

art connections

a teacher resource guide

fall 2002

The Art of Romare Bearden

This teacher resource guide provides information and cross-curricular, multi-disciplinary activities for the study of the artist Romare Bearden.

THEME: Romare Bearden is one of many artists who lived and documented the life of the American Negro before, during, and after the [Great Migration](#) and the [Harlem Renaissance](#). During this time in American history, black Americans were impacting the world around them, producing art, music, poetry and literature. Art was a mechanism not only for creative outlet but for documenting history. Jacob Lawrence's paintings, *The Migration of the Negro*, is a series of 60 paintings documenting the exodus of African-Americans from their homes and farms in the South around World War I, travelling north, looking for work and a better way of life. Duke Ellington, a famous musician and composer of the same period in history, wrote the stirring piece *Black Brown, and Beige - A Tone*

Parallel to the History of the American Negro, as an African suite, detailing in music the history of the American Negro. Writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were documenting the struggle of the American Negro through poetry and prose, affecting change and insisting on a better way of life for all people.

Romare Bearden, too, documented history through art, and created three very significant bodies of work about his life and the lives of many African-Americans who grew up during this time. The series, *Mecklenburg County*, is about growing up in rural North Carolina; *Profile/Part 1: The Twenties*, document living in an industrial city like Pittsburgh, PA; and *Profile/Part II: The Thirties*, is a series of paintings about life in Harlem, NY.

BACKGROUND: Romare Bearden was born in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1922. He lived in rural Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, with his parents and grandparents until 1920, when his parents headed north to escape the racial prejudice that existed in the southern United States. Between 1920 and 1929, Bearden lived on and off in Pittsburgh, PA with his grandmother, and in [Harlem, New York](#), with his parents. Living in such three diverse communities: the rural south; the blue-collar industrial Pittsburgh; and the cultural and diverse Harlem; left great impressions on Bearden, the stories of which he eventually told with his art.

After graduating from high school, Bearden attended Lincoln University, a black University in Pennsylvania, then transferred to Boston University where he majored in Mathematics. Bearden's mother hoped her son would become a doctor, but Bearden's interest in art was calling him back to New York City's cultural environment. Bearden had some success publishing cartoons and drawings for Boston University's newspaper, and although he returned to Harlem and graduated from New York University in 1935 with a degree in Mathematics, he continued exploring art as the way he wished to spend his life.



Background, con't:

Around 1935-36, after attending an exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art entitled *African Negro Art*, Bearden was “inspired by the possibility of creating meaningful modern art from his (Bearden’s) own experience as a black man and from the cultural legacy of his ancestry.” Through his involvement with the **Harlem Artist Guild**, Bearden began studying with German artist George Grosz, who encouraged Romare to paint. Romare also joined **group 306**, an informal group of artists, writers and musicians that grew out of the **WPA Federal Art Project**.



By 1938, Bearden, unable to make a living solely as a painter, took a job as a case-worker for the New York City Department of Welfare, a job that he kept until 1967. Although it offered Bearden a steady income, this job disqualified him for work in the WPA/Federal Art Project and forced him to work on his art in the evenings and on weekends. In 1940, Bearden had his first solo exhibitions at the 306 Studio. While continuing to live with his parents, he rented his first art studio. However, as the 30’s ended and the 40’s began, Bearden became increasingly frustrated with his paintings -- feeling unable to express himself openly and honestly. Although he had several opportunities to exhibit his work, he was dissatisfied with the “business” of art, and in 1942, with the start of World War II, Bearden enlisted in the Army.



Discharged from the Army in 1945, Bearden returned to New York City to the Welfare Department and to his painting. Although continuing the work and exhibit on a regular basis, he struggled with the use of color, space, and style. In 1950, Bearden left Harlem for Paris, France. Many artists were in Paris at the time, finding the French community supportive of an artistic lifestyle and less racially divisive. Because Bearden was a veteran of the Army, he received \$75.00 a month to study in an institution approved by the U.S. Government. Two such institutions existed in Paris. Although inspired by life in France, Bearden found himself unable to paint, and upon his return to the United States, in 1951, he had all but stopped. He became interested, instead, in song writing, and had brief success with the hit, “Seabreeze” recorded by Billy Eckstine. It didn’t take Bearden long, however, to realize that song writing was not his future. In 1953, he became ill, suffering from a nervous breakdown and depression. After a brief stay in the hospital, Bearden returned to his studio and began to paint again.



