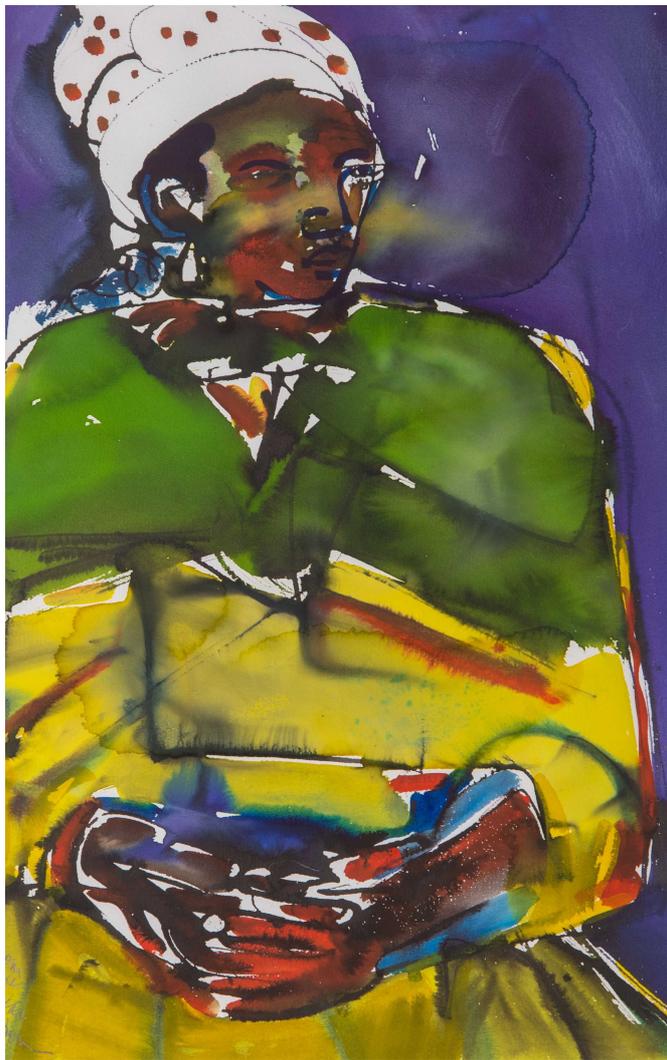


Steptoe

Diversity & Art: A Virtual Tour

Romare Howard Bearden

United States (1911-1988)



Portrait of a Lady

Work

Referring to Romare Bearden as a Renaissance man is an understatement. Best known for his paintings and collages, Bearden was a man of diverse interests and talents. While he experimented with many different media and artistic styles in the visual arts, he was also a poet, songwriter, author, illustrator, and baseball player. He also designed album covers, stage sets, and dance costumes for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and for Nanette Bearden's Contemporary Dance Theatre.

While Bearden could be viewed as a chronicler of African-American culture and the Harlem Renaissance, his works are placed within the framework of universal themes and values, common to all humanity. Using his own personal memories, especially those of his childhood years in North Carolina, Bearden depicts the lives and culture of Black America, inspired not only by his memories, but African-American history, literature, and culture, including slave crafts such as patchwork quilts, expressing the notion that art could be made out of the most humble materials, an idea that is also expressed in his unique and innovative collages for which he tore pages off magazines and newspapers.

He drew inspiration from many cultures and art forms, as he was broadly aware and knowledgeable about European art, Byzantine mosaics, Italian frescoes, African sculpture, and modern art. This became even more apparent in his later years when he spent time in the Caribbean, as new experiences broadened his horizons, and more universal symbols permeated his art.

In 1977, he created a sequence of 20 collages based on episodes from Homer's *Odyssey*, finding that the topics and motifs touched upon in the great epic, those of wandering, mourning, and the search for home, are as relevant to the black experience as they are universal.

About the Artist

One of the 20th century's finest artists, Romare Howard Bearden was born in 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina, to middle-class African-American parents. When he was three years old, the Jim Crow laws, which sought to reinstate the social structure of the Antebellum era marginalizing African-Americans, forced the Bearden family to leave the South as part of the Great Migration north, eventually settling in Harlem, New York.

During the cultural and artistic explosion of the Harlem Renaissance, the Bearden household was a gathering place for such luminaries as music legend Duke Ellington, a distant relative, poet Langston Hughes, singer and actor Paul Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois, and many others, all of whom left an indelible mark on young Romare. His family was artistically inclined and civically minded. His paternal grandfather and great-grandfather painted, while his father, inspector in New York City's sanitation department, played the piano. His mother, who did graduate work at Columbia University, was the New York Bureau Chief of the *Chicago Defender*, an influential African-American newspaper. She was also the first president of the Negro Women's Democratic Association, and was elected to NYC's School Board No. 15, the first black woman to sit on a local board.

As his parents tried to make a go of it those first years in New York, Romare spent his summers with his paternal grandparents in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. He attended high school in Pittsburgh, where his maternal grandmother ran a boarding house for workers who had moved to the North looking for work.

Despite the promise of a supposedly progressive North, racism and discrimination were very much a part of Bearden's daily life. In his later years, he opened up about these experiences, recalling his white grade school teacher who separated him and the only other black student from the rest of the class, claiming that math would be too difficult for them. Ironically, Bearden went on to study mathematics in college. Such experiences only strengthened Bearden's commitment to his people. A 2004 *Chicago Tribune* article with the headline "A Deeper Look at an Artist who Refused to be White," writes that Bearden's extremely light skin would have made it easy for him to live his life as white. Instead, he made African-American life and culture central to his art. As a star pitcher at Boston University in 1930, he also turned down an offer to pitch for the major-league Philadelphia Athletics, which was contingent upon his pretending to be white.

In the 1930s, Romare received a degree in education from New York University, and worked as a cartoonist. He also studied art (drawing and painting) at the Art Students League of New York, under German Expressionist George Grosz, who fled Germany to escape the Nazis. Grosz mentored his students, exposing them to classical art, and impressing upon them the importance of the old masters. At the same time, Grosz helped Bearden recognize the "artistic possibilities of American Negro subject matter."

In 1935, Romare took a job at the New York City Department of Social Services, where he worked mostly with the Gypsy community until 1969, when he retired. In 1935, he joined the Harlem Artists Guild, and in 1942, he enlisted in the Army, assigned to a racially segregated division. On September 4, 1954, he married Nanette Rohan, a model, dancer, and choreographer, who founded her own dance company.

Disillusioned by the pervasive racism in the US, in the 1950s, Bearden took leave from his job and under the G.I. Bill traveled to Paris, where he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. He also submerged himself in the art of the city, making friends with such greats as Picasso, Braque, Brancusi, and Matisse, as well as with the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Disappointed with his own artistic abilities, upon his return to New York, Bearden turned to music, writing "Seabreeze," a hit song that was recorded by Tito Puente and is considered a jazz classic. After a period of agonizing soul searching, he finally returned to the visual arts.

Bearden was a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as Spiral, an association of African-American artists that came together to support the civil rights movement. In 1964, he was appointed the first art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, a prominent African-American advocacy group. Among many awards, he received the National Medal of Arts presented to him by President Ronald Reagan in 1987, a few months before the artist's death. He also received Honorary doctorates from Carnegie Mellon University, Davidson College, and Atlanta University, as well as the Pratt Institute.

His first solo exhibition in Harlem was in 1940, while his first national solo show was at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, in 1944. Exhibited throughout Europe and the US, Bearden's work is included in many collections including that of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others.