

Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey

NOVEMBER 13, 2007 – JANUARY 5, 2008

OPENING PREVIEW: TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13 FROM 6:00 TO 7:30 PM

PRESS RELEASE



The Siren's Song, 1977, collage with paint and graphite on fiberboard, 32 x 44"

In 1977, Romare Bearden (1911–1988) created twenty collages based on episodes from *The Odyssey*, Homer's ancient Greek poem. *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* is the first full-scale presentation of these works since they were originally shown thirty years ago. The exhibition will also include additional compositions relating to Bearden's interest in classical themes and will examine his motivations in creating these works within the context of the *Odysseus Series* and his overall oeuvre.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a 112-page full-color case-bound catalogue with an essay by Robert G. O'Meally, scholar, Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York's Columbia University, and founder of the Center for Jazz Studies. The catalogue will be distributed internationally by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.

"Romare Bearden's brilliant collages of Homer's *Odyssey* may strike even the most avid Bearden-lovers as an odd departure from his best-known work: the edgy urban and jazz scenes that Albert Murray has called 'the visual equivalent of the blues,' " observes O'Meally in his essay *Romare Bearden's Black Odyssey: A Search for Home*. "Why would this great chronicler of black life in America, this Ellington of twentieth-century painters (who was the maestro's second cousin), suddenly turn from contemporary Harlem to classical Homer?"

"My best answer is that perhaps Bearden did not wander so far afield, after all," O'Meally continues, "that Bearden saw Harlem in Homer's *Odyssey*, and Odysseus in Harlem. Behind the faces of Homer's Greek characters—in the figures of Odysseus, Penelope, Poseidon, Nausicca—Bearden detected a blues-like heroism that would enable black American's ongoing search for home. This is the pressing quest which—considering his scores of interiors and exteriors, country and city life, and depictions of family love—is the central theme of all Bearden's art. If Bearden found the link between Odysseus's ancient quest and that of black America to be 'missing' from American art, this is the link he sought to 'put there': to draw out. Here then is Bearden's Black Odyssey."

Homer's *Odyssey* tells the story of the wanderings of Odysseus and his crew in the aftermath of

the Trojan War. For ten years they roam the Mediterranean in search of their home, the island of Ithaca, suffering a myriad of challenges and temptations along the way. In this epic of symbolic departures and returns, Bearden discovered an echo of his own story and resonances of the larger African American experience as a whole. Bearden the artist found Homer's subject matter and imagery universal, and he reinterpreted the epic as if Homer had been a Mediterranean-African bard in settings almost more North African than Greek, with lush environments inhabited by dark-skinned figures rooted in both classical myth and African American culture.

Romare Howard Bearden was born in September, 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and died in New York City in March, 1988. Recognized as one of the most creative and original visual artists of the twentieth century, Bearden had a prolific and distinguished career. His work is included in many important public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. The most recent major retrospective exhibition of his work was organized by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 2003 and traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in California, the Dallas Museum of Art in Texas, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia. Throughout his lifetime Bearden received numerous awards, including honorary doctorates from Pratt Institute, Carnegie Mellon University, Davidson College, and Atlanta University. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan presented him with the National Medal of Arts award. Bearden was also a respected writer on art and social issues and, with Harry Henderson, coauthor of the book *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, and with Carl Holty, co-author of *The Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting*.

DC Moore Gallery is pleased to represent the Estate of Romare Bearden and The Romare Bearden Foundation.

On Thursday, November 29 the gallery will present a lively discussion with Robert G. O'Meally and Diedra Harris-Kelley, Program Associate of the Romare Bearden Foundation, from 6–7pm. A reception will follow from 7–8pm. As seating is limited, those wishing to attend will need to RSVP by November 20.

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DC Moore Gallery specializes in twentieth-century and contemporary art. The gallery is located on the eighth floor of 724 Fifth Avenue between 56th and 57th Streets and is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 to 5:30. Press viewings can be arranged prior to the exhibition.

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