

Romare Bearden
MATRIX 7

Wadsworth Atheneum
May June 1975

Show Time



Romare Bearden has a special talent for integrating social commentary (and sometimes political protest) into his works without mitigating his primary preoccupation with formal considerations. His collages reflect his study of Duccio and Lorenzetti, of Vermeer and de Hooch, of African sculpture and Japanese portraitists. Bearden draws also on the experience of growing up black in a white-dominated society.

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1914 and raised in Harlem, Bearden received a BA in mathematics from New York University in 1934. At the Art Students League he studied with George Grosz. In 1940, Bearden became a caseworker with the New York City Department of Social Services, a profession he practiced intermittently until 1966. During World War II, he was a sergeant in the 372nd Infantry Regiment, a segregated unit. In 1950 he studied art in Paris, returning to the United States the following year to become a song writer. In 1954, he took up painting once again and for a number of years his work grew increasingly abstract. He reintroduced figurative elements in his work in the early 'sixties and in 1963 began his first collages.

In 1971, the Museum of Modern Art held a major retrospective of collages by Romare Bearden in a show called The Prevalence of Ritual. Bearden lives in New York City and is represented by Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc.

Five of the works in MATRIX are from a new series, Of The Blues. This is the first time they have been seen in a museum. Some of these works recall the way in which jazz permeated the daily life of Harlem residents during

Bearden's formative years when the Savoy and the Lafayette were neighborhood landmarks. Others look back to New Orleans, the early jazz capitol of the world.

A man of diverse abilities and exceptional energies, Bearden has written several books on the history of Afro-American art and one book on space and structure in painting. He also helped to found Spiral, an early organization of black artists, and Cinque, a New York Gallery specializing in exhibitions of Afro-American art. In addition, he has been closely associated with the Harlem Cultural Council.

The sixth work in MATRIX, SHE-BA, is from the Atheneum's collection. Completed by Bearden in 1970, it is particularly rich in color and texture. A color postcard of SHE-BA is available in the Atheneum Shop.

AMK

Works in MATRIX:

Kansas City 4/4, 1974, collage with acrylic and lacquer, 44" x 50". Lent by Mr. & Mrs. John Newgard, Boonton, NJ.

New Orleans Farewell, 1974, collage with acrylic and lacquer 44" x 50". Lent by Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc., NYC.

Show Time, 1974, collage with acrylic and lacquer, 50" x 40". Lent by Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc., NYC.

Storyville, 1974, collage with acrylic and lacquer, 15 1/4" x 20". Lent by Mr. Norman Ives, Woodbridge, CT.

Wrapping It Up At The Lafayette, 1974, collage with acrylic and lacquer, 48" x 36". Private collection.

SHE-BA, 1970, collage of paper, cloth and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 48" x 35 7/8". In the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

"I do want my language to be strict and classical, in the manner of the great Benin heads, for example...I do not need to go looking for 'happenings', the absurd, or the surreal; because I have seen these things out of my studio window on 125th Street."

Bearden, as quoted in Romare Bearden

"I am trying to explore, in terms of the particulars of the life I know best, those things common to all cultures."

Bearden, as quoted in The Prevalence of Ritual

"His appreciation of an astonishing array of artists spans the continents and centuries and undergirds his mature oeuvre with a range of aesthetic allusions brilliantly absorbed into his own highly assured personal style. His goal consistently has been to create a universal art in a contemporary medium while remaining true to his particular cultural heritage and experience...Thematically, Bearden's work since 1964 is often analogous to that of Brueghel. Technically, it is influenced by Mondrian, as is evident in his interlocking rectangular relationships, and also by such older Dutch masters as de Hooch and Terborch. His forms and distortions owe much to African sculpture."

Carroll Greene, The Prevalence of Ritual

Selected one-man exhibitions:
306 West 141st Street (studio
of Ad Bates), NYC '40 (first);
G Place Gallery, Washington,
D.C. '44; Samuel M. Kootz
Gallery, NYC '45, '46, '47;
Cordier & Ekstrom, NYC '61,
'64, '67, '70, '73, '74, '75; Cor-
coran Gallery, Washington,
D.C. '65; Museum of Modern
Art, NYC '71; The Studio
Museum in Harlem, NYC '72.

Selected group exhibitions:
Whitney Museum of American
Art, Annual Exhibition '45,
'46, '55, '69; Metropolitan
Museum, NYC American Paintings
Today - 1950 '50; Spiral
Gallery, NYC First Group Show
'65; Museum of Modern Art,
NYC New American Painting and
Sculpture '69; Johnson Museum
of Art, Ithica Directions in
Afro-American Art '74.

Selected bibliography by
Bearden:

"The Black Artist in Ameri-
ca," Metropolitan Museum of
Art Bulletin, vol. 27, no. 5
(January '69), pp. 245-260.

Bearden and Carl Holty, The
Painter's Mind: A Study of
the Relations of Structure and
Space in Painting, Crown Pub-
lishers (New York) '69.

Bearden with Harry Henderson,
Six Black Masters of American
Art, Doubleday (Garden City) '72.

Selected bibliography about
Bearden:

Siegel, Jeanne. "Why
Spiral?" Art News, vol. 65,
no. 5 (September '66), pp. 48-
51, 67-68.

Canady, John. "Romare
Bearden Focuses on the Negro,"
New York Times, October 14, 1967,
p. 23.

Pomeroy, Ralph. "Black
Persephone," Art News, vol. 66,
no. 6 (October '67) pp. 45, 73-
75.

Jacobs, Jay (interview).
"Two Afro-American Artists,"
Art Gallery, vol. XI, no. 7
(April '68), pp. 26-31.

Glueck, Grace. "A Breughel
from Harlem," New York Times,
February 22, 1970, p. 29.

Greene, Carroll. "Per-
spective: The Black Artist in
America," Art Gallery, vol. VIII,
no. 7 (April '70), pp. 1-29.

Greene, Carroll. Romare
Bearden: The Prevalence of
Ritual, Museum of Modern Art
(New York) '71.

Washington, M. Bunch. Ro-
mare Bearden. Harry N.
Abrams (New York) '73.