

Romare Bearden at 100

by David Yezzi

Little enough is certain about the painter Romare Bearden (1911–88) that even the pronunciation of his name remains unclear. In taped interviews, Bearden pronounced it RO-mer-ee, while his intimates simply called him Romy.¹ Oddly, today Ro-MARE is what one hears most often, and even longtime friends have largely adopted this pronunciation. (There are also discrepancies in the titles of a number of his works, which appear one way here, another there.) Now a couple of centenary events afford an opportunity to know Bearden and his work a little better. A first-rate show of his signature collages, currently on view at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York, reveals the fine-grained nature of his art—the rubbed and scratched surfaces and brilliant, aqueous hues not captured by reproductions.² The second is the publication of *Romare Bearden: American Modernist*, a collection of fourteen essays originally given as lectures in conjunction with the career retrospective “The Art of Romare Bearden,” organized by the National Gallery of Art in 2003.³

1 An earlier version of this essay was given as a talk at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture in New York on November 10, 2010.

2 “Romare Bearden: Collage, A Centennial Celebration” opened at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, on March 26 and remains on view through May 21, 2011.

3 *Romare Bearden: American Modernist*, edited by Ruth Fine and Jacquelin Francis; The National Gallery of Art, 296 pages, \$70.

Not surprising for an artist who employed vibrant and evocative narrative elements in his paintings and collages, Bearden loved stories. Like a character from one of August Wilson’s plays (which his paintings helped to inspire), he loved telling them—recounting them with relish, ebulliently. Bearden’s particular brand of pictorial storytelling, the distinctive Cubist narrative style he developed in his paintings and collages, is unique in American art; it’s also uniquely American. And though the story of his paintings ends in Harlem—by way of Pittsburgh, North Carolina, and even Saint Martin in the Caribbean—it begins way back with the ancient Greeks and as far distant as Wang Wei’s China and Manet’s Paris. As his friend the photographer Frank Stewart said of Bearden’s wide knowledge of the history of painting, “he knew from caveman on up.”

Here’s one of the stories that Bearden liked to tell: It’s 1950, and Bearden, then in his late thirties, traveled to Paris on the GI Bill, ostensibly to study philosophy at the Sorbonne (which must have been tricky given his limited command of French). In fact, he had gone as a painter, with some early acclaim and a few gallery shows already to his name. He took with him letters of introduction from his dealer, the legendary Samuel Kootz, to Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and Brancusi (with whom he later shopped for groceries). While he made no paintings during his time in Paris, his passionate immersion into the life of the city had a lasting effect in his work.

According to one interview Bearden gave, his first meeting with Matisse did not go as he had hoped; Bearden made something of a well-intentioned, and in retrospect rather hilarious, faux pas. Having understood from a friend that Matisse loved chocolate, Bearden bought some as a gift from the Army PX (he had served Stateside during the war). When he gave the chocolate to Matisse, the great man's reaction was decidedly cool—Matisse apparently did not care for American chocolate (who could blame him?). “Awful stuff,” Matisse had said, and the interview never recovered.

This is how Bearden told it, and the story is rather too good to check. In a profile of Bearden for *The New Yorker* in 1977, Calvin Tompkins reported that Bearden never met Matisse, though “he and his friends used to see him from time to time.” The last sighting made a deep impression on Bearden. It was the sort of thing that could only happen in Montparnasse. Bearden was sitting outside the Dôme Café, when Matisse, who must have been in his eighties, came walking by, propped on the arm of a younger man, and accompanied by two women, possibly artist's models. Someone in the café said something to the effect that the maestro was passing by, and the waiters spontaneously began to applaud.

When Matisse was told that this applause was for him, he came over and shook everyone's hands. Bearden prized this story for the sense it gave of being in a place where artists meant so much to people: “It wasn't Maurice Chevalier or Brigitte Bardot,” Bearden later marveled. “It was a man who changed the way that people saw life.”

The episode became something of a foundational story for Bearden and his art. Bearden emerged out of an American modernist tradition based in New York but which had looked to Paris for inspiration. “Whoever you need for help is who you like,” Bearden said, and his passion for Matisse and Picasso, for Cézanne and Jean Hélion (to say nothing of Rembrandt and the Old Masters) would prove both formative and sustaining.

Bearden carried his inheritance from European painting and collage back with him to the States (though in truth he'd possessed it for years) and made of it something personal and distinctly American—Cubist in style, but infused with stories of the rural South, and synched with the teeming life of New York City and the rhythms of jazz. Bearden devised within the Cubist idiom a new narrative potential, teeming with incident and surprise. His figures do not easily settle down into a single story; rather, through scraps of assemblage and a revolutionary use of color, they radiate, as through a prism, a multitude of anecdotal details and emotional resonances. Bearden's unique vision and innovative use of collage was not arrived at easily or quickly; it was the product of years of grappling with the art of painting and with his own personal and aesthetic past.

