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Romare Bearden

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

"BEARDEN'S MEANING IS IDENTICAL with his method," wrote Ralph Ellison in 1977. "His combination of technique is in itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps of consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of times, and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes, and dreams which characterize much of Negro American history." Ellison was one of many cultural luminaries in New York who were close to the artist and collected his by-then-famous collages. It was, in fact, a work from the Ralph and Fanny Ellison Charitable Trust that set a new auction record for Bearden last year at Christie's New York when the collage, *Strange Morning, Interior*, 1968, went for \$338,500. Private sales have yielded far higher prices, experts say, often around \$1 million, because his highest-quality works have seldom come to auction.

Bearden came to the method he is so closely identified with only in his later years, having experimented with a range of other styles including non-objective, Social-Realist, and Cubist-influenced modernist painting. Collage proved a perfect fit for an

artist who wore many hats and seemed to be always exploring; he had held a job as a social worker since 1935, and was also a talented baseball player, jazz musician, and mathematician. In 1956 the artist briefly institutionalized himself after suffering an emotional crisis about his direction in life.

At the age of 52, in 1963, he founded the Spiral Group with other African-American artists in New York—including Charles Alston, Emma Amos, and Norman Lewis—to explore ways to respond to the civil rights movement. He had the idea to make a group collage and brought cut-up images and magazines to a weekly meeting. As a collaborative project it never took off, but Bearden went on to make his own series of small-scale experimental collages that he blew up as photostatic enlargements, shown in 1964 at Cordier & Ekstrom in New York to great acclaim. Over the next two-and-a-half decades, until his death in 1988, Bearden continued primarily in collage, mining the rituals and rhythms of African-American life as subject matter and fusing myriad influences in works that came to redefine the medium.

Romare Bearden's *The Fall of Troy*, 1977, a watercolor and graphite on paper, will be included in a traveling exhibition opening this month at the Amon Carter Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas.



The work that set the record last year is one of his many pieces drawing on childhood memories of family life in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, where he was born in 1911, and to which he frequently returned to visit relatives after his family settled permanently in Harlem in 1920. The scene shows four figures cobbled together from mottled, abraded papers, each of them isolated in a dreamlike state within a shifting rectilinear patchwork, showing how Bearden had assimilated Cubism. "It is multi-figural and has that really complex and dynamic surface, which is always desirable in his work," says Elizabeth Sterling, head of American art at Christie's, adding that the provenance, larger scale (44 by 55 inches), and 1968 date—when Bearden was hitting his stride in collage—all made this a desirable work. "The premium is for works from the late 1960s and 1970s," she notes.

Sterling says observers also "might be seeing some growth in prices for works from the 1980s as time goes on and those works become more scarce." Last year *Solo Flight*, from 1981, sold for \$116,500 at Sotheby's New York, setting a new high-water mark at auction for a late Bearden work. "I think if someone is looking to get into collecting his work now, that is a good area."

New York dealer Michael Rosenfeld sold several monumental jazz collages from the 1974 "Of the Blues" series for approximately \$1 million each in the 2011 exhibition at his gallery celebrating the centennial of Bearden's birth. "It was by far the best-attended exhibition in the history of the gallery and was extremely successful in terms of sales and reviews," says Rosenfeld, who spent years accumulating top-tier collages for the show. Collectors also seek out Bearden's earliest paint-

ings, which reflect the influence of the Mexican muralists and of George Grosz, who taught Bearden at the Art Students League in the 1930s, Rosenfeld says. He is currently offering a Social Realist painting, *Untitled (Harvesting Tobacco)*, circa 1940, for \$750,000. "While it's not the first kind of Bearden one thinks about, they're coveted because they are so rare, and they do speak of black experience," he says.

There's a sharp falloff in collector interest for Bearden's Cubist-influenced watercolors exploring biblical themes from the later 1940s and his pure 1950s abstractions, according to Rosenfeld, because they're not immediately identifiable as Bearden unless one really knows his career.

Scott Nussbaum, vice president and head of day sales in contemporary art at Sotheby's, feels that even considering the higher prices realized in private sales, Bearden is a relative bargain. "He's just vastly undervalued," Nussbaum says. "African-American artists in general have tended to be undervalued relative

to their peers. Bearden was a great social chronicler, not exclusively of the African-American experience but of America in the 20th century." Nussbaum has seen a significant bump in the artist's prices since the watershed Bearden retrospective organized by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 2003, which toured San Francisco, Dallas, New York, and Atlanta through 2005.

At Sotheby's New York in 2006, a large, vibrant composition of jazz musicians titled *The Savoy*, 1975, went for \$216,000, well over three times its \$60,000 high estimate. The following year the house offered *Manhattan Suite*, a smaller 1975 collage of an urban streetscape—another theme Bearden continually cycled back to—and it shattered the \$40,000 high estimate at a price of \$240,000, which remains Bearden's second-highest record at auction. "There's still a lot of room to grow," says Nussbaum.

Pittsburgh, 1965, and *Family*, 1970, both from the estate of Harry Henderson, who collaborated with Bearden in writing *A History of African-American Artists*, were the first works by the artist to reach six figures, each selling for \$106,375 at Swann Auction Galleries in 2005. Nigel Freeman, director of the African-American fine art department at Swann, says that largely because of the success of these collages, his department was launched in 2007. Bearden's work appears in a range of other auction categories depending on where it's offered, including American art, contemporary art, print, and 20th-century works on paper sales.