In 1954, Bearden met and married Nanette Rohan. Although he had learned that he could not be at peace unless he was painting, he was still unable to support himself and his new wife solely as a painter, and so he continued his work with the Welfare Department. It is during this time of his life that Bearden experienced renewal in his creative life, eventually experimenting with materials until finding his voice in collage. Now that Bearden had found a medium where he felt he could express his feelings and experiences as an artist and as an African-American, his work became more prolific, inspired, and constant. In 1963, Bearden formed the Spiral Group, with the goal of seeking greater recognition for black art. In 1964, he created *Projections*, a series of photomontages that marked his return to artistically expressing the reality of the black experience.



The success of *Projections* finally allowed Bearden to retire from the Welfare Department of New York City and in 1970, he completed and exhibited *The Block*, a six panel collage that examined Harlem life from the inside-out. In 1971, he had a solo exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art.

top to bottom:

untitled, 1930.

Blue Lady, 1955

Jazz Village, 19.67.

Carolina Shout, 1974.

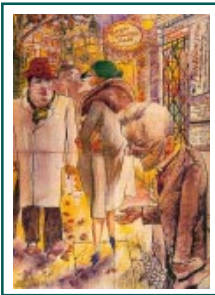
Quilting Time, 1985.

artistic influences on Romare Bearden

Romare Bearden was influenced artistically by a number of different artists, with distinct and individualized styles. Those artists include:



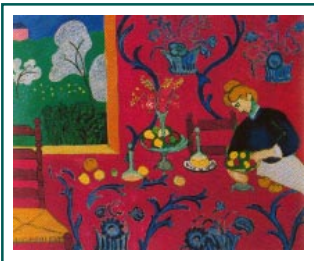
Peasant Wedding Feast, c. 1566/7, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. "... it is Bruegel's work, based on real life observation, that is the more real and human."



Berlin Streetscene, 1930, George Grosz. German expressionist of political and social satire, "This watercolor caricatures the appalling social conditions on post-First World War Germany."



Egg Beater No. 4, 1928, Stuart Davis. "Much of the artist's work show the influence of Cubist fragmented shapes, although Davis has developed these through the humor, zest and zany sounds of jazz, which he was passionate about."



"*The Dinner Table (Harmony in Red)*, 1908, Henri Matisse. Color always played a roll in the artwork of Matisse, and can be seen in the vibrant paper collages he produced late in his life.

In 1972, Bearden was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1973, he created a series of collage based on his life in the Caribbean, where he and his wife had built a home. 1975 brought the series *Of the Blues*, 19 collages; and 1976, *Of the Blues: Second Chorus*. Both series exploit the improvisational possibilities of collage and trace jazz from its folk sources, religious and secular, to the cities in which its major styles evolved - New York, New Orleans, Chicago, Kansas City - to the performers and their sounds.

In 1978, Bearden's series of collages entitled *Profile/Part I: The Twenties* are recollections of his living in industrial Pittsburgh, PA. In 1981, he created a second series, *Profile/Part II: The Thirties*, which focused on his life in New York. These two series of collage are telling the history, not just of Bearden, but of his people and of all human kind. In 1987, Bearden was awarded the Medal of Arts from President Reagan. He died in 1988 at age 76.

classroom connections

Romare Bearden told stories with his art. He created three bodies of work growing up during the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance: *The Mecklenburg County* series, about life in rural North Carolina; *Profile/Part I: The Twenties*, a series about living in an industrial city like Pittsburgh, PA; and, *Profile/Part III The Thirties*, a series about living in Harlem, NY.

