

### About Romare Bearden (1911-1988)

Romare Bearden was born in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1911, though moved with his family to New York City when he was three years old. He often returned to Charlotte during his childhood, though, spending summers with his grandmother and other relatives. His time there provided a lifelong point of reference for his art, and one of his most important themes was African American life in the rural South, inspired by his early memories of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

Growing up in Harlem, Bearden had a lifelong involvement with jazz and blues as well. His parents were deeply engaged in the cultural life of Harlem during the 1920s, and through them he met many jazz greats. Their apartment was around the corner from the Lafayette Theater, a major venue for music and vaudeville, and he also frequented many well-known clubs, like the Savoy Ballroom and Smalls Paradise, as a young man. Duke Ellington bought one of his first paintings, in fact.

In 1921, Bearden spent a year in Pittsburgh with his grandparents, who ran a boardinghouse in Lawrenceville, a steel mill neighborhood in the city. He then returned in 1927 to finish high school. After attending Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania, and Boston University, he transferred to and graduated from New York University with a degree in education. He studied drawing and painting with George Grosz at the Art Students League of New York as well, and in the 1930s and 1940s, became close friends with several older artists, including Stuart Davis, who was an important mentor.

In 1931, Bearden met Elmer Simms Campbell, the first black cartoonist for *Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, and *New Yorker*, and in 1933 he was producing political cartoons for *The Crisis*, an activist journal sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He was also taking night classes at Art Students League, and in 1935, Bearden joined the Harlem Artists Guild, contributing political drawings to the weekly *Baltimore Afro-American*. From the mid-1930s through the 1960s, he was a caseworker with the New York City Department of Social Services, continuing to work on his art at night and on weekends.

Bearden's career as a painter was launched in 1940 with his first solo exhibition in Harlem at "306," a collective of artists, writers, dancers, and musicians who met in studios at 306 West 141<sup>st</sup> Street. In 1941 and 1942, he painted a group of modernist works in tempera on paper that established the trajectory of his career. He had a second solo show in 1944 at the G Place Gallery in Washington, DC, while he was serving in the Army. In 1945, shortly after his honorable discharge, he joined the Kootz Gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, and exhibited there for the next three years. Through Samuel Kootz, Bearden was involved with several of the artists of the evolving Abstract Expressionist group. At the time, Kootz represented Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, and William Baziotis, among others, and showed the work of Arshile Gorky and Hans Hofmann.

In 1950, Bearden traveled to Paris on the G.I. Bill, studying philosophy at the Sorbonne and visiting museums throughout France and Italy. In 1951, he was included in *American Painting Today*, a group exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Sculpture, Watercolors and Drawings* at The Whitney Museum of American Art, before returning to New York in 1952. Back home in Harlem, he married Nanette Rohan in 1954. Two years later, they moved to a loft on Canal Street.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Bearden's work became increasingly less representational, culminating in a series of large-scale, lyrical abstractions from about 1957 to 1963. He then turned to collage and photomontage, which established his reputation as a leading contemporary artist. Bearden joined the Cordier & Ekstrom gallery in 1961, and was represented by them for the rest of his life.

In 1963, Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and others formed the Spiral group in order to promote the work of black artists and explore ways in which they could contribute to the ongoing civil rights movement. In a further expression of his lifelong commitment to the African-American art community, he, Lewis, and Ernest Crichlow later established the Cinque Gallery, dedicated to supporting and exhibiting the work of emerging black artists.

For much of his career, Bearden also created set and costume designs for theater, dance, and film, as well as murals, illustrated books, and record album covers. He worked with Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theater on several projects and contributed to his wife's company, the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theater. One of his major projects that was never realized was *Bayou Fever*, a ballet that he hoped would be choreographed by Ailey.

Bearden was a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Black Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1964, he was appointed the first art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, a prominent African-American advocacy group. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1972.

In 2018, Mary Schmidt Campbell authored *An American Odyssey: The Life and Work of Romare Bearden*, published by Oxford University Press. Among his many other publications are *The Romare Bearden Reader* (2019); *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections* (2011); *Romare Bearden: American Modernist*, published by the National Gallery of Art (2011); *The Art of Romare Bearden*, also published by The National Gallery of Art (2003); *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, coauthored with Harry Henderson and published posthumously in 1993; *Six Black Masters of American Art*, also coauthored with Harry Henderson (1972); and *The Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting*, coauthored with Carl Holty (1969).

Recognized as one of the most original visual artists of the twentieth century, Romare Bearden has work in public collections across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, National Gallery of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Art Institute of Chicago, and Studio Museum in Harlem. In 1987, he received the prestigious President's National Medal of the Arts. Bearden has been the subject of a number of major retrospectives such as those at the Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina (1980); Detroit Institute of the Arts, Michigan (1986); Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1991); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2003); and Mint Museum of Art (2011).

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.