

# Romare Bearden





Romare Bearden, *Tomorrow/May Be Far Away*, 1967, collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Fund © Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

# 1 Bearden's Journey

Born in Mecklenburg County in North Carolina, Romare Bearden (1911–1988) was just three years old when his family moved from the rural South to a vibrant section of New York City called Harlem, a growing center of African American life and culture. There, Bearden grew up amid the city's diverse people, the new sounds of jazz, and a wide variety of art, including paintings by Pablo Picasso and sculpture from Africa. When he decided to become an artist, Bearden had the knowledge and experiences of Harlem from which to create his art. He also drew from his memories of his return trips to North Carolina to visit his grandparents and of the summers he spent working in steel mills in Pittsburgh when he was a teenager.



Romare Bearden in his New York City studio with his beloved cat Gypo (detail), 1974, Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation, New York (photo: Nancy Crampton)



## 2 An Artist's Memories

*Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* melds Bearden's memories of the people, landscape, and daily activities of Southern communities. In the center, a man is seated in front of a cabin. A woman peers through the cabin window, her hand resting on the sill. Behind them is a lush landscape filled with birds, a woman harvesting a melon, and another cabin.

**Imagine:** What are the man and woman watching? What might happen next? Create a story to go along with this scene.

**"My purpose is to paint the life of my people as I know it." Romare Bearden**

## 3 Piece by Piece

To make this image, Bearden began by collecting patterned papers, including magazine illustrations, wall-paper, and hand-painted papers. He cut them into shapes and glued them onto a large piece of canvas, layering the pieces to make the picture. Bearden described his technique as "collage painting" because he often painted on top of the collaged papers.

### Look closely

**Can you find paper that was cut and repeated throughout the collage?** Bearden used the same hand-painted blue paper for the woman's dress, the man's clothing, and the water barrel at his feet.

**How were the faces made?** Bearden arranged as many as fifteen different magazine cuttings for the man's face, hands, and eyes. He was particularly interested in hands and eyes because they help express a person's character and thoughts.

**Do you see the train rolling across the horizon?** Trains appear in many of Bearden's collages. They reminded the artist of his travels between the North and the South when he was a child. In African American history, trains sometimes symbolize the Underground Railroad, the escape from slavery, and the Great Migration to jobs in the North and West after Emancipation.

**"Aah, tomorrow I may be far away  
Oh, tomorrow I may be far away  
Don't try to jive me, sweet talk can't make me stay"**  
From "Good Chib Blues," first recorded in 1929

try this

## Bearden's Photomontages

A photomontage is a collage that includes photographs. In *Watching the Good Trains Go By*, Bearden used photographs to create a rural scene that reminded him of Mecklenburg County in North Carolina. Cut-out pictures of trains, faces, and arms, combined with patterned papers, create a busy scene.

Bearden's art was influenced by his love for jazz and the blues. Music was often the subject of his work, and it also influenced his way of working. One distinguishing feature of jazz is improvisation. In this approach, performers create music in response to their inner feelings and the stimulus of the immediate environment. Bearden advised a younger artist to "become a blues singer—only you sing on the canvas. You *improvise*—you find the rhythm and catch it good, and structure as you go along—then the song is you."

**"The more I played around with visual notions as if I were improvising like a jazz musician, the more I realized what I wanted to do as a painter, and how I wanted to do it."**

**Romare Bearden**



### Create a photomontage

#### You will need:

Scissors

A glue stick

Cardboard or tag board

Assorted papers, wallpaper sample books, magazines, and/or postcards

Personal photographs

First, think of a place that is special to you. Like Bearden, use your memories of everyday life in that place to inspire your work. What sights and sounds, people, and activities make that place special?

Next, gather photographs and postcards that remind you of that place. Collect patterned papers, such as wrapping paper or wallpaper, and look through magazines for images that remind you of your special place. Cut out patterns and images from your papers, and then arrange and glue them on the cardboard to form the background.

Then, cut out details of people and objects from your photographs. Overlap and layer the pieces to create your scene.

Improvise as you go!



top: Romare Bearden, *Watching the Good Trains Go By*, 1964, collage of various papers on cardboard, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio: Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Phillip J. and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art 1930–1970. Art © Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

bottom: Bearden working in his Long Island City Studio (detail), early 1980s, Estate of Romare Bearden, courtesy of the Romare Bearden Foundation (photo: Frank Stewart)