

National Gallery of Art

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Updated: August 2003

Press Release

**MOST COMPREHENSIVE SHOW EVER OF ART BY ROMARE BEARDEN
PREMIERES AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
SEPTEMBER 14, 2003 - JANUARY 4, 2004;
NATIONAL TOUR INCLUDES FIVE U.S. CITIES**

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[Li'l Dan, The Drummer
Boy
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Romare Bearden
Piano Lesson, 1983
collage of various papers with
paint, ink, and graphite on
fiberboard, 73.7 x 55.9 cm (29
x 22)
The Walter O. Evans
Foundation for Art and
Literature
© Romare Bearden
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Washington, DC - The Art of Romare Bearden, the most comprehensive retrospective ever assembled of the large and diverse body of work by one of America's preeminent 20th-century artists, will be presented by the National Gallery of Art in its East Building, September 14, 2003 - January 4, 2004. Approximately 130 works will explore the complexity and scope of the artist's evolution and will feature many rarely exhibited and/or never before reproduced works from private collections.

Paintings; drawings and watercolors; monotypes and edition prints; collages of diverse materials, including fabrics; photographs; wood sculpture; designs for record albums, costumes, and stage sets; and book illustrations reveal the places where Bearden lived and worked: the rural south; northern cities, principally Pittsburgh and New York's Harlem; and the Caribbean island of St. Martin. They

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also reflect his wide range of interests and explore often overlapping themes of religion, ritual practice, everyday life, jazz clubs, brothels, history, mythology, and literature.

Organized by the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition will also be seen with slight variation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 7 - May 16, 2004; the Dallas Museum of Art, June 20 - September 12, 2004; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, October 14, 2004 - January 9, 2005; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, January 29 - April 24, 2005.

"This exhibition will be a wonderful opportunity to view the full range of Romare Bearden's artistic genius," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful for the generosity of AT&T and the many private and public lenders, as well as for the invaluable assistance of the Romare Bearden Foundation."

The exhibition is made possible with generous support from AT&T.

"As the world's networking company, AT&T is committed to satisfying customers and serving society. Because we live by our values in good times and bad, AT&T has become one of the world's most-trusted corporate citizens," said AT&T Chairman and CEO Dave Dorman. "It is in this spirit that we are delighted to sponsor **The Art of Romare Bearden** at the National Gallery of Art, as well as its national tour."

"As the most experimental African-American artist of his generation, Romare Bearden incorporated the broader social and artistic currents of his time into his extraordinary art," Dorman added. "With this exhibition, we all will learn something new about the power of art and communication to connect people, places and ideas."

The exhibition is sponsored in part by Chevy Chase Bank.

The Exhibition

Romare Bearden's oeuvre of more than 2,000 known works in many media reveals the diverse influences of earlier Western masters ranging from Duccio, Giotto, and de Hooch to Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse, as well as his fascination with African art (particularly sculpture, masks, and textiles), Byzantine mosaics, Japanese prints, and Chinese paintings.

The sections of the exhibition are *Origins, Circa 1964, Mecklenburg Memories, The City and Its Music, Stories, Women, Monotypes, Collaborations*, and *Late Work*.

Highlights include *Berkeley-The City and Its People* (1973), which measures 10 x 16 feet and will be seen here for the first time outside of the Berkeley City Council chambers where it was installed in 1974; *The Block II* (1972), an unusual multipanel piece depicting the varied indoor and outdoor life of Harlem; and *Mauritius* (1969), his only known work of sculpture, which alludes to a martyred Roman soldier, an African recruited from upper Egypt. Also in the show are three illustrations (never before exhibited or reproduced) for a book, *Li'l Dan, the*

Drummer Boy: A Civil War Story, for which Bearden also wrote the text. It has just been published by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Among the many private collectors lending to the National Gallery of Art exhibition who knew Bearden personally are artist and art historian Professor David C. Driskell and Mrs. Driskell; musician and educator Wynton Marsalis; and Marion B. Javits, widow of the late Senator Jacob Javits.

