

# Romare Bearden: Vision and Activism

This exhibition examines how an American artist agitated for social change through the power of his art and writing. For over fifty years Romare Bearden (1911-1988) depicted, defined, and celebrated the life that surrounded him.

*"... it is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda. It is precisely my awareness of the distortions required of the polemicist that has caused me to paint the life of my people as I know it-as passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day."*

- Romare Bearden from "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings," (1969)

To say he had a unique perspective, and heightened skills at expression, only begins to consider his genius. He lived through tumultuous and exciting times of change in this country. He was involved in political action in and outside of the studio. Whether he worked in text, painting, collage, printmaking, or commissioned publications and murals, he chose to reflect his concerns and experiences in his creations. This means in his art you see war, struggle and strife, but also ritual, music, and family joy.

**Vision and Activism** traces Bearden's evolution into a true master artist whose art changed ways of seeing the world. Through a diverse collection of original collage, watercolor, limited edition prints, reproductions, and archival material, viewers glimpse a vision of reviewing, revising, and celebrating throughout. The exhibition starts with examples of the beginnings of his art with editorial cartoons for university magazines, and later, national publications and newspapers. In the section called **Revising History** are examples where he takes on the past to engender pride, as in *Slave Ship*, which references the story of Cinque who led a mutiny aboard a slave ship. In others he engages current events, as in the Mayor Lindsay piece for *Time Magazine*.

Artists often make social change simply through re-presenting, or re-arranging, the way we see people or things. In a large section the artist explores **Visualizing the African American Landscape**. Bearden's observations of American life and culture may not seem unique to us now, because they have so much informed what we now imagine about Mecklenburg County, NC in the early 20th century, or Harlem of the 1950s. We see the prevalence of rituals- people at work, at play, in the home, and in the jazz club- but it's his use of collage, and other artistic techniques, which readjusts our lens of understanding complex lives. In this section are also examples of where Bearden claims the classics, showing the artist's great love of literature, and skill at story telling. Here he revisits and reconstructs themes of the *Bible*, and Homer's *Odyssey*, into stories that at once seem specific and universal at the same time.

It's apt to make note of a section of **Bearden and Women**, as it brings full circle the early influence of the artist's mother, Bessye Bearden, a dynamic force in her --son's life, and the Harlem community of her time. Generations to come will engage this vision through Bearden's visual conversations that continue to speak to issues relevant today.

Originally curated by Diedra Harris-Kelley, C. Daniel Dawson, and Robert G. O'Meally, as "Artist as Activist" (NYC 2011) this exhibition has been revised and updated for the present tour. Organized by the Romare Bearden Foundation, with generous loans from the Estate of Nanette Bearden, and the DC Moore Gallery, New York; Exhibition Management by Landau Traveling Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA.

# Romare Howard Bearden



Bearden near the Apollo, 1952  
by Sam Shaw



Romare surrounded by his great-grandparents; standing from left, his aunt Anna, mother, and father, and grandmother Cattie, c. 1917

**Romare Bearden** was born to R. Howard and Bessye J. Bearden in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 2, 1911. He studied at Lincoln University, Boston University, Columbia University, and NYU, from which he graduated in 1935. That year, he joined the Harlem Artists Guild and began contributing political cartoons to the *Baltimore Afro-American*. In 1938 he became a case-worker with the NYC Department of Social Services, a job he held through the 1960s.

His career as an artist was launched in 1940 with his first solo exhibition in Harlem. A solo show in Washington, D.C. followed four years later. In 1942 he entered the Army, and in 1950 he traveled to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. He and Nanette Rohan were married in 1954. In 1962, Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and others formed the “Spiral Group,” a New

York group dedicated to supporting emerging black painters-and to participating artists in the black freedom movement. It was with these aims, too, that Bearden, Lewis, and Ernest Crichlow would later establish the Cinque Gallery. Bearden was a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Black Academy of Arts and Letters in 1964. Bearden was appointed the first art director of the Harlem Cultural Council. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1972.

