

The Blue Pool (L'Etang Bleu)

Romare Bearden. Acrylic and collage on board, 1973.



Romare Bearden's collages in 1973-1974 captured the vibrant color and light of the islands and waters he experienced while living in French St. Martin in the Caribbean. *The Blue Pool (L'Etang Bleu)* was among these works, in the Rain Forest series.

Bearden utilized primarily vivid, cool blue and green colors. The blue pool shape itself forms the centrally placed focus of the work. Bearden imparts a deep-forest feeling through the use of plant shapes layered all around the piece, with 5 active figures placed in a circle and a bird entering the scene. Bearden's use of color, postures and varying amount of detail in the figures, along with the singular red ball shape, leaves the meaning of this piece ambiguous.

Artist Background

Romare Bearden was born in 1911 in Mecklenburg and his early youth was spent in Charlotte, North Carolina. The family moved to the New York City (NYC) Harlem neighborhood when Bearden was 3, although he spent future summers in Charlotte. He was from an educated, middle-class family but they suffered prejudice. He began seriously drawing and painting when he was in his twenties, strongly influenced by his experiences in both Charlotte and Harlem. Bearden spent 1920 in Pittsburg at his grandmother's boardinghouse, where he was exposed to steel mill workers difficult environment. In 1927 Bearden worked in a Pittsburg steel mill, under extremely difficult conditions. This coincided with the great migration of Southern black workers to northern industrial cities. Both had a significant impact on Bearden's art.

The depression of the 1930's was the next major impact on Bearden and his art, deepening his awareness of social, aesthetic and human issues. He returned to Pittsburgh to interview steel workers for a journal assignment to describe their plight. Bearden graduated from NYU with a degree in mathematics, and then began studying at the Art Students League. Here he learned about master draftsmen of the past and also cartooning. He was also greatly influenced by music beginning in the 1930's – such as by musicians Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. In

1938 Bearden became a full-time caseworker for the NYC Department of Welfare, and he held this position for 30 years. This allowed him to have his own studio and moonlight as an artist but it did restrict his ability to teach or participate in the WPA arts projects. This career exposure to grim living conditions was another impact on his art. Bearden served in the military during World War II, until 1945. The racial segregation and discrimination made another major impact on Bearden. However, he was welcomed into the black artist community, which influenced him and strengthened his desire to paint. Bearden was able to disassociate the poverty in Harlem that he encountered in his work with the NYC Department of Welfare with his inner artistic vision. He felt that it would be severely limiting, both artistically and ethically, to only reflect social injustices inflicted on black people in his art. Bearden's aim was to depict "the life of my people as I know it, passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel." His first work to be purchased by a museum was *He Is Arisen*, in 1945 by the Museum of Modern Art. He also had his first exhibition in NYC in 1945.

Bearden lived in Paris from 1950-1952 to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. He encountered an exciting environment to discuss and learn about art, poetry and music. After his return to NYC, he explored being a songwriter but it only reinforced his desire to be a painter. He returned to work at the Department of Social Services for the steady income, assigned to the NYC Gypsy population. Bearden's marriage to Nanette was a profound influence on him, and stabilized his life. The late 1950's represented a shift of his art from increasingly non-representational work in oil to representational work in collage, including photomontages. Over the years, Bearden



explored combinations in a range of mediums, pioneering respect for collage as an art form. He absorbed classical Dutch art, African sculpture, and Cubists influence and his personal history and stressed the human drama, which gave his art universality. One of his greatest masterpieces in collage was *Patchwork Quilt* from 1970, which was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art.

Bearden retired from the Department of Social Services in 1966, which enabled him to devote the remainder of his life to art. He was involved in the civil rights movement, with significant impact on his work. After 1971, Bearden utilized less photographic materials in his art and there was much less fracturing of the bodies, increasing focus on only a few people, and pure color. His collages in 1973-1974 captured the vibrant color and light of the Caribbean islands and waters. These were followed by a series on jazz themes, *Of the Blues* in 1975. By 1976

References: Romare Bearden, *His Life & Art*, Myron Schwartzman. *History of Art*, fifth edition, H.W. Janson
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Bearden turned to African-American, Southern, Afro-Mediterranean and Afro-Caribbean themes. He continued to paint until his death in 1988, leaving a legacy as one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

References: Romare Bearden, His Life & Art, Myron Schwartzman. History of Art, fifth edition, H.W. Janson
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