

Romare Bearden (1911-1988): Collage, A Centennial Celebration

by Valery Oisteanu

Romare Bearden (1911-1988) began as a painter whose interest was to communicate “social changes” with a figural approach often inspired by social realism. All that changed during an 18-month-long trip to France and Italy in 1950 (via the G.I. Bill) that put him in close contact with European artists and museums, leading him into the realms of abstraction, Cubism, and a special kind of social surrealism via collage.

As the critic Clement Greenberg put it, “Collage was a major turning point in the evolution of cubism, and therefore a major turning point in the whole evolution of Modernist art in this century.” Bearden is a case in point, an artist who understood the kinetic poetics of scraping, fractured, scat-like expression, and a language similar to jazz.

In this second show of the artist’s work organized by the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery (and keyed to the centenary of his birth), an intimate grouping of 21 collages (produced between 1964 and 1983) reminds us that Bearden found his medium of expression only after searching for almost 30 years.



King and Queen of Diamonds (aka: *Mysteries*), 1964, mixed media collage on cardboard, 20" × 20", signed and dated

It was when he was in his early fifties that Bearden started to produce a series of dynamic works from preexisting images, creating something entirely new, ironic, humorous and socially relevant. The earliest collage on view here is “King and Queen of Diamonds” (1964), a masterpiece exploding with hands and faces, as if it came from Hannah Hoch’s kitchen.

Bearden believed that “art is made from other art”—black-and-white photographs, color cut-ups from magazines, scraps of printed fabric and distressed bits of colored paper, all out of scale. He recycled his cut-up images by photocopying them, enlarging the images and pushing the medium to the edge, sandpapering and washing the copies until the images looked degraded with the patina of time.

The narratives of his art reflect African-American experience: family issues, sex, migration, and agriculture vs. industrialization, all addressed through the prism of New York City, where he worked for more than 30 years as a social worker. (In addition to his art, Bearden also was active in arts organizations advancing the cause of civil rights; he was a co-founder of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1968.) His approach, which seems to meld immediacy of expression with Marshall McLuhan’s 1960s dictum: “The medium is the message” into a form of visual jazz, is clearly expressed in a trio of collages with common title “Of the Blues,” all made in 1974, and in later works such as “The Savoy” (1975) and “Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Mr. Blues & Uptown Sunday Night Session” (1981).

His overlapping planes and flat spaces are similar to Cubism and to early Mondrian, while his frontal organization of shallow space recalls Dutch masters such as Vermeer and de Hooch, who inspired his painterly compositions. Like Giacometti, he shows an affinity for profiles and isolating interior spaces, and his combination of Egyptian poses and African masks create a Picasso-like effect that is at once innovative and sarcastic, with unexpectedly intuitive juxtapositions and challenging, disharmonious collisions.



Of the Blues: Mecklenburg County, Saturday Night, 1974, mixed media collage on Masonite, 50" × 44", signed

Bearden was an alchemist with his materials, mixing watercolors with salt and applying tinfoil and glue, the accumulation of which would eventually warp and buckle his paper supports. Together with Nancy Grossman (another collage artist), he experimented with ways to avoid this, which brought them to use Masonite.

Romare Bearden defined the American collage on a par with such Pop, proto-Pop, and conceptual artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Tom Wesselmann, and Ray Johnson. What Calder is to the mobile, Bearden is to collage. He influenced several generations of collagists, illuminating the path for the likes of Lil Picard, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Lucien Dulfan, and others.

Today we encounter an unprecedented proliferation of collage-art in schools, advertisements, community centers, libraries, and popular culture at large. Whether as urban folk art or a high fine art, Bearden's "footprints" must be regarded as iconic.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/05/artseen/romare-bearden-19111988-collage-a-centennial-celebration>

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