

## Romare Bearden Bayou Fever and Related Works

March 23-April 29, 2017

Opening reception: Thursday, March 23, 6-8 pm



Romare Bearden, *Bayou Fever, Earth and the Magic Drummer*, 1979.



Romare Bearden, *Bayou Fever, The Swamp Witch*, 1979.



Romare Bearden, *Bayou Fever, The Hatchet Man*, 1979.

DC Moore Gallery's new exhibition, ***Romare Bearden: Bayou Fever and Related Works***, features a series of twenty-one vibrant collages from 1979 that Bearden conceived for a ballet that invokes African American traditions and the African presence that is deeply rooted in the Louisiana bayou near New Orleans, and elsewhere in North America and the Caribbean. Never before shown in New York, the collages represent the main characters and settings of a performance that he hoped would be choreographed by Alvin Ailey.

Bearden (1911-1988) had worked with Ailey before, most notably two years earlier when he created a scrim for the ballet, *Ancestral Voices*. He had been interested in dance for some time, as his wife had her own company, the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theater. While the *Bayou Fever* dance was never performed, the bold imagery of Bearden's collages speaks to the power of his visual imagination and narrative strength of his original concept.

An illustrated catalog with an essay by Robert O'Meally will be available.

Ritual, magic, and mystery infuse the *Bayou Fever* series. Much of the storyline centers on a confrontation between the Conjur Woman and the Swamp Witch, in a dramatic struggle between good and evil that plays out in a rural cabin deep in the bayou. Overall, the dance's imagery incorporates many of the most prominent motifs and elements found in Bearden's art, including strong women, elders, musicians, Caribbean masquerade figures, domestic interiors, and rural landscapes, in addition to the powerful Conjur Woman. His costume designs for the characters in the dance often combine photos of African masks with pieces of cloth and textiles.

The collages are based on memory for the most part, as was often the case in Bearden's art. Some refer to his childhood in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, such as *The Mother Hears the Train*, *The Magic Root (Spotted Deer and the Father)*, *The Herb Woman*, *The Blue Demons*, and *The Swamp Witch*, *Blue-Green Lights* and *Conjur Woman*. Others concern his experience in Paris in the early 1950s, especially *Star from the Heavens*, which alludes to the moment many years earlier when he stood looking at Notre Dame Cathedral in the early morning hours and imagined seeing an angel walking across the Seine.

The additional artworks in the exhibition have been selected to complement the imagery and themes of the *Bayou Fever* series, and highlight their importance in Bearden's larger body of work. A key element is traditional African American and African Caribbean belief and religion. In the early 1980s, Bearden explored ritual aspects of Obeah, a religious practice in the Caribbean, which originated in Ghana and is similar to Haitian Vodou. Bearden created Obeah images in a series of bold watercolors, while, Hoodoo, its counterpart in the United States, is reflected in the enigmatic figures of the Conjur Woman and other powerful, mysterious women.

Other religious imagery is significant as well, especially expressions of Christian faith. Images of, baptism, burial and other ceremonies provide references to rituals Bearden saw as fundamental to the African American experience.

Closely related to these more sacred rites are processions and parades, where the religious and the secular often overlap, particularly in places like New Orleans and the surrounding area. Bearden frequently turned his attention to local ceremonies and celebrations, festivals, and carnival figures, a colorful group of which will figure prominently in the show.



Romare Bearden, *Bayou Fever, Star From the Heavens*, 1979.

Throughout his life, Bearden often acknowledged women's place at the heart of the African American community. As mothers, sisters, and midwives, as well as healers and herbalists, they were and still are the caretakers of the family and neighborhood, holding important leadership roles throughout the American South, as evidenced in his images of strong, independent women seen throughout the exhibition.

Bearden was also very interested in the communities themselves, both in people united by shared history and culture, and the landscapes that they inhabited. Several of the collages and watercolors will feature views of the rural South and Caribbean countryside.

DC Moore Gallery is the exclusive representative of the Romare Bearden Estate and Romare Bearden Foundation.



Romare Bearden, *Bayou Fever, Wife and Child*, 1979. Collage, acrylic, ink, and pencil on fiberboard.

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DC MOORE GALLERY specializes in contemporary and twentieth-century art. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am to 6 pm. For more information, for photographs, or to arrange a viewing, please call 212-247-2111 or email Rachel Johnson at [rjohnson@dcmooregallery.com](mailto:rjohnson@dcmooregallery.com).

## About the Artist

Born in 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Romare Howard Bearden moved with his family to New York City when he was three years old. After attending Lincoln University and Boston University, he graduated from New York University with a degree in education. He also studied drawing and painting with George Grosz at the Art Students League of New York, and in the 1930s and 1940s, became close friends with several older artists, including Stuart Davis, who was an important mentor.

In 1935, Bearden joined the Harlem Artists Guild and began contributing political cartoons 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, working 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. 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 discharge, he joined the Kootz Gallery on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, and exhibited there for the next three years. He then traveled to Paris on the G.I. Bill in 1950, studying philosophy at the Sorbonne and visiting museums throughout France and Italy. Back home in Harlem, he married Nanette Rohan in 1954. Two years later, they moved to a loft on Canal Street.

For much of the 1940s and 1950s, Bearden worked in varying degrees of abstraction, culminating in a series of lyrical paintings from about 1957 to 1963. He then turned to collage and photomontage, which established his reputation as a leading contemporary artist. He joined the Cordier & Ekstrom gallery in 1961, and was represented by them for the rest of his life.

Throughout 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.

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.

Bearden was also 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.

Among his many publications are *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). Most recently, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service organized *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* (2012), which toured the country through 2014.