

Romare Bearden

Paris Blues/Jazz and Other Works



Paris Blues/Jazz series, At the Savoy, 1981. Collage on paper, 13 ¾ x 22 ½ inches.

November 14, 2024 – January 11, 2025

Opening Reception November 14, 6 - 7:30 pm

So much twentieth- and twenty-first- century art has been shaped by the example of jazz music that we could call the long twentieth the jazz century, as one comprehensive international art exhibition has done. And in the dialogue between jazz and art, Romare Bearden may be the most influential artist: the dean of jazz painters. Bearden literally wrote jazz music, and for decades his art routinely depicted figures in the characteristic stances of jazz musicians, some of them specifically identifiable players and singers in well-known jazz spaces.

—Robert O’Meally

DC Moore Gallery is pleased to present *Romare Bearden: Paris Blues/Jazz and Other Works*, bringing to light the series known as *Paris Blues*, or *Jazz*, created in 1981. Exhibited here in a rare opportunity to view the series of 19 collages, Romare Bearden’s *Paris Blues/Jazz* makes a major statement on the relationships between visual art, jazz music, and urban spaces. In these works, Bearden translates the patterns and rhythms of jazz into visual compositions, the medium of collage paralleling its improvisational and collaborative nature.

The *Paris Blues/Jazz* series moves through Paris, New Orleans, and Harlem, mapping jazz onto city spaces. Depicting iconic jazz singers, musicians, and clubs, Bearden also looks to the city streets and infrastructure, as well as its inhabitants, that were vital sources of jazz music. These collages, which author Robert O’Meally calls “expressions of unruly Black cosmopolitanism,” celebrate spaces where Black people and Black culture could assert artistic and political freedom. Bearden lays claim to an array of sites and figures in his tour of jazz— a staircase in Paris, a New Orleans brothel, a New York skyline, and, of course, the Harlem clubs where jazz was played.

The geography mapped out by Bearden, in the *Paris Blues/Jazz* series and elsewhere, suggests an alternate way of thinking about movement, a navigation of identity across borders. In Bearden’s work, influence moves in all directions, embracing multiplicity, quotation, blank space, and assemblage. In drawing out these relationships between cities, jazz, and visual art, he shows us that they are in fact inseparable, as O’Meally writes, Bearden is “seeking not merely to paint about jazz but to paint jazz.”

History of the *Paris Blues/Jazz* Series

In 1950, Romare Bearden moved to Paris for seven months, studying at La Sorbonne on the GI Bill and socializing with the many other artists, writers, and intellectuals who flocked to the city in the postwar years. The vivid stories he recounted of artistic and social freedoms (relative to the US) inspired his friend in New York, the photographer Sam Shaw, to adapt these experiences into a film. The basis for the screenplay was the 1957 novel *Paris Blues* written by Harold Flender, a friend of Shaw’s, which told the story of a jazz musician in Paris rather than a painter.

The movie Shaw envisioned about a Black artist living freely in Paris proved to be too radical for Hollywood, and what eventually was released in 1961, with Shaw hanging on as a producer, was a watered-down version of the original script. *Paris Blues*, starring Sidney Poitier, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and Diahann Carroll, follows two jazz musicians falling into whirlwind romances, set to a dynamic score by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn.



Paris Blues/Jazz series, *Ellington, Billy Strayhorn (Sacre-Cœur)*, 1981. Collage on paper, 14 x 11 inches

Twenty years after the release of the film, Bearden teamed up with Sam Shaw and his good friend the writer Albert Murray to recoup what had been lost and tell their version of the story. They planned to create an oversized book to be published in France of Bearden’s collages, with photographs by Shaw, many taken during the shooting of the 1961 film, and text by Murray. Rather than focusing on individual romances, Bearden’s *Paris Blues/Jazz* narrative tells a much larger story of artistic freedom and identity as found in Paris, New Orleans, and Harlem. While the book was never completed, the collages stand as a testament to this expansive vision.

Beyond *Paris Blues/Jazz*

Also included in this exhibition are individual works from across Bearden's career which led the way to or expanded upon the *Paris Blues/Jazz* project. Although Bearden was an exhibiting artist from the 1940s on, he is not known to have created artwork during his time in Paris in 1950. He was more interested in absorbing Parisian culture, including art exhibitions, jazz played at the circus and clubs, and heady conversations with artists and writers in cafes. Following his reluctant return to New York, Bearden diverted his attention to writing jazz songs, taking up painting again in earnest in 1955. This exhibition showcases several of Bearden's earliest collages from the mid-1950s on the theme of performers, clowns, and harlequins. In this same period, Bearden began an intense study of classical Chinese painting and calligraphy which led to major abstract paintings such as *Heart of Autumn* (c. 1961). In these abstracts, Bearden began experimenting with texture, dissonance, rhythm, and interval, which would lead the artist to his improvisational collage practice.

In 1964, responding to the Civil Rights Movement, Bearden returned to figurative art, creating collages on themes important to Black life and beginning his celebrated Projections series—photostat enlargements of collages. Included in this exhibition is the photostat, *Train Whistle Blues No. 1* (c. 1964), an early visual exploration of jazz music. Throughout the rest of his career, Bearden continued to experiment with collage in the mode of a jazz player, assembling fragmented and layered images into startling and innovative compositions.



Bessie, Duke, and Louis, c. 1981. Collage on fiberboard, 18 1/8 x 45 3/4 inches

About the Artist

Recognized as one of the most original visual artists of the twentieth century, **Romare Bearden (1911-1988)** is represented in public collections across the country. At the Museum of Modern Art, NY, there is currently a [one room installation](#) of Bearden's work from their collection and archival materials from his 1971 MoMA retrospective. His 1979 series of twenty-one collages, *Bayou Fever*, is currently included in the exhibition *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art through February 9, 2025. **The *Paris Blues/Jazz* series will next be shown at the Centre Pompidou in the exhibition *Paris Noir*, from March 19 - June 30, 2025.**

DC Moore Gallery represents the Romare Bearden Estate and Romare Bearden Foundation.

DC Moore Gallery specializes in contemporary and twentieth-century art. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10am-6pm. For more information, photographs, or to arrange a viewing please call 212-247-2111 or email Caroline Magavern at cmagavern@dcmooregallery.com.