

Artist Profile – Romare Bearden

b. 1911 Charlotte, NC; d. 1988 New York City

Bearden was born and in the South, but beginning in his youth he traveled between New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania where he began to gain a complex understanding of black culture across the United States. Travel began for Bearden when he realized black men could seldom find work in the South and had to move North. Although he left the South, Bearden lived there long enough to have many memories from his childhood etched into his mind and they later show up in his works. He wanted to create works that represented his life, the people around him, and their community; Harlem life.

In the North, Bearden lived in his grandmother's boarding house where many African Americans who had come in the first waves of the Great Migration stayed. He was able to witness the beginnings of the Great Migration by watching trucks of African Americans come into Pittsburgh, and then watch as they found jobs in mills and factories around the city. Throughout Bearden's life, he was incredibly supportive of his community and the emerging artists who lived there. Bearden's wife, Nanette, finished his plans to open the Romare Bearden Foundation shortly after he died, the foundation helps keep his legacy alive and also supports the art community and new artists.

While attending NYU, Bearden started cartooning, and around 1933 his signature style appeared. In his cartoons, his characters were almost always white, they were light and bantering, and only once did Bearden address the situation of blacks during the Depression. After attending NYU, Bearden went on to study at the Art Students League, where his cartoons and drawings became more political and about racism and black life. Bearden also began frequenting the art studio 306, where he worked with other artists like Jacob Lawrence and Charles Alston and began to develop his new style of collage.

In his collage work, Bearden layered paintings and prints to show the richness of black life in the United States and created a new style of humanist portraiture that truly explores its subject. Bearden's style combines cubism, landscapes, and Mexican murals, this eccentric mixture creates pieces that are semiabstract and two-dimensional. He also experimented with distorting size and proportion and using arbitrary colors, often basing his subjects off of African masks. A huge part of Bearden's work are his memories, people and places he remembers from his past are often the subject and he uses a godlike omniscience to portray them in his pieces. Main subjects and themes in Bearden's work are black life; in Harlem, the South, and working in factories and mills, the female form, and African Americans during the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Bearden's technique for creating his collages are to start by painting broad areas of color on a fine, acid-treated paper which was glued to a Masonite board, then he would weave in other colors and add other media.

While attending Peabody High School, Bearden won two poster contests, one for a local movie, and another for a city-wide clean up campaign of Pittsburgh. Bearden did not just practice as an artist but was also a writer who often published articles in newspapers, and was an athlete, pitching for the Boston Tigers during his time at Boston University. In 1945, the Museum of Modern Art purchased a painting of Bearden's from a series of abstract paintings he did with religious themes, the series was titled *The Passion of Christ*.

An example of Bearden's work that demonstrates his collage technique, as well as pulling memories from his past, is *Southern, Limited* (1), and an example of his early cartoon works that addressed black life during the Depression is titled *Shall Mob Rule Continue...* (2). Lastly, a work of Bearden's from his short stint with abstract paintings, often with religious themes is titled *He Is Arisen* (3).