Bearden elucidates the tension in art between precedence and innovation in much the same terms that T. S. Eliot described in his famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Tradition or “handing down,” for Eliot, was not a matter of “following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its success.” This, he warned, should be vehemently discouraged. What Eliot advocates, and what Bearden comprehended so fully, is the historical sense required to create vital new works of art—that is, for anyone (as Eliot puts it) “beyond his twenty-fifth year,” anyone who would outlive the brash enthusiasm of youth to make a life in the arts. The historical sense, Eliot explains (*mutatis mutandis*, substituting painting for writing):

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. . . . [I]t is at the same time what makes a writer

most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

This last point is crucial. Only by acknowledging the presence of the past can one fully understand the uniqueness of the present moment.

Bearden clearly knew Eliot's essay. A small chapter from his book *The Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting*, co-authored with his friend and mentor the artist Carl Holty, is titled "Structure and the Individual Talent." In it, Bearden and Holty argue that "the supreme interpretation of [the artist's] pictorial structure lies in a change in his character and vision to a oneness with all the means of his medium, and with art itself." A realized structure, he continues, "unites such complexities as a sense of the past, as well as the total response of the painter to his craft, to himself and to the life about him."

This was patently the case for Bearden, whose only formal training was a short stint at The Art Students League in the mid 1930s with the expatriate Expressionist painter George Grosz. Bearden taught himself to draw by copying Old Master paintings, which he had a photo shop mechanically enlarge from reproductions. He painstakingly copied the drawings of Rembrandt and the canvasses of Vermeer, to which he added his own colors, feeling deeply the conviction that "the art of the world belongs to everyone."

If Bearden is not as widely touted today as his Pop and Ab Ex contemporaries, it may be the fault of his conviction, independent from fashion and mindful of tradition, that the best art was marked by both divine play and an abiding seriousness. Bearden chose to return to the figure after Rothko and Co. had jettisoned it, and, while artists after Warhol succumbed increasingly to the siren song of irony and kitsch, Bearden found in the continuity of cultures and artistic traditions an affecting beauty and a love of paint. Bearden was fundamentally a late modernist, extending the lessons of Cubism into new realms.

As Hilton Kramer has noted, Bearden makes use of forms that "derive originally from African art, then passed into modern art by way of Cubism, and are now being employed to evoke a mode of African-American experience." Bearden was serious about his inheritance and about what he bequeathed. As one percipient reviewer put it, Bearden "is not playing games. With a gentle sympathy, he explores his culture and our culture with the delicate sensuality of a good physician feeling for broken bones."

Always keenly aware of his lack of formal training, Bearden worked hard to make up for it. He continued to copy from reproductions for over three years, looking back to *The Annunciation* of Duccio and from there forward to the shifting planes of Cézanne. Bearden worried that the problem with art schools—and certainly with what artists' training had become by the 1980s—was that they no longer taught technique; they teach success, he jibed. In other words, students come out of school versed in the style of the moment. They know how to make, say, an Ab Ex painting, or a Pop Art painting, or a conceptual piece, but lack the basic tools, such as draftsmanship, that would allow them to leave their own mark on the form, to arrive at something new out of the ashes of the old.

Bearden's historical sense included Classical and modernist literature as well. He greatly admired the rhythms of James Joyce, comparing them to jazz. He made paintings inspired by the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell, by the Bible and the Apocrypha, and by Homer's *Iliad*. He drew inspiration from Rabelais, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Valéry. In the late 1970s, he produced one of his masterworks: a series of collages based on Homer's *Odyssey*, that brings together classical legend with Matisse-inflected cutouts and an Afro-Caribbean palate, conflating history and geography, much in the way the poet Derek Walcott does with Achilles on the island of Saint Lucia in his epic *Omeros*.

By the 1970s, Bearden was widely acknowledged as a major artist. He was the

subject of a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971 and, later in that decade, the long Tompkins profile in *The New Yorker*. His fame only increased after his death from bone cancer, in 1988. In 2004, he was the first black painter to receive a retrospective at the National Gallery in Washington. But it hadn't always been that way: by 1950, the year Bearden went to Paris, he'd been dropped by his dealer Samuel Kootz, and by 1953 he had retreated from painting into songwriting (he wrote the popular "Seabreeze" used in ads by the Seagrams company). His good friends Hannah Arendt and her husband, the poet Heinrich Blücher, warned him that he was ruining himself by not painting, and it turned out they were right. In 1956, Bearden suffered a nervous breakdown and woke up in Bellevue Hospital not knowing where he was.

