

For Teachers

Romare Bearden: Scenes From the Portfolios,
The Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sacred Heart University
January 22 - February 15, 2007.



The Smithsonian Archives

The following pages have been designed to introduce the work of this extraordinary African American artist to students. This exhibition is particularly suited for teaching art as well as other disciplines because Bearden's themes include so many different subjects.

ROMARE BEARDEN

Romare Bearden (b. 1911 – d. 1988) was born on September 2 in Charlotte, NC. (see **Chronology Page**) Bearden's parents Bessye and Howard Bearden were well educated. His mother became was editor for the Chicago Defender and was based in New York City, and his father was an inspector for the New York City Department of Sanitation. Their home was a gathering place for many well known New York writers, musicians, and artists. Bessye was also a social activist and this may have provided the impetus for Bearden's own social activism in the 1960s.

Education was important to the Bearden family and Romare not only graduated from high school he attended Boston University and graduated from New York University in 1935. He also

studied art at the Art Student's League in New York City. Later, after serving in the army he studied in Paris and traveled throughout Europe where he studied the works of the Old Masters.

There seemed to be no limit to his interests and abilities. He wrote and published articles on numerous topics and created political cartoons. He designed costumes and sets for prominent dance and theater companies, illustrated books by influential authors, co-wrote books about African American art and culture and composed songs. He was even offered an opportunity to play professional baseball for the Philadelphia Athletics, if he would only agree to "pass as white"—an offer he refused.

THEMES

Bearden was best known for the universal themes depicted in his collage paintings and prints. A well-read man whose friends were other artists, writers, poets and jazz musicians, Bearden mined their worlds as well as his own for topics to explore. He took his imagery from both the everyday rituals of African American rural life in the south and urban life in the north, melding those American experiences with his personal experiences and with the themes of classical literature, religion, myth, music and daily human ritual.

Bearden recognized that everyday ceremonial dramas, however small and seemingly insignificant occur in the lives of ordinary people everywhere. Many of his works were based upon things he remembered from his childhood, everyday activities such as visiting friends, their gardens, an evening spent at home.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Social consciousness was the other driving force in his life. In fact, while creating his art, Bearden also worked full time as a social worker until age 63. He was also one of the founders of Spiral, a group of artists actively engaged in the civil rights movement that focused on the "role of the artist in social change and whether or not race was an essential determinant in aesthetic sensibilities."¹

In 1964, he was appointed the first art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, which helped to found The Studio Museum of Harlem and the Academy of Black Arts and Letters.

EXHIBITIONS

Romare Bearden had numerous exhibitions in galleries and museums throughout his career. *Projections*, his first one-man museum exhibition was organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1966. The exhibit's success allowed him to quit his job as a social worker and make art full-time.

In 1971, *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual* opened at the Museum of Modern Art to critical acclaim. A 10-year retrospective of his works was organized by the Mint Museum in Charlotte in 1980. The National Gallery curated a traveling exhibition entitled *The Art of Romare Bearden*, in 2003. Honored by both President's Carter and Reagan, he received the President's National Medal of the Arts Award.

MATERIALS & TECHNIQUES

Bearden incorporated **collage** techniques and materials in his paintings, and always thought of his collages as paintings. He loved the improvisational nature of collage, the spontaneity of it and "playing" with materials until they made a coherent composition.

Bearden layered parts of magazine images, newspaper photos, photocopies, drawn and painted papers that were cut and torn, and pictures of art from the past, including African masks. His skill as a draftsman, combined with unusual techniques such as scratching, abrading, sanding, or bleaching parts of a work, enlivened his images and contributed to the development of collage as a medium. Collage seemed particularly appropriate to his subject matter and to his themes. He also used a variety printmaking and photographic techniques. **(Refer to Technical Definitions Page).**

1 Fine, Ruth, The Art of Romare Bearden, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2003, p.145.