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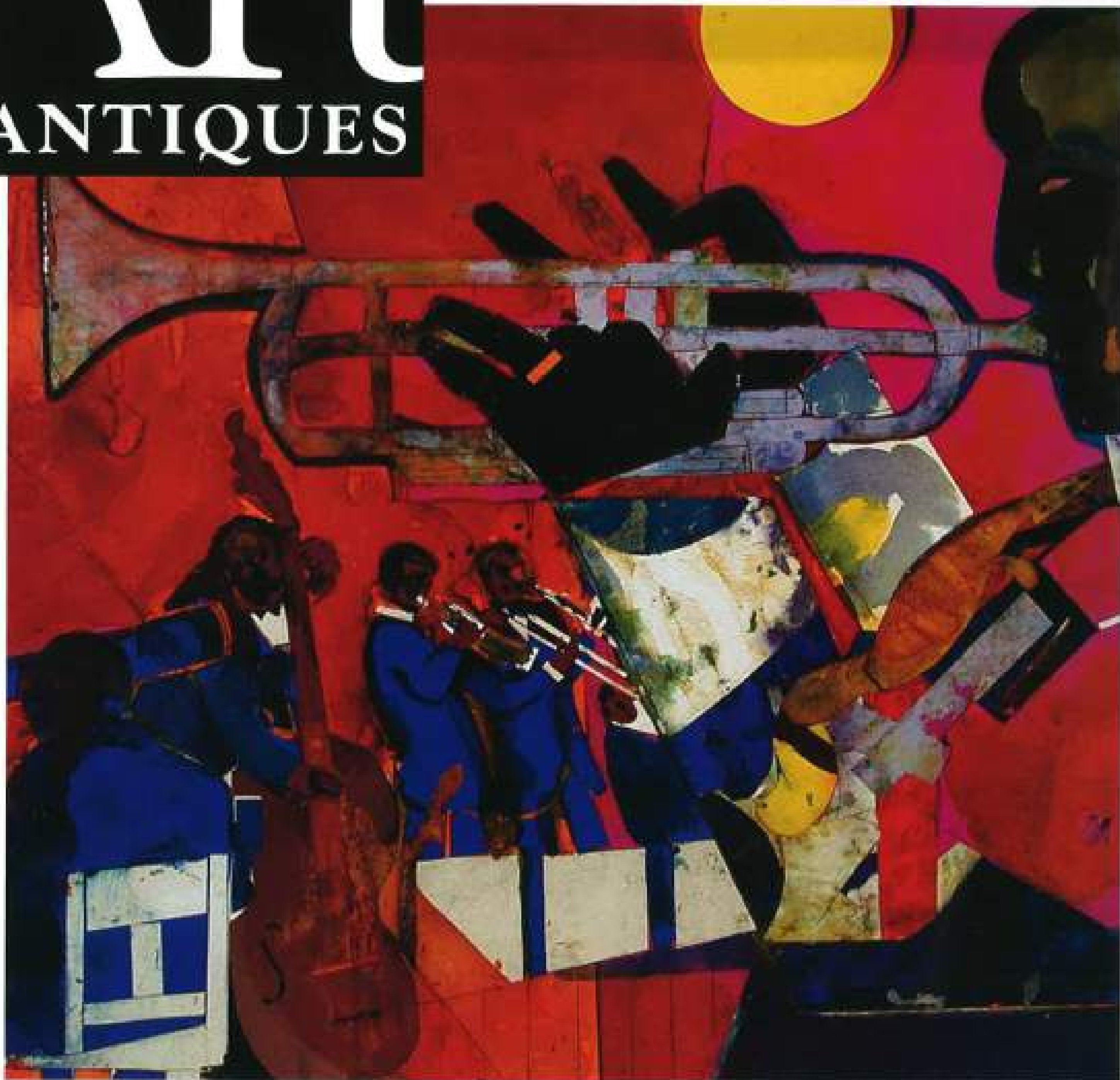
Art & Antiques

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



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ROMARE BEARDEN

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Art & ANTIQUES

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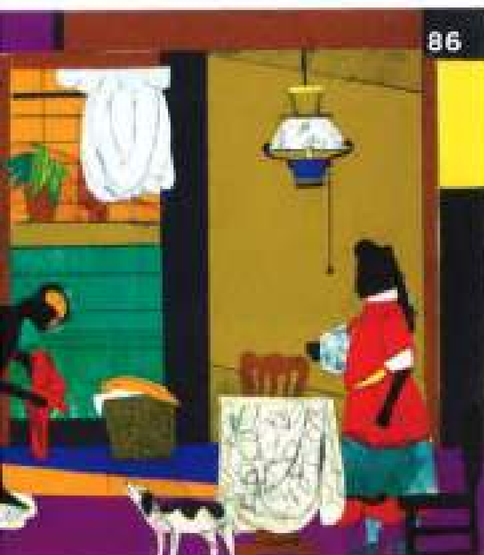

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Romare Bearden, whose centennial celebration continues this fall, colleged diverse elements—visual, musical, literary and historical—into a unique American art.