After Bearden renewed his commitment to painting in the late 1950s, he seems not to have doubted it again. In 1959, the gallery owners Arne Ekstrom and Michael Warren visited his studio and expressed interest in showing his new work. (The gallery that later became known as Cordier & Ekstrom represented Bearden for the rest of his life.) Bearden's initial exhibitions with Ekstrom were of non-representational paintings, but by the mid 1960s he produced—off-handedly, almost by accident—his first series of collages, which became known as Projections. The dynamic that Bearden introduced into the art of collage in these small works (which were then photographically enlarged) became his signature. The art of collage, so close to painting in his hands, engaged him for the rest of his life.

The central tensions of Cubism captivated Bearden throughout his career. As enunciated by the critic Clement Greenberg, they are the tensions between flatness and depth, between the suggesting of illusion and the dashing of illusion in such a way as to create both energy and formal poise. These were the very tensions that had occupied Picasso and Braque, as they moved from their earlier discoveries in analytic cubism to the collage

and sculptural elements they introduced into what became known as synthetic cubism. As Greenberg puts it (and it is worth quoting him at some length on this point):

In later collages of both masters, a variety of extraneous materials are used, sometimes in the same work, and almost always in conjunction with every other eye-deceiving and eye-undeceiving device they can think of. The area adjacent to one edge of a piece of affixed material—or simply of a painted-in form—will be shaded to pry that edge away from the surface, while something will be drawn, painted or even pasted over another part of the same shape to drive it back into depth. Planes defined as parallel to the surface also cut through it into real space, and a depth is suggested optically which is greater than that established pictorially. All this expands the oscillation between surface and depth so as to encompass fictive space in front of the surface as well as behind it. Flatness may now monopolize everything, but it is a flatness become so ambiguous and expanded as to turn into illusion itself—at least an optical if not, properly speaking, a pictorial illusion.

In his collage *The Piano Lesson* from 1983 (named after Matisse), Bearden returns, as in so many of his pictures to childhood memories, to rituals of the parlor recast in Cubist pictorial space. In a conversation with his biographer Myron Schwartzman in the mid 1980s, Bearden discussed *The Piano Lesson* in much the same terms as Greenberg described the work of Picasso and Braque. Bearden talks of the interplay between depth and flatness and how he "tipped" his picture so that piano at the center lies on a diagonal, suggesting volume. Bearden then uses both line and color to "bring things back on the frontal plane . . . so that the things are more or less flat."

Matisse employed a similar technique in his *Piano Lesson* of 1916, which Bearden clearly had in mind when he was working out his own picture. Matisse's compositional rhythms are lyrical and classically poised. As in the Bearden, it is the piano and the table (as well as a chair) that break the flat plane of

the canvas, while most everything else works to return the eye to the flat horizontals and verticals. By contrast, the diagonals in the background lead the eye forward and behind—it's as if the pyramidal metronome on the piano is first writ large then repeated (sometimes upside-down) over the entire canvas.

The same in the Bearden: the piano leads us forward and back, while the columnar passages of blue and orange reassert the two-dimensionality of the work. As in the Matisse, the many strong verticals are rhythmically interspersed with pyramidal shapes picked up from and echoing the angles of the metronome—the women's skirts, the space between the billowed curtains, the acute angles of the lime green throw rug.

Bearden's compositional guideposts were not only modernist and Cubist; he also looked continually to the Old Masters for ideas and solutions. As the critic and painter Mario Naves reminds us, during Bearden's brief stint at the Art Student's League, his admiration for Breughel was so intense that fellow students nicknamed him Pete. Bearden said that he wanted "to paint the life of my people as I know it . . . as Breughel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day."

Bearden's particular aesthetic vocabulary is an example in the visual arts of what the writer Pico Iyer has called "tropical classical." Iyer suggests that what distinguishes such artists as Derek Walcott in poetry, Michael Ondaatje in fiction, and Richard Rodriguez in the essay form is:

the ability to season high classical forms with a lyrical beauty drawn from the streets and beeches of their homes. To learn from the tradition of Homer and Augustine, respectively, and yet to enliven and elevate those dusty forms with the rhythms of St. Lucia, the colors of Sri Lanka, the love songs of the Latin South. . . . Rather than simply rejecting the worlds into which they were born (or exalting them for their own sake), they try to find ways of having it both ways—of, in Walcott's terms, invigorating the classical forms he learned in school with his own West Indian words and

names, while at the same time dignifying his beloved Caribbean with a classical high voice.

Bearden's narratives, at once Homeric and modern, intimate and universal, create an eternal present on the canvas (or Masonite board). His fractured views and teeming interior spaces employ narrative elements that are often vestigial and suggestive—a face in a window, a floating battery of eyes and hands, composite faces staring out through exterior walls, a rooster, a brilliant sun. Yet somehow Bearden's stories are more active and replete dramatically, more universal, less compositionally final, than the more straightforward social narratives of his colleague Jacob Lawrence. Bearden's scenes gain power—and poetry—for being less determined. A rural family scene will echo, for example, a Dutch interior or Manet's picnic on the grass.

