

Rarely-seen stain and collaged paintings from 1958-1962 by Romare Bearden on view at DC Moore Gallery



Romare Bearden, Heart of Autumn, 1956-58. Oil and graphite on canvas, 67 x 70 inches. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

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NEW YORK, NY. - DC Moore Gallery is presenting Abstract Romare Bearden, featuring rarely-seen stain and collaged paintings from 1958-1962 by one of the most renowned visual artists of the 20th century. Also on view, will be selected works from earlier and later periods. The abstract paintings shed light on Bearden's continual interest in experimental techniques. They also provide new context to the influence his earlier work had on this period, and how these seminal paintings contributed to the development of his later well-known collages.

After painting and drawing for nearly two decades, the noted African American artist Romare Bearden (1911-1988) turned to songwriting for a few years in the early 1950s. When he began painting again in earnest around 1955, his work was more abstract than previously, as he explored new modes of expression. At first, he layered paint thickly, in abstracted figural works that were increasingly less representational than what he had been doing in the 1940s.

By 1957, Bearden had moved to pure abstraction. His dynamic new canvases were larger, all-over paintings of organic, atmospheric forms, merging and coalescing. A critic noted in an exhibition review, "they are full of suggestions of stratified earth, subaqueous suspensions and clear auroras of atmosphere."ⁱ As with Heart of Autumn (c. 1960), he created active surfaces and rich tonal effects with paint that flows across the canvas or is worked in several different ways. In others, he began to use collage elements of painted, torn paper or applied canvas. The underlying canvas plays an important role in many of the works, too, as the paint is often thinly applied, resulting in lyrical abstractions of distinctive beauty.

In most cases, Bearden painted unstretched canvas rolled out on the floor, like some of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries. He frequently worked from all four sides, sometimes lifting the canvas so that paint flowed freely. He rubbed turpentine onto a freshly painted surface as well, thinning it so that only a few stains remained. Repeating the process two or three times, he gradually built the composition. Spatters, slashes, and drips were another aspect of his method.

Not only was Bearden well aware of contemporary practice, but he had also been involved with some of the artists of the evolving Abstract Expressionist group since his return to New York from military service in the mid-1940s. He joined the Kootz Gallery in 1945 and had three consecutive solo shows there. At the time, Samuel Kootz also represented Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, and William Bazotes, among others, and showed the work of Arshile Gorky and Hans Hofmann. Kootz had group meetings with the artists on a regular basis, so Bearden would have had many opportunities to discuss their current work as well as his own.

In light of this, it is not surprising that when he started painting again in the mid-1950s after his brief excursion into songwriting, Bearden largely set aside his earlier figural modernism and turned to abstraction. Foregoing thematic content—except what is suggested by the evocative titles that he and his wife, Nanette, gave to the works—he began painting freely and on a larger scale, embracing a more intuitive approach based on improvisation and chance.

For the most part, though, he chose not to pursue the subconscious probing and automatic drawing of the Surrealists that inspired many of the Abstract Expressionists. Instead, his new method resonated with the Zen Buddhist concepts of no-mind and emptiness, which focus on a state of awareness and flow of attention beyond the ego, and, in the case of painting, beyond any conscious effort to create a predetermined composition or result. Merging with his other interests, Bearden's increasing involvement with Zen and some of the arts related to it created a powerful new current in his art.

Soon after he and Nanette moved to a loft on Canal Street in 1956, Bearden met a calligrapher and scholar of Chinese art named Mr. Wu who had a bookstore in the neighborhood. For the next few years, he studied informally with him, meeting about once a week for discussions of Chinese painting and the principles of calligraphy. He also explored the Buddhist philosophy that underlies them. Bearden discovered that, in his words, "underneath the seeming simplicity was a great, long tradition, and a very complex one, in which so much had been taken away to find the essence of the landscape."ⁱⁱ And, as he later recalled,

"I was also studying...the techniques which enable Chinese classical painters to organize their large areas, for example: the device of an open corner to allow the observer a starting point in encompassing the entire painting; the subtle ways of shifting balance and emphasis; and the use of voids, or negative areas, as sections of passivity and as a means of projecting big shapes. ... As a result, I began to paint more thinly, often on natural linen, where I left sections of the canvas unpainted so that the linen itself had the function of a color."ⁱⁱⁱ