The Artist

Romare Bearden was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, the seat of Mecklenburg County, on September 2, 1911. About 1914, his family joined in the Great Migration north, settling in New York City, which remained Bearden's base for the rest of his life. He became a prolific artist whose works were exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. He was also a respected writer and an eloquent spokesman on artistic and social issues of the day. His many awards and honors include the National Medal of Arts he received from President Ronald Reagan in 1987, one year before he died in 1988.

Related Activities, Catalogue, and Resources

A wide range of films, brochures, concerts, lectures, tours, and family and school programs for all ages will be offered free of charge throughout the run of the exhibition. A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue and other exhibition-related books and items will be sold in the Gallery Shops and there will be special restaurant offerings, including a weekend jazz brunch. The audio tour, which will be available for rent, will feature Gallery director Powell, exhibition curator Ruth Fine, David C. Driskell, and Wynton Marsalis. A video documentary on Bearden produced by the Gallery will be shown continuously in a theater adjacent to the exhibition in a 12-minute format; a 30-minute version will also be available for viewing in the East Building auditorium and for sale in the Gallery Shops. For more information, visit www.nga.gov/press.

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The Art of Romare Bearden

BIOGRAPHY: RUTH FINE



Ruth Fine, Curator of Special Projects in Modern Art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., is curator of **The Art of Romare Bearden**--the most comprehensive retrospective of the artist's work ever assembled, and the 8th major retrospective of work by post World War II artists shown at the National Gallery of Art since it opened in 1941.

As the curator of modern prints and drawings at the National Gallery from 1988 through 2002, Fine organized exhibitions of work by American artists including Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, Helen Frankenthaler, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns; contemporary print-publishing workshops Crown Point Press, Gemini G.E.L., and Graphicstudio, U.S.F.; and of the Herbert and Dorothy Vogel collection of contemporary art. From 1972 to 1980, she served as curator of Lessing J. Rosenwald's collection of prints and drawings, a major gift to the National Gallery that was housed at Rosenwald's home in Jenkintown, PA, until his death in 1979.

Primary author of the exhibition catalogue *The Art of Romare Bearden* (hardcover, Harry R. Abrams, Inc, 2003; softcover, National Gallery of Art, 2003), Fine is lead author of the catalogue raisonné of Mark Rothko's works on paper, a multi-volume, multi-year project to be published by the National Gallery of Art. She coordinated the 1999 Georgia O'Keeffe catalogue raisonné project, and has contributed essays to catalogues on the art of Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, James McNeill Whistler, Tyler Graphics, Ltd., and The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection, among others. She has written reviews for *The International Review of African American Art* (Hampton University Museum), and on Dox Thrash for the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 1976 bicentennial exhibition.

Fine is a painter/printmaker whose work is in the permanent collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum Library, London, the Museum of the Book, The Hague, and the National Library of Canada, as well as Columbia University, Bryn Mawr College, Dartmouth College, the Boston Public Library, and I.B.M. She has illustrated five books, lectures frequently, and has taught studio art (printmaking, painting, drawing, and design) at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the

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University of the Arts), Beaver College (now Acadia College), and the University of Vermont. Fine was educated at the University of Pennsylvania (M.F.A., 1964) and the Philadelphia College of Art (B.A., 1962), and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (1961).

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Backgrounder: August 29, 2003

[Press Release](#)

THE ART OF ROMARE BEARDEN NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART SEPTEMBER 14, 2003 - JANUARY 4, 2004

Backgrounder

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The Art of Romare Bearden is the most comprehensive retrospective ever assembled of the large and diverse body of work by one of America's preeminent 20th-century artists. It includes approximately 130 works--paintings; drawings and watercolors; monotypes and edition prints; collages of diverse materials, including fabrics; photographs; wood sculpture; and designs for record albums, costumes and stage sets, and book illustrations--that explore the complexity and scope of the artist's evolution and include many rarely exhibited and/or never before reproduced works from private collections.