1. When you look at the collage, *Morning of the Rooster*, which series do you think it is a part of? Does it reflect a rural, industrial, or urban lifestyle? Identify at least five images within the collage that help us to understand where this scene is taking place.

2. Now, do the same with *Allegheny Morning Sky*, and *Slapping Seventh Avenue with the Sole of My Shoe*. How do you know, just by looking at the images, where these scenes take place?

3. Find North Carolina, Pittsburgh, PA, and Harlem, NY on the map. Trace the route that Romare Bearden and his family followed during their migration to the northern United States.

Look at the collage *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket*.

1. What is happening in this collage? Is it morning or evening? How do you know? What are the people saying to each other? How do they feel? Are they happy? Sad? Tired? Well Rested?

2. Pretend you are writing a book. Use this collage to begin your first chapter.

Romare Bearden believed that being an artist, like being a musician, meant that you had to improvise - be willing to go where the work of art was leading. He was very interested in the relationship between visual art and music, and dedicated many works to the people and places that are important in American music history.

1. Compare and contrast the image of *Jazz Village* (1967) to the image of *One Night Stand* (1974). What things are similar and different about these images?

2. *Jazz Village* shows a group of musicians playing on the street. Imagine that you are a reporter for a local newspaper, and you discovered this group of musicians on the street playing jazz. Write an article for your paper describing your experience.

3. In contrast, where are the musicians in *One Night Stand* performing. How do you know this from looking at the collage? What kind of music are the playing?

Bearden stated that the relationship between jazz and visual art can be described as "hot or cool."

1. As you look at Bearden's "jazz" images, describe them as hot or cool and state your reasons why. How does Bearden get the feeling of hot or cool across to the viewer?

2. What do each of these paintings "sound like?" What is the mood of each image?

classroom connections, con't:

Look at the image and the book *The Block*. Bill Cosby states, "...it reminds many viewers of people and events from their own lives and it encourages others to visualize what life might have been like in a busy and exciting Harlem neighborhood."

1. Identify some of the things happening in *The Block*. How is life where you live different or the same as the life being shown in this collage?

2. What does this street scene sound like? Does it sound like your street? Write down words that describe the sounds on this street.

Look at the image *Quilting Time*.

1. What is happening in this collage? What are the people doing? What is going to happen next?

2. Where is this taking place? How do you know this from looking at the image?

3. When your extended family gathers together-Aunts, Uncles, Grandparents, Cousins - what are the things that you do together? Think about your favorite family story, and then create a collage or write a poem about that special time together.

Research and identify some works of art created through the WPA/FAP (Works Progress Administration/Federal Arts Project). Why was this program created? What did it accomplish? What are communities doing when they discover one of these works of art? Does this governmental program continue? How do the works *visualize America in all of its regional diversity*?

vocabulary

collage A method of composition using paper, fabric, or other everyday materials pasted onto a background; a piecing together of various materials working in sympathy with each other. An improvisational medium that allows the artist to combine materials of the everyday world until they form a coherent composition.

group 306 An informal group of artists, including representatives of the visual, language, and performing arts, who met to discuss various problems of the artistic fields in a communal environment.

Harlem, NY From 1916 and through the mid-1930's, a city that saw an influx of African-Americans as they migrated from the southern United States to cities in the north. In the 1930's, almost 35,000 African-Americans lived in the five square miles that made up Harlem, NY.

Harlem Artist Guild Formed by sculptor Augusta Savage and artist Charles Alston, the purpose of this group was to gain more grants and funding for African-American artists from the Federal Arts Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Harlem Renaissance A period of history from 1920 to about 1930 in which the African-American population, due to the migration of African-Americans to northern cities between 1916 and 1926, had great success in the literary, visual, and performing arts. Originally called the "New Negro Movement," the Harlem Renaissance celebrated the heritage and cultural signification of the African-American population.

improvisational To do something without advanced preparation, whether performing or composing - to use whatever materials are available to accomplish a goal.

industrial Of, or about, industry; or workers in industry.

jazz Music that combines composed music with improvisation.

medium The material or technique with which an artist works.

rural Of the country or country life.