His abstracts were featured in two solo New York exhibitions in 1961. Both shows were well received, as critics welcomed his return to painting. One noted that it was good to see an artist "once as well regarded as Romare Bearden exhibiting again."^{iv} Elsewhere, Bearden was characterized as "a virtuoso of texture and of sumptuous and subtle color if there ever was one."^v The Museum of Modern Art acquired one of his 1959 abstractions, *Silent Valley of the Sunrise*, in 1960, after his first show, and in 1997, the Studio Museum of Harlem added a major example to its collection, *North of the River* (1962).

Bearden continued painting abstracts until 1963, which was a momentous year for the artist and the

nation. That summer the massive March on Washington, where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his historic "I Have a Dream" speech, marked a new stage in the ongoing struggle for civil rights. In New York, Bearden and several artists, including Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, and Norman Lewis, formed the Spiral group in order to promote the work of black artists and explore ways in which they could contribute to the civil rights movement. This led directly to Bearden's return to figurative art in his collages and his celebrated black and white photostat enlargements, which he called Projections.

In all, though, this turn of events was not so much a dramatic break as an adjustment of focus. Writing in the late 1960s about his abstractions and use of collage, Bearden noted that, "Then in a transition toward what turned out to be my present style, I painted broad areas of color on various thicknesses of rice paper and glued these papers on canvas, usually in several layers. I tore sections of the paper away, always attempting to tear upward and across on the picture plane until some motif engaged me. When this happened, I added more papers and painted additional colored areas to complete the painting."^{vi}

While his collages after the mid-1960s consisted mainly of figurative elements cut from photographs and magazine illustrations, along with areas of solid color and surfaces worked in various ways, the technique that he used to construct them was one with which he had been experimenting for some time.

The same is true of his increasing emphasis on improvisation. Bearden's lifelong involvement with jazz and blues gave him a deep appreciation and understanding of its potential, and it had played a part in his art since at least the early 1940s. He often credited the modernist artist, Stuart Davis, with helping him recognize the relationship between certain jazz techniques and his artistic process.

Later in life, Bearden told an interviewer that, "I now don't 'do' a collage in the sense of rational, predetermined composition, I just invite some of the people I knew to come into the room and give it an ambiance."^{vii} While this is classic Bearden commentary, it also reflects what he once recalled as Mr. Wu's tendency to humanize every aspect of their conversations. As such, it highlights the ways in which Bearden's engagement with Abstract Expressionism merged with other aspects of his life experience and artmaking. His abstracts of the late 1950s and early 1960s stand as a singular achievement, a highly personal body of lyrical, poetic painting that continued to support and strengthen his work for years to come.

In 2018, Mary Schmidt Campbell authored *An American Odyssey: The Life and Work of Romare Bearden*, published by Oxford University Press. Recognized as one of the most original artists of the twentieth century, Romare Bearden has work in public collections across the country, and has had a number of major retrospectives. The Neuberger Museum presented new Bearden scholarship in their 2017 exhibition and publication, *Romare Bearden: Abstraction*. The American Federation of the Arts will travel a large version of this exhibition to American museums starting in 2020. In 2011, The Studio Museum presented a groundbreaking exhibition *The Bearden Project*, exhibiting over 100 artists, to showcase the vast influence Bearden has had for generations, and in 2003 The National Gallery of Art presented *The Art of Romare Bearden*, which traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art, CA, the Dallas Museum of Art, TX, the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, and the High Museum of Art, GA.

i Brian O'Doherty, "Art: O'Keeffe Exhibition...Bearden and Resnick Works on View," *New York Times* (April 17, 1961). ii Quoted in Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 197. iii Romare Bearden, "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings," *Leonardo* 2 (January 1969), p. 12. iv Carlyle Burrows, "Bearden's Return," *New York Herald Tribune* (January 24, 1960). v *New York Times* (January 23, 1960). vi Bearden, p. 12. vii Quoted in Schwartzman, p. 187.