



Celebrating Black History Month

Romare Bearden, Quite an Interesting Life

by Charles Swaney, Museum Docent

Romare Bearden (1911–1988) was born in Charlotte, NC, to a middle-class family: his parents Bessye and Howard Bearden were both college educated. As part of the Great Migration, the Bearden family moved to Harlem in New York City in 1914, when Romare was three years old. His father was a sanitation system inspector for the city of New York, a pianist, and storyteller. His mother was a political activist and the New York correspondent for the *Chicago Defender*. Their home was a meeting place for many of the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, including Countee Cullen, Paul Robeson, and Duke Ellington (also a distant cousin). Bearden was educated in the NYC public school system but finished high school in Pittsburgh after the family moved.

Bearden developed an interest in drawing cartoons during his college years, first at Lincoln University outside Philadelphia and later at Boston University and New York University. His primary interest was baseball, which he played at Boston University and in the Negro Leagues with the Pittsburgh Crawfords. So skilled was Bearden at the sport that he received an offer from Connie Mack to play major league baseball with the Philadelphia Athletics. The offer was made, however, because Bearden's light skin would have allowed him to pass as a white player. He rejected Mack's proposal because he would have had to live a lie and undermine his own identity.

Bearden served in World War II as a sergeant in a segregated army regiment. In 1945 he returned to New York City, where he was employed as a caseworker for the Department of Social Services until 1969. He married Nanette Rohan, a dancer whose ancestors were from the Caribbean island of St. Maarten, where the couple would establish a home and spend much time from the 1970s until Bearden's death.

Bearden was largely self-taught as an artist, but in 1936–1937 he studied at the Art Student League primarily under George Grosz, a modern artist and satirist who had left Nazi Germany when he faced prosecution for his work. Bearden commended Grosz for making him “realize the artistic possibilities



Portrait of African American artist Romare Bearden (1911–1988) New York, 1972. (Photo by Anthony Barboza/Getty Images)

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of the American Negro subject matter.” His other important artistic relationships were with his cousin and first teacher, Charles Alston, and his friends Jacob Lawrence and Stuart Davis. He was also influenced by the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, who were both active in the US in the 1930s. In the early 1950s, Bearden traveled to Europe and studied art history and philosophy in Paris. His exposure to the art of Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, and Constantin Brancusi was significant for his artistic development.

Bearden’s style had immense range, showing influence of Regionalism and cartoons early in his career; Cubism, Fauvism, Abstract Expressionism, and Futurism in mid-career; and collage later in his career. In the early 1950s, he branched out into music, co-writing (with Billy Eckstine) the jazz classic “Sea Breeze” ([recently performed by Branford Marsalis](#)).

It thus comes as no surprise that Bearden executed many works with jazz musicians as the subjects. A quote illustrates his connection between art and music: “I’m like a trumpet player blowing loud, then dropping back. When I put a beat of color on an empty canvas, I never know what’s coming down the track... You put down one color, and it calls for an answer. You have to look at it like a melody.”*

Bearden’s work *Conjunction* illustrates his strong ties to the Caribbean as well as his affinity for African culture, both indicated by the brightly colored fabric the men wear as well as the style of clothing and hats. This lithograph is derived from a collage with a mixture of representation and abstraction. *Carolina Blue* further emphasizes Bearden’s use of abstraction and collage with actual collage elements added to the serigraph, possibly by the artist himself since this is an artist’s proof. The subject harks back to his home and relatives in North Carolina and represents the universal theme of home life. The figure on the right has simplified and elongated facial features reminiscent of African masks and figural sculpture, such as the Museum’s *Figure of a Seated Woman and Child* from the Dogon culture. The use of vibrant colors and different patterns along with the artist’s additions in collage suggest the improvisation of jazz music that also influenced Bearden’s

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Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988)
Conjunction, 1979
Color lithograph on arches paper
Museum purchase (92.81)



Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988)
Carolina Blue, 1970
Serigraph and collage on paper
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2015.16)



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paintings. The Museum's two prints are illustrative of his paper-based collage style, but he also used tile in murals, translating collage into a different medium. A mural in the Pittsburgh subway, commissioned from Bearden in 1984, employs ceramic tile for a collage-like effect.

Bearden maintained a close connection to the African American experience throughout his life, probably a result of his early years among members of the Harlem Renaissance. He connected this experience to universal themes, like his early home life in North Carolina, but he also reimagined such themes in classic works, replacing white characters with black characters. This is evident in his [Odyssey series](#), which renders that classic tale particularly powerful and poignant. This form of universalization of African American characters is also employed in the musical *Hamilton*. ■

“Even though you go through these terrible experiences, you come out feeling good. That’s what the blues say and that’s what I believe—life will prevail.”

—Romare Bearden [see beardenfoundation.org]



Figure of a Seated Woman and Children
Dogon culture, early 20th century
From Mali
Wood
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Werner Muensterberger
(74.50)



[Bearden's tile mural, Pittsburgh subway](#)

*From *My Hands Sing the Blues: Romare Bearden's Childhood Journey*, by Jeanne Walker Harvey, 2011