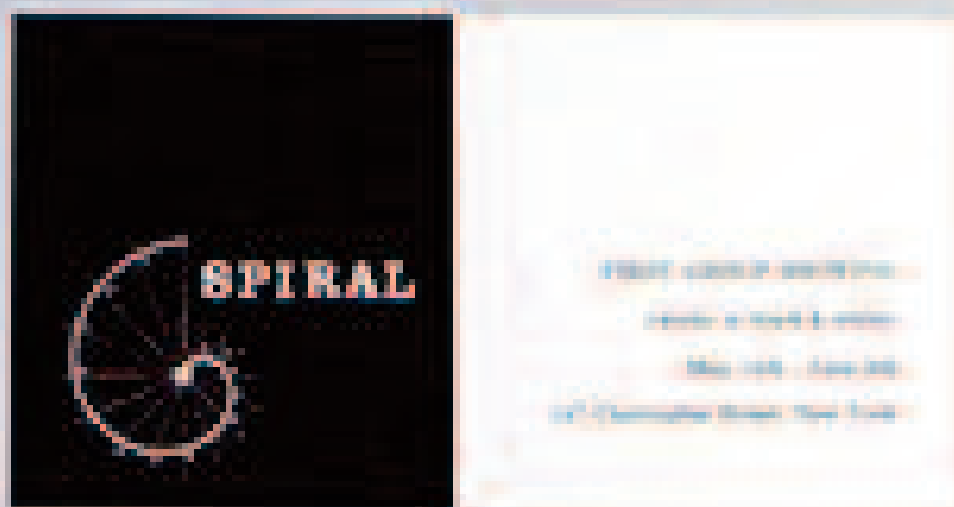
*Among his many publications are *The Painter’s Mind*, co-authored with Carl Holty (1969); *The Caribbean Poetry of Derek Walcott and the Art of Romare Bearden* (1983); *A History of African American Artists*, coauthored with Harry Henderson and published posthumously in September 2003.*

Bearden’s work appears in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Beginning in 1980, he has had numerous retrospectives, across the nation. In 1987, he was awarded the National Medal of Arts. Bearden died in New York City on March 12, 1988.

# Bearden as Activist



Group members, Bearden, Ernest Edmonds, and Romare Bearden (left) at the table, 1970s. © 2015



Black Artists in the 1960s, May 1966, p. 10



Bearden and children at the Studio Museum, 1970s. © 2015

ROMARE BEARDEN was enlisted for life as a “race man” in the struggle for African American emancipation and social justice. Bearden’s identity as an artist-activist informs all his work, from his earliest political cartoons of the 1930’s – appearing regularly in *The Crisis*, *The Defender*, *the Baltimore Afro-American*, and other black journals of social purpose – to his articles and books (and pictures for books) through the 1980’s. In addition to creating his own works, Bearden also organized and supported the highly significant black artist collectives called 307, Spiral, and Cinque, and helped found the Studio Museum in Harlem. These professional organizations consistently asked: What is the most effective role the artist can play in the freedom movement? This question rings throughout the Bearden oeuvre. His answer: *Do everything in your power not just to protest a failed world but to depict one where community responsibility and love are real.*



"Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 1966, p. 10



"The Negro in Little Steel," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 1966, p. 10

# Bessye J. Bearden



**Bessye J. Bearden** (1891-1943), Romare Bearden's mother, is a rich subject for study in her own right. A writer for the *Chicago Defender* and frequent public speaker, she was the manager of several congressional campaigns, an organizer of the National Council of Negro Women, and the founder and first president of the Negro Women's Democratic Association. For a while she worked as a real estate agent and managed the ticket office at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem; and eventually she served as a Deputy Collector of Internal Revenue. With all these connections, according to journalist Calvin Tomkins, "everyone in Harlem knew Bessye J., and Bessye J. knew everyone: Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary Bethune, councilmen and judges, editors and mayors, not to mention all the musicians and singers and actors who played at Connie's Inn or the Lafayette Theatre." She was a powerfully energetic political force in Harlem—"someone you came to when you wanted to cut through red tape and get action," Tomkins wrote. As Romare Bearden noted, "If the family went to a theater on 125th Street with a Negro section in the balcony, my mother would raise hell and sit exactly where she wanted to." She died just prior to her son's first important public success as an artist. "I just wish Bessye could be here," was one relative's frequent refrain.

# Acknowledgements

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Originally curated by Diedra Harris-Kelley, C. Daniel Dawson and Robert G. O'Meally, as "*Romare Bearden: Artist as Activist*" (New York City, 2011), this exhibition has been revised and updated for the present tour. We wish to thank the Nathan Cummings Foundation (NY) for their initial support and hosting of the exhibition.

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A big thank you to Robert G. O'Meally, who as one of the curators, wrote much of the original text for the wall panels; We also are pleased to thank Linda Florio of Florio Design (NY), whose original design for the panels and brochure continues to set the tone for display.

The Romare Bearden Foundation is a non-profit organization that offers programs that preserve, perpetuate and make publicly accessible Romare Bearden's extraordinary legacy. Beyond Bearden's art, archives and literary works, the Foundation has built its programmatic mission on his legacy of nurturing and supporting the creative and intellectual potential of artists, children and scholars. Established in 1990, the Foundation is one of the oldest organizations of its kind established for an African American visual artist.

Bearden Foundation Website: [www.beardenfoundation.org](http://www.beardenfoundation.org)