[Related Activities](#)

Bearden's oeuvre of approximately 2,000 known works in many media reveals the diverse influences of earlier Western masters ranging from Duccio, Giotto, and de Hooch to Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse, as well as his fascination with African art (particularly sculpture, masks, and textiles), Byzantine mosaics, Japanese prints, and Chinese paintings.

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Presented thematically in a roughly chronological sequence, the works in the show represent the places where Bearden lived and worked: the rural south; northern cities, principally Pittsburgh and New York's Harlem; and the Caribbean island of St. Martin. They also reflect his wide range of interests and explore overlapping themes of religion, ritual practice, everyday life, jazz clubs, brothels, history, mythology, and literature. The sections of the exhibition and highlights are as follows:

[A Painter's Mind: Selections from the Library of Romare Bearden at National Gallery of Art](#)

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Origins: Christian iconography plays a role throughout Bearden's oeuvre and is evident from the start in two of his gouaches from c.1941, *The Visitation* and *The Family*, the latter never before exhibited or reproduced. Works representing literary themes based on the Passion of Christ and Federico Garcia Lorca's 1935 poem, *Lament for a Bullfighter* (Lamento por Ignacio Sanchez Mejias), will be on view along with two early abstract collages, *Harlequin* (c.1956) and *North of the River* (1962).

[Blues and Dreams: A Citywide Celebration in Washington, DC](#)

[Li'l Dan, The Drummer Boy \(Book and CD\) A Civil War Story](#)

Circa 1964: Approximately 20 small collages from 1964 made almost entirely of magazine and newspaper clippings were inspired by the Civil Rights movement and Bearden's participation in *Spiral* (a group of African-American artists). One of Bearden's most important motifs, the train, appears in works such as *Train Whistle Blues: I*, *Train Whistle Blues: II*, and *Watching the Good Trains Go By*.

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Expulsion from Paradise; Pittsburgh Memory; The Street, depicting Harlem; and *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman* are among other collages on view along with four powerful Projections, which are photostatic enlargements of the collages. Bearden's Projections were a radical departure that brought him increased attention from the art world and press. A selection of later works revisits this early imagery, a form of Bearden's "call and recall."

Mecklenburg Memories: In the mid- to late-sixties, Bearden began using a wider array of papers, as well as foils and fabrics in his collages, and began to incorporate extensive use of spray paint. Mecklenburg County, North Carolina (where Bearden was born and spent many summers), defined his pictorial direction at this time. Among the large collages shown here will be *Three Men* (1966-1967); *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* (1966/1967); *Sunday Morning Breakfast* (1967), based on a painting by Horace Pippin; and *Three Folk Musicians* (1967), which pays homage to a cubist painting by Picasso.

The City and Its Music: Bearden spent much of his life in cities, primarily New York. He immersed himself in the varied street life, especially of Harlem, as may be seen in the packed particulars of *The Block II* (1972; an unusual multi-panel piece with some panels inset and others built out), the more abstract celebratory aura of *City Lights* (c.1970), or the subtle and intimate *Untitled* (c.1971), composed from multiple vantage points and depicting a gridded hopscotch game on a water-soaked sidewalk interrupted by a shadow-like figure hopping mid-air, a child, and two cats.

Berkeley-The City and Its People (1973), to be seen for the first time outside of the Berkeley City Council chambers where it was installed in 1974, is an extraordinary complex of photographs and colored papers on seven panels that together measure ten by sixteen feet. One of Bearden's largest known works on paper, it depicts the many facets of this university city which was new to the artist, although he quickly came to understand it in all of its aspects. The composition includes four heads representing the city's racial diversity that later became Berkeley's logo.

Bearden's world of jazz is one of clear forms and brilliant color, unlike the smoky images depicted by many others in word, film, or paint. Works from Bearden's 1974 exhibition, **Of the Blues** (Cordier & Ekstrom), that are included in this section--all with titles that begin with the phrase *Of the Blues*--are *At the Savoy* and *Wrapping it up at the Lafayette*. An aspect of his attention to music may be seen in the album covers for jazz artists he knew, including the collages *Thank You...For F.U.M.L. (Funking Up My Life)* (1978) for Donald Byrd, and *J Mood* (c.1985) for Wynton Marsalis.