WPA/FAP Works Progress Administration/Federal Arts Project A job creation program begun by President Roosevelt. Established in 1935, the program employed thousands of artists to uplift and beautify the United States with murals, monuments, and other large scale public works that visualized America in all of its regional diversity.

Through the WPA, about 200 murals; 2100 sculptures; 12,000 easel paintings; and, some 750,000 prints were created and given to hospitals, schools, libraries, and post offices. By 1936, the WPA/FAP had employed more than 4,000 artists produced over 20,000 pieces of art for New York state alone.



bibliography

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Romare Bearden, Artist, Black Americans of Achievement, Kevin Brown, Chelsea House Publishers, 1995.

I Live in Music, poems by Ntozake Shange and paintings by Romare Bearden, Stewart, Tabori and Chang, Inc., 1978.

The Block, collage by Romare Bearden and poems by Langston Hughes, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Viking, NY, 1995.

Romare Bearden, His Life and Art, Myron Schwartzman, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990.

A History of African-American Artists, 1797 to the present, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, 1993.

Free Within Ourselves, the Harlem Renaissance, Geoffrey Jacques, Franklin Watts, A Division of Grollier Publishing, 1996.

Children of Promise, African-American Literature and Art for Young People, edited by Charles Sullivan, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, NY, 1991.

The First Book of Jazz, Langston Hughes, The Ecco Press, 1997.

Jazz, My Music My People, Morgan Monceaux, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 1994.

images (on CD rom)

Allegheny Morning Sky, Romare Bearden, from the *Profile/Part I: The Twenties* series (Pittsburgh Memories), collage on board, 10 1/8 x 14 1/2", 1978, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. M. Gutner, NY.

Blue Lady, Romare Bearden, oil on canvas, 10 x 31 1/4", 1955, Private Collection.

Carolina Shout, Romare Bearden, from the *Of the Blues* series, collage with acrylic and lacquer on board, 37 1/2 x 51", 1974, Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC.

Early Carolina Morning, Romare Bearden, from the *Mecklenburg County* series, collage on board, 29 x 41", 1978, Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Clinton N. Levin.

Jazz Village, Romare Bearden, mixed media and collage on board, 30 x 40", 1967, The Estate of Romare Bearden.

Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket, Romare Bearden, from the *Profile/Part I: The Twenties* series (Pittsburgh Memories), collage on board, 13 3/4 x 18 1/8", 1978, Private Collection.

Morning of the Rooster, Romare Bearden, from the *Mecklenburg County* series, collage on board, 18 x 13 3/4", 1980, Private Collection.

Mysteries, Romare Bearden, collage on board, 11 1/4 x 14 1/4", 1964, Private Collection.

One Night Stand, Romare Bearden, from the *Of the Blues* series, collage with acrylic and lacquer on board, 44 x 50", 1974, Private Collection.

Quilting Time, Romare Bearden, paper collage on board, 19 3/8 x 28 1/2", 1985, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society.

Show Time, Romare Bearden, from the *Of the Blues* series, collage with acrylic and lacquer on board, 50 x 40", 1974, Collection of Dolores and Stanley Feldman, Lynchburg, VA.

Slapping Seventh Avenue with the Sole of My Shoe, Romare Bearden, from the *Profile/Part II: The Thirties* series, collage on board, 14 x 22", 1981, Private Collection.

The Fiddler, Romare Bearden, collage, 30 x 40", 1965, Collection of Sheldon and Phyllis Ross, Birmingham, MI.

The Piano Lesson, Romare Bearden, 29 1/4 x 20 1/4", 1984, Private Collection.

The Street, Romare Bearden, collage on board, 27 1/2 x 51", 1975, Sheldon Ross Gallery, Birmingham, MI.

Untitled, Romare Bearden, gouache and ink on paper, 24 x 33 1/2", 1930s, Collection of Leonard Bates, NY.

Untitled, Romare Bearden, oil and gouache on canvas, 60 x 50", 1930s, Collection of Leonard Bates, NY.