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An Intimate Modernist

by Jonathan Lopez
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Sunset Limited, 1974, mixed media collage on Masonite, 14" x 20"

The painter Romare Bearden (1911-88) once said his goal was to depict "the life of my people as I know it," and today he is justly recognized as one of the great visual chroniclers of the African American experience. Yet his pictures transcend the mere exploration of group identity through grand and poetic feats of formal invention. Bearden combined a sophisticated Modernist aesthetic with a homespun feeling of intimacy, to create works of universal resonance and poignant emotional appeal.

The 14 essays collected in "Romare Bearden, American Modernist" were originally delivered as symposium papers at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., on the occasion of a 2003 Bearden retrospective. Employing a variety of methodological approaches—biographical, sociological, formalist, iconographic—they produce a composite portrait of a complex man who forged an unconventional path to artistic success. The book provides a useful introduction to Bearden's work, although his own writings, which are extensive and insightful, remain an indispensable resource.

Bearden aspired to be an artist even prior to his college days at New York University in the 1930s. But he needed to earn a living and therefore took a degree in education that led to full-time employment with the New York City Bureau of Social Services. Aside from three years spent in the Army during World War II and an 18-month stint studying art in Europe on the G.I. Bill, Bearden remained at his job for the next 30 years. Nights and weekends were devoted to art. The young Bearden pursued formal training with the Expressionist master George Grosz at the Art Students League and produced freelance political cartoons for African American newspapers on civil-rights-related themes. Success was slow in coming.

During the 1940s and '50s, Bearden produced ambitious cycles of pictures in a semi-abstract mode—on such themes as Homer's Iliad and the Passion of Christ—generally with unexceptional results. His early manner consisted of cerebral but inert homages to Cubism and other established artistic movements, and though his work from this period could be technically accomplished, it tended toward the programmatic and the impersonal.

In 1963, at the age of 52, Bearden had a stylistic epiphany. Combining bits and pieces of photographs torn from the pages of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines with vibrantly colored shapes that had been cut from sheets of tinted paper, he began to create fascinating collages. Often, Bearden added freely painted forms to evoke scenes from his early childhood in Mecklenburg County, N.C., or his adult life in New York.

The inspiration for this technique likely came from Grosz, who had worked with the pioneering photomontage artist John Heartfield in Berlin. But unlike Heartfield, who used his art to rail against the corruption of post-World War I Germany, Bearden had little interest in polemics. A signature image like "The Old Couple" (1967), for instance, presents the quiet dignity of an aging man and wife posed inside a humble farmhouse. The dazzling "Susannah in Harlem" (1980) offers a smart urban genre scene set in the close quarters of a Manhattan apartment.

These works succeed because of Bearden's careful sense of composition and unfailing concern with coherence, but the improvisatory nature of montage allowed him to set aside his earlier stylistic timidity. "In creating a picture," he wrote in 1969, "I use many disparate elements to form a figure, or part of a background. I rarely use an actual photograph of a face but build them, for example, from parts of African masks, animal eyes, marbles, corn and mossy vegetation."

This conjuring creates a rich and transformative effect, akin to a jazz musician playing a solo. And, like jazz, Bearden's art is a brilliant and original American creation.



Profile/Part II, The Thirties: Uptown Sunday Night Session, 1981, mixed media collage on board, 44" x 56", signed

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