STORY BY JOHN DORFMAN

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Romare Bearden, whose centennial celebration continues this fall, collaged diverse elements—visual, musical, literary and historical—into a unique American art.

By John Dorfman

ROMARE BEARDEN WAS AT HOME in many worlds. That's remarkable for any artist; indeed for any person, but especially so for an African-American person born when Bearden was—in 1911. The artist's centennial is being celebrated through the end of this year with many museum and gallery exhibitions, and a look at the wide range of work represented should convince anyone with eyes to see that it's impossible to pigeonhole Bearden, whether it be as a regionalist, a black artist, a collagist, even a modernist. He was all of those things, and more.

Previous spread: Romare Bearden, *Billie Holiday*, 1973. This page: *110th Street Harlem Blues*, circa 1972.

DC MOORE GALLERY; ACA GALLERIES; JERALD MELBERG GALLERIES

Certainly he was a multitalented man—so much so that he might have succeeded in any number of areas, and it's art's good fortune that he chose to focus his energies there. His college degree was in the demanding field of mathematics, and he was athletic enough to play professional baseball, doing a brief stint with an all-black team in Boston. He was a skilled writer who fluently explained his artistic purpose and technique. And most important of all, he had great musical ability. For a while in the 1950s he branched off into full-time composing, with considerable success—his song *Sea Breeze* gave Billy Eckstine his first hit. Music was always a big part of the artist's life. Growing up in Harlem in the '20s and '30s, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller and James P. Johnson, friends of his parents, were frequent guests at the dinner table. His collages and paintings frequently refer to musical subject matter, in particular the jazz of Harlem and New Orleans, their foregrounds bristling with the trumpets, trombones and basses of a street band. There's a quality of synesthesia about Bearden's work, a continuity between aural and visual experience that makes complete sense in light of the artist's background and talents.

As a visual artist, Bearden went through many phases and styles, in a wide range of media. In the 1930s, after studying with George Grosz at the Art Students League in New York, he was working in a more or less social-realist vein, influenced by the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. He worked for the WPA art division, doing work that depicted the African-American experience in a fairly straightforward fashion. Other figurative work from the '40s made use of the flat spaces and simple, bold forms and colors that Bearden admired in the works of Giotto and other medieval and early Renaissance masters. In the mid-'50s, after his songwriting hiatus, he moved into an abstract mode of painting that prompted the critic John Canaday to write, "It becomes obvious that Mr. Bearden could have kept on in this vein to develop into a leading member of the Rothko-Motherwell clan." But it wasn't Bearden's way to "keep on"; instead, as the 1960s got underway he moved forward into the highly distinctive collage-based style that he is now most famous for, a style that allowed him to combine his modernist proclivity for experimenting with space and form with his concern for the history and present-day experiences of the African-American people.

While artist biographies can be a distraction from the art itself, in Bearden's case a full understanding of the work is impossible without an understanding of the life. Almost from the very beginning, Bearden had a foot in each of two worlds—the rural South in which the African-American past was rooted, and the cosmopolitan urban north. He was born in Charlotte, N.C., and when he was three years old his parents moved with him to New York in search of wider cultural horizons. They definitely

From top: *Mother and Child*, circa 1976–77; *Mecklenburg County Daybreak Express*, 1978.

From left: *Junction Piquette*, 1971; *Moon Light*, circa 1980.

ACA GALLERIES; DC MOORE GALLERY

found it; in addition to the jazz musicians, literary stars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes became part of their circle. However, throughout his childhood, Bearden spent summers with his grandparents in Mecklenburg County, N.C., and for the rest of his life remained emotionally very closely connected with the area. Bearden believed that the stories and folkways of rural black Americans needed to be preserved and understood, and much of his work embodies a desire both to document this milieu and to transform it into timeless art.

In New York, Bearden was exposed not only to the Harlem Renaissance but to the broader American and European intellectual tradition and the modernist revolution that was then in full swing. After his service in World War II, the GI Bill enabled him to study at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he concentrated on philosophy. Back home, financial pressures made it necessary for him to take a job as a caseworker for the New York City Department of Social Services while making art on weekends and after hours. This parallel career in social work, which had actually begun in the very late '30s, continued in one way or another until 1967, and while experts disagree on the extent of its impact on his art, it seems likely that Bearden's experiences with the city's poor and marginalized (especially the Gypsies) entailed close and sympathetic observation of their culture. As for the culture of his own people, he later wrote, "It is not my aim to paint about the Negro in terms of propaganda...[but] the life of my people as I know it, passionately and dispassionately as Breughel. My intention is to reveal through pictorial complexity the life I know."