Stories: The exhibition includes Bearden's only known work of sculpture, *Mauritius* (1969), alluding to a martyred Roman soldier, an African recruited from upper Egypt. *Captivity and Resistance* (1976), a dramatic textile collage measuring approximately 6 x 10 feet, was created by Bearden for the opening of what is known today as the African American Museum in Philadelphia. The major theme is the 1839 Mende rebellion aboard the slave ship *Amistad*, with numerous references to the Civil War. Biblical references include *Noah, the Third*

Day (1972) and *Delilah* (1973). Several of Bearden's 1977 Odysseus collages as well as related small watercolors reveal his lifelong fascination with Greek mythology.

Women: Bearden cited "the beauty of the black woman" as a subject of immense importance to him and it was a motif he used throughout his career. He depicted nude women in the academic tradition, as in *Two Moons of Luvernia* (1970) and *Reclining Nude* (c.1977), an homage to the work of Matisse; as prostitutes in collages such as *The Apprenticeship of Jelly Roll Morton* (1971); as lovers in *Down Home*, also (1971); and as one with nature, as in *Madeline Jones' Wonderful Garden* (1977). Bearden also celebrated the mother-child relationship in such works as *Mother and Child* (c.1972) and *Woman and Child Reading* (1977). Another significant female motif is the Conjur (a magic woman or sorcerer in African-American culture), who appears in several works throughout the exhibition.

Monotypes: Bearden was introduced to a hybrid process that conflates aspects of drawing and painting with printmaking by his longtime friend Robert Blackburn, founder of New York's Printmaking Workshop. Bearden's monotypes picture a variety of motifs. Among these are the blues, as in *Mirror and Banjo* (c.1983); jazz, as in *Zach Whyte's Beau Brummell Band* (1980) and *Celebrations: Trumpet Spot, Wynton* (c.1983); portraiture, as in *Blues Singer* (1975); and lush landscapes, as in *Rain Forest -- Pool* (c.1978) and *Waterfall* (c.1980).

Collaborations: The exhibition includes 16 designs for costumes, masks, and sets that have never been exhibited or reproduced that Bearden created for a ballet "Conjur: A Masked Folk Ballet."

Late Work: Interviews with Calvin Tomkins in preparation for a fascinating 1977 *New Yorker* "Profile" inspired two series of works: Profile/Part I, The Twenties, which referenced characters and situations associated with Bearden's early life in Pittsburgh and Mecklenburg County, and Profile/Part II, The Thirties, which focused on his life in Harlem. The exhibition includes three works from each series. Other major late works include lush landscapes such as *Birds in Paradise* (c.1982) and *Mecklenburg Autumn: October-Toward Paw's Creek* (1983); urban life such as *Pittsburgh Memories* (1984); Caribbean scenes, such as *Obeah in a Trance* (1984); and such domestic interiors as *Piano Lesson* (1983), a version of which inspired August Wilson's stage play by the same name. Also in the show are three illustrations (never before exhibited or reproduced) for a book, *L'il Dan, the Drummer Boy: A Civil War Story*, for which Bearden also wrote the text. It will be published by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers to coincide with the exhibition.

The Artist

Romare Bearden was born to (Richard) Howard and Bessye Bearden in Charlotte, North Carolina, the seat of Mecklenburg County, on September 2, 1911 (according to a baptismal record that will be published in the exhibition catalogue). Due to Jim Crow laws, life became increasingly difficult for African Americans, even for such college educated and economically successful families as the Beardens. Therefore, about 1914, Howard, Bessye, and Romare joined in the Great Migration north, settling in New York City, which remained

Bearden's base for the rest of his life.

Bessye became a social and political activist and was the New York correspondent for the African-American newspaper, *Chicago Defender*, while Howard worked as a city sanitation inspector, played the piano in his off-hours, and, according to Bearden's close friend author Ralph Ellison, was "a teller of tales." Their life was centered in the intellectual, artistic, and political mainstream of the Harlem Renaissance: among their friends were writer Countee Cullen; musician Duke Ellington; actor, activist, and athlete Paul Robeson; the founder-president of the National Council of Negro Women, Mary McLeod Bethune; and the first African-American surgical intern at Harlem Hospital, Dr. Aubré de L. Maynard.

