

The Lantern
Lithograph, 1979
Romare Bearden

***The Lantern* by Romare Bearden**

The Lantern by Romare Bearden is a lithographic print created in 1979 as a part of the Mecklenburg County Series depicting the artist's family's early life and roots in the South. As one of the central pieces of the series, *The Lantern* is a vivid example of the raw, earthy work of this well-known American artist.

Bearden is best known for his work in collage and chose to work with printers to make a variety of his works more accessible to the broader public. *The Lantern* uses a layered, collage approach whereby individual hues are printed one on top of another with additional colors created through the overlapping process. The result is a vivid portrait of a rural worker holding a lantern.

The print itself uses vibrant primary and secondary color splotches to create the image. As a print it is very flat and the image of the worker almost primitive in its simplicity. Bearden uses the full surface balancing the central figure with the trees and clouds that surround him. The brightness of the lantern serves as a focal point and suggests to the viewer the possibilities of what is being lit.

The work shows the hard work of the rural southern black man while hinting at the many changes happening in the society around him. One wonders if this worker would later travel north to the steel mills of Pittsburg as a part of the great migration leaving behind only the glow of the memory of the quiet, simpler life.

Artist Background:

Romare Bearden was born in 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina to educated and upper middle-class black family. An only child, Romare was surrounded by extended family including his grandfather H.B. Kennedy who owned a grocery store next door to the family home. His parents, Bessye and Howard Bearden were both college educated but struggled to find employment beyond the family business and moved to New York City when Romare was 3 years old. Romare spent his school years between New York City and Pittsburg, home of his maternal grandmother, with summers often spent in Charlotte. Each of these places had a profound impact on both his social conscience and his art. As an adult he lived in New York and spent time with his wife Nanette at their home on St. Martin in the Caribbean.

In Harlem, Bearden found himself surrounded by the changes in society prior to WWII. His mother was the NY editor of the Chicago Defender and often entertained celebrities of the civil rights and arts movements and lived first-hand the Harlem Renaissance. In Pittsburg, he stayed with his grandmother at her boarding house and seeing the impact of the railroads bringing black workers to the increasingly industrialized cities. Down south in Charlotte, there was both the comfort of home and family, the quiet rural nature of life, and the tensions of segregation. He graduated from college with a degree in math and in 1938 began a job as a full-time caseworker for the NYC Department of Welfare. This job was to provide him with a regular income

throughout his career as well as serving as a window into the lives of recent immigrants and the urban poor.

Bearden's art began in Pittsburg drawing the life around him and included winning a student art contest. He drew cartoons for his college literary journal and in 1935 discovered the Harlem Artists Guild. Here he worked with artists like Augusta Savage. He wrote of her; "she was a flesh and blood artist with a studio which we were welcome to use as a workshop, or even just to hang out in." He was also exposed to the work of Stuart Davis, Aaron Douglas, and the Mexican Muralists. Here too the growing Jazz movement that found its heart in Harlem surrounded him. He was greatly influenced by the Greenwich Village painters like Walter Quirt and Stuart Davis, early participants in the Ashcan school of American Modernism. He credits Carl Holty, a cubist, as his most important teacher and with him wrote "The Painter's Mind" in 1948.

In the 1940's he worked hard to learn the tradition of classical painting studying Rembrandt and other masters. At the same time he was encouraged to 'draw what you know,' and accepted an offer from Ida his cleaning lady to pose for him. Ida was a former prostitute and Bearden credits her with his beginning of 'a life-long love affair ... with the infinite sensuous variety of the black female form.'

Through the GI Bill, Bearden was able to study in Paris in early 1950. Here he visited museums and studied with some of the great emerging European artists. He displayed keen interest in the works of old masters as well as the contemporary efforts of cubism, surrealism, and abstractionism. Here too he was exposed to Chinese landscapes and African Art, particularly masks.

Bearden's life was always lived within the overarching context of American racism. Whether as the child of parents who could not secure professional jobs in the rural south or his experience in Officer Candidate School at the end of WWII, the light-skinned blue-eyed Bearden struggled with the strictures imposed on those of African descent. Critics often saw his work as 'Negro' art and expected it to address the social injustices inflicted on his people.

In 1963 he helped to form Spiral, a group of African-American artists who were active in New York City. It was here with his suggestion that the group create in collage that his most known work emerged. While the Spiral group never actually did a collage project, Bearden pursued it actively combining newspaper and magazine clippings with paint and fabrics to depict both historic and contemporary themes.

Collage in many ways mimicked the earlier cubist works that Bearden favored. Whereas in painting Bearden often abstracted his images on the 2 dimensional surfaces with collage he could layer paper, fabric, and other materials along with paint to portray his ideas. The process itself allowed for constant variation and often took days and weeks to complete. In addition, he worked with a variety of printers, first in monotype a process that produces two images – a positive and a negative, and later in etching, lithography, screen-print and calligraphy. In this and in most of his work he was able to experiment with new combinations of techniques and styles.

Throughout Bearden's long career he produced hundreds of works reflecting his life and times. His central themes included: the rural south of his North Carolina roots, the industrialization of the Pittsburg steelworks, Harlem with high-energy arts and intellectual communities, Paris, and the Caribbean. He often referenced the innovative nature of music, particularly jazz and the blues in his work. In addition to painting and collage his work included murals, jazz composition, writing and more. Romare Bearden was truly a leader in the arts community.

Discussion Options

1. VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) to be used with elementary students:
 - a. What is going on in this picture?
 - b. What do you see that makes you say that?
 - c. What more can we find?
2. Discussion/Experience to be used with middle school students along with a collage activity
 - a. Brief background information about the artist:
 - i. African American
 - ii. Mecklenburg County Series
 - iii. Collage as a method
 - b. Discussion questions about the work
 - i. What is going on in this picture?
 - ii. Where is this picture set, would you like to visit here?
 - iii. What is the man thinking?
 - iv. What is the mood of the piece?
 - v. What does the picture tell you about the artist, about the process used?