Freeman says that Bearden's core collectors have traditionally been other prominent African-Americans, including Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Wynton Marsalis, and basketball player Grant Hill, who has collected Bearden in depth, including rare early paintings. Today Freeman sees more diversity in the collector pool, including people focusing on American art »



Strange Morning, Interior, a 1968 collage, above, sold at Christie's New York last May for \$338,500. It was the highest price for a Bearden work at auction, though private sales have reached upwards of \$1 million. *Untitled (Harvesting Tobacco)*, right, an early, Social Realist-style painting, ca. 1940, at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, is priced at \$750,000.

Pittsburgh, a 1965 collage, right, captured \$106,375 at a Swann Galleries sale in 2005 and was one of the first Bearden works to fetch a six-figure price at auction. Sotheby's sold *Solo Flight*, a 1981 oil and graphite on paper collage, below, for \$116,500 last May. While pieces from the late 1960s and '70s fetch a premium, experts see growing demand for later works.

or specializing in works on paper who want Bearden in their collections. "I think his stature is going to grow internationally as more of his work is shown," says Freeman. "There's something quintessentially American about Bearden and his way of telling stories. He's going to be identified with America just like jazz and baseball and apple pie."

Bearden's work has been on view in a slew of recent exhibitions, some prompted by the Romare Bearden Foundation, which encouraged institutions to showcase their holdings of the artist during the centennial celebration of his birth in 2011–12. The Studio Museum in Harlem framed him with contemporary artists he has influenced, while the High Museum, in Atlanta, showed him in the context of artists from Picasso to Andy Warhol in "14 Modern Masters." The Mint Museum, in Charlotte, North Carolina, the institution with the most Bearden work on permanent display, organized a three-venue touring show of work based on Bearden's recollections of the South.

On May 18, "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey" goes on view at the Amon Carter Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas. Part of a seven-city tour organized by the Smithsonian, it displays a series from the mid-1970s, that includes watercolors as well as collage, in which Bearden reinterpreted Homer's story of Odysseus using black characters and synthesizing stylistic influences ranging from Matisse's cutouts to African masks. It is an expansion of a 2007 exhibition organized at the DC Moore Gallery, in New York, which at the time had just begun representing the Bearden Foundation and estate (the works were first shown at Cordier & Ekstrom in 1977). "Bearden thought of *The Odyssey* as a metaphor for African-Americans and their search for home," says Bridget Moore, director of the gallery. "He did this work right after he had come back from having a retrospective at the Mint Museum, where he revisited all the places in Mecklenburg County he used to go as a child." Works from this series have sold in the range of \$300,000 to \$500,000, Moore says.

The Bearden Foundation also works with the Jerald Melberg Gallery, in Charlotte, which primarily sells his prints and watercolors and is currently compiling a catalogue raisonné for his prints. "He had a very graphic sense

so his works do reproduce quite well as prints," says Sterling of Christie's, who thinks the prints, often selling for under \$20,000, are a good opportunity for people looking to buy in a lower price range.

Later on, when the artist and his wife, Nanette, made regular visits to their second home in St. Maarten, where she had grown up, Bearden produced many breathtakingly colorful, tropical-themed watercolors and monoprints (he didn't work in collage during his Caribbean stays). These tend to be priced under \$50,000.

Other galleries that regularly handle Bearden's secondary market include ACA Galleries and Essie Green, both in New York, as well as Stella Jones in New Orleans. ACA, which represented the Bearden Foundation and estate for the decade immediately following the artist's death in 1988, had a show this past winter of work spanning 1945 to 1988. On offer at the top end was a very large and rare three-figure fabric collage priced at \$1.6 million titled *Junction Piquette*, 1971, similar to his 1970 *Patchwork Quilt* (another rare fabric work), that was given to the Museum of Modern Art by Blanchette Rockefeller. The works from the late 1940s, priced between \$32,000 and \$45,000, showed his shift from Social Realism to a more Cubistic modernism.

Bearden's exploration of non-objective painting in the 1950s—the period which coincided with his breakdown—is the focus of a 2015 show being organized for the Neuberger Museum of Art, in Purchase, New York, by chief curator Tracy Fitzpatrick, who calls this period, "the absent decade." The abstractions that he painted between 1952 and 1964 "are almost entirely unknown within his body of work but are crucial to understanding the collages," she says. The show will illuminate how he recycled his abstractions, cutting and pasting pieces of these earlier canvases into his representational collages. She plans to bracket the nonobjective work with examples of earlier and later pieces. "Bearden was a breakthrough artist in many ways," she says. "He was working in multiple areas across materials, across styles, across artist groups. He was downtown, he was in Harlem. He was an artist who could move in a very fluid way." ▣



From the Files

- Bearden likened his improvisational process of working to that of a jazz musician: "You start a theme and you call and recall."
- In 1930 Bearden was a star pitcher for a Negro League minor-league baseball team. He refused an offer to pass for white and play professionally for the Philadelphia Athletics.
- Bearden established the **Cinque Gallery**, in New York, with **Ernest Crichlow** and **Norman Lewis** in the late 1960s to exhibit younger black artists, and helped found the **Studio Museum** in Harlem in 1968.
- Basketball star **Grant Hill** has collected Bearden's work in depth. His African-American art collection toured seven cities from 2003 to 2006, which helped popularize Bearden.