That complexity was achieved through Bearden's pioneering form of collage, a mixed-media technique that combined paint, canvas (early on) or fiberboard (later), colored paper, pencil and collaged graphic elements, either cut or torn. A 1965 collage on canvas, *Fishing and Crabbing, Three Mile Creek* (the title was suggested by the writer and jazz critic Albert Murray, a longtime friend and collaborator of Bearden's and the owner of the piece) recently on view at DC Moore Gallery in New York (which handles the Bearden estate) illustrates nicely the main traits of the artist's method. As with Surrealist collage, space is fractured and distorted in Cubist fashion, but unlike Surrealist collage, the intent here is not to completely subvert narrative structure but instead to enhance and deepen it with layers of reference, as well as to imbue it with energy and a

From top: Lead Trumpet, 1983; *Blue Nude*, 1981.

sense of motion. The faces are overlaid with images of African tribal masks—interestingly, a pictorial element beloved by the Surrealists. For Bearden, though, the masks are not there to look freaky, primitive or depersonalized; they are there to link the modern American characters in the picture with their ancestors across the Atlantic.

Although the collages do represent a major new direction for Bearden, those in the know are quick to point out that they come out of his abstract work of the '50s. "The abstract work has not been appreciated or evaluated as it should be," says Ed DeLuca of DC Moore. "They very strongly fit into what was going on at the time. Even in some of his later work, in his collages and monotypes, there's a freedom of expression that you can relate to works of the '50s." Jerald Melberg, who represents Bearden's work from his gallery in Charlotte, agrees. Referring to the frequently quoted anecdote that Bearden's use of collage dates to a 1963 meeting of the Spiral Group, a collective of like-minded African-American artists, he says, "It's often said that there was a great awakening at this Spiral meeting, but that's not true. I have a collage here, completely abstract, from well before that. But after that meeting, Bearden thought, this is the direction I should go in. He wanted to tell stories."

Those stories have been on view in various venues across the country since the fall of 2011. The Mint Museum in Charlotte debuted "Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections," which traveled to the Newark Museum and closed this past August. The Met had "Romare Bearden: A Centennial Celebration" through March, and the Studio Museum and the

From top: *Big Sister*, 1968; *Fishing and Crabbing, Three Mile Creek*, circa 1965.

Schomburg Center, both in Harlem, also had shows. Upcoming is an exhibition at ACA Galleries in Chelsea of major collages from private collections, titled "Romare Bearden: Urban Rhythms and Dreams of Paradise," running November 3 through January 5, 2013. Owner Jeffrey Bergen, who represented the Bearden estate for a decade following the artist's death in 1988, says that the show will include "a whole group of very curious things that people would never have the opportunity to see very often," such as what he calls "the largest pure fabric collage by Bearden left in private hands." Almost eight feet high, it was found in a castle in Scotland. An early abstract collage in the show has an interesting provenance closer to home, having come from the collection of the artist's former boss (and early patron) at the Department of Social Services. From the same collection comes a watercolor from the 1940s depicting a bullfighting scene (possibly an homage to the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca) on the back of which Bergen was surprised to find a collage.

The market for Bearden's work has risen steadily since his death, and the recent centennial exhibitions and writings are likely to push it higher still. "When we started representing the estate," recalls Bergen, "collages, big ones—killers—were around $35,000. Today they're a million, a million two. There's been a nice upward

DC MOORE GALLERY

Clockwise from top left: *Sunrise for the China Lamp*, 1985; *House in Cotton Field*, 1968; *On Such a Night as This*, 1975.

movement in the last 20 years." Nonetheless, DeLuca diagnoses a shortfall in Bearden appreciation: "The reason why he's not a household name," he explains, "is that his works are mainly works on paper, and museums don't place them as much. We still don't know the range of his work." According to DeLuca, prints are generally in the $5,000–15,000 range, with "special ones" selling in the $30,000–40,000 range. Monotypes start around $8,000, and collages go from $25,000 up to seven figures. "Any important, sizable collage," says DeLuca, "will be into the six figures." As for supply, he adds, "There are some strong pieces out on the market currently, available to collectors. What's hard to find are two types of work—very early pieces from 1930s and '40s, and then some of the collage works from the '60s, the first ones he did. Those are rare and bring very strong prices."

While the general public may still need to be better educated on Bearden, there is no doubt that his work has been hugely influential on artists, especially African-American artists, whom he was always eager to mentor, particularly in the last 15 or so years of his life. Melberg sees his influence as being very broad. "There isn't an artist who tears, cuts and pastes anything on a surface today who doesn't owe a debt to Bearden," he says. "And I can't think of him as being a regionalist. That tag got hung on him because of his subject matter. Bearden is a modernist. If I were to call him anything at all, it would be a magnificent storyteller." ■

GERALD MELBERG GALLERIES; DC MOORE GALLERY; ACA GALLERIES