Bearden's assembled faces and victorious-ly humane compositions invite us in, while eye-popping colors and elaborately layered figures lead us back toward the plastic and pure form—a delicate balance, as Greenberg says of the Cubists, between eye-deceiving and eye-undeceiving elements. The enlarged head of a child begins to tell one story, then bared teeth taken from another face lead us to entertain a different possibility, even as an African mask introduces its own set of associations, rituals, and anecdotes. A giant hand, expressive of a mother's outsized powers of nurture, lends a documentary feel, while scraps of clothing and string return us to the synthetic quality of the work and to the presence of the artist's hand.

Rhythm provides a key to Bearden's work. His tour de force, *The Block*, a series of six panels depicting scenes of Lenox Avenue in Harlem, takes its life from the energetic interplay of colored rectangles and the curves introduced by cut-paper figures, lampposts, architectural ornament, letters, clouds. A procession of yellow disks, for example, recurs throughout the work, appearing first as a halo, then as either a sun or moon glimpsed above the rooftops and through a bedroom window, then in a scene on TV, and finally as the light atop a barber pole.

Suns and moons appear regularly in Bearden's pictures, frequently populating the same sky. This simultaneity suggests an aspect of Bearden's "prismatic" narrative technique and its special representation of time—not only between eras, from Classical to contemporary—but even between different times of day within the same picture. *The Block II* also clearly depicts a large moon on the right and a sun viewed through a window on the left—these different incidents and times of day presented together. If Cubism considered multiple points of view, Bearden's narratives render multiple points in time, much the way medieval religious painting might chronicle separate events of a saint's life in a single painting. In *The Block*, the yellow o's are alternately suns and moons: daylight shining on street corners, while, in a window, lovers embrace by night. Bearden shows us the block from different angles and at different hours simultaneously. The piece embodies a balance of Classical, almost scientific, coolness that nevertheless links different scenes together with warmth and generosity.

Bearden's *Sunset and Moon Rise with Maudell Sleet* (1978) includes the sun and the moon on opposite horizons (as actually happens during the full moon). Sun and moon appear together again in *Conjure Woman*, a collage of totems and folk magic suggestive of Bearden's abiding (and one might argue modernist) fascination with the occult. If Mondrian and Kandinsky tended toward Theosophy, Bearden's connection to the supernatural was through the Obeah women of the Caribbean (where his wife's family was from) and the visionary women, called conjure women, he encountered as a boy in Pittsburgh and North Carolina.

For more than fifteen years, Bearden made ends meet by working for the Welfare Department in New York. His job for much of the time was to keep track of the gypsy population—where they settled, their difficulties and needs. He saw a great deal of extreme poverty—further affirmation for him that cultural separatism is, as Tompkins recounts, "self-defeating."

Bearden found echos between the occult practices of the gypsies and those still alive

on Saint Martin. Bearden observed that "in the Caribbean, it's like a volcano there; there's something underneath that still smolders. People still *believe*. When you stop believing in the gods, they pack their bags and go someplace else! . . . So Zeus and Poseidon and all the rest of them take off." Bearden kept the spirits close. His watercolors, painted at his summer house in Saint Martin (where he lacked the space to paint in oil), render spectral figures in saturated, umbered colors. A haunting series of ghoulish large-scale watercolors, painted when he knew he was dying—both uncanny and carnivalesque—are infused with visionary forboding.

The exhibition currently at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is not to be missed. A number of the collages are rarely shown, including the intimate *Untitled (The Family)* (1969). One is reminded of the ways in which Bearden engaged with the art of his contemporaries, while decidedly following his own course. The spindly figures of *Illusionists at 4 PM* (1967) recall the surrealist figuration in early Rothko, while the all-over feel of *King and Queen of Diamonds (aka Mysteries)* (1964), newspaper and magazine cut-outs on cardboard, suggests his own earlier abstractions as well as those of Ab Ex itself.

The essays in the National Gallery's new collection are a treasure trove of information and insight. The best of them avoid the easy politicizing of Bearden's art, recognizing, in Darby English's words, that "where work is being taken seriously *as art*, the formal trumps the social every time." Bearden would have agreed. While clearly committed—though his involvement with Cinque Gallery and the Studio Museum in Harlem—to supporting black artists, Bearden saw his work as universal, as continuing the conversation begun by the Old Masters in Holland and by the modern masters in the ateliers of Paris. His vision for blacks in America situated them in the cabins of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, in the bordellos of Pittsburgh, and on the sidewalks of Harlem, but connected them to modern Europe and Ancient Greece and beyond. It is a modernist lesson that he first made his own, then made American, then imparted to everyone.