Bearden's interest in art was sparked by experiences with a childhood friend in Pittsburgh and by his experiences and observations in the studio of Harlem artist Augusta Savage. After extensive studies in art, he graduated with a degree in education from New York University (NYU) where he had been a lead cartoonist and then art editor for the college's monthly journal *The Medley*. He published the first of many journal covers during his university years and the first of numerous texts he would write on social and artistic issues. In 1935 he became a weekly editorial cartoonist for the Baltimore *Afro-American*, until 1937.

Employed by the New York City Department of Social Services, Bearden worked in his studio on weekends and evenings, and took additional classes from German-born artist George Grosz at the Art Students League. He had his first solo exhibition in Harlem in 1940, his first solo show in Washington, D.C., in 1944, and his work was exhibited in Paris before the end of the decade. Bearden enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1942, was assigned to the First Headquarters, Fifteenth Regiment, the all-black 372nd Infantry Division, and was honorably discharged. After the war he joined the prestigious Samuel Kootz Gallery in Manhattan, which represented prominent artists including William Baziotés, Alexander Calder, Fernand Léger, and Robert Motherwell.

In 1950, Bearden used the G.I. Bill to travel to Paris, France, where he studied literature, philosophy, Buddhism, and art, and made side trips to Italy and Spain. Back in New York, he returned to his job at the Department of Social Services and worked as a songwriter. In 1954 he married Nanette Rohan, with whom he spent the rest of his life.

Bearden continued to be a prolific artist whose works were exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. He was also a respected writer and an eloquent spokesman on artistic and social issues of the day. He was active in many arts organizations: after his Spiral association, he was appointed in 1964 as the first art director of the newly established Harlem Cultural Council, a prominent African American advocacy group with several hundred members; and was elected to the American Academy of Design and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He retired from his full-time position at the Department of Social Services in 1966, but continued working there part time until 1969.

Bearden's collages appeared on the covers of *Fortune* and *Time*

magazines in 1968, and he was active in the founding of the Studio Museum in Harlem. With seed money from the Ford Foundation, Bearden with artists Norman Lewis and Ernest Crichlow founded Cinque Gallery, in support of younger minority artists. Bearden designed costumes and sets for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and programs, sets, and designs for Nanette Bearden's Contemporary Dance Theatre. In the early 1970s he and Nanette established a second residence on the Caribbean island of St. Martin, his wife's ancestral home.

Bearden's many awards and honors include the National Medal of Arts he received from President Ronald Reagan in 1987, one year before he died. Among his numerous publications is *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, which was coauthored with Harry Henderson; it was published posthumously in 1993.

A retrospective exhibition and national tour of Bearden's work was organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1971. After several other museum shows during his lifetime, a posthumous retrospective was organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1991.

Bearden at the National Gallery of Art

Works by Bearden are in dozens of museums throughout the United States. The National Gallery of Art's collection includes several works such as the major collage *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* (1966/1967); *The Street (Composition for Richard Wright)* (c.1977), an ink drawing reproduced in the New York Times in 1977; *The Fiddler* (1965), an unusual screenprint on canvas based on a photostat; *Circe*, a collage design for a Modern Masters tapestry; three examples of his distinctive collagraph prints; and *The Caribbean Poetry of Derek Walcott and the Art of Romare Bearden* (1983), an illustrated book that includes an original lithograph.

The Art of Romare Bearden is one of eight major comprehensive retrospectives of work in a variety of media by post World War II artists shown at the National Gallery of Art since it opened in 1941. The others are: **Georgia O'Keeffe 1887-1988** (1987-88); **Selections and Transformations: The Art of John Marin** (1990); **Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology** (1995); **Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944** (1995); **Alexander Calder 1898-1976** (1988); **Mark Rothko** (1998); and **Henry Moore** (2001-2002).

Among the many private collectors lending to the National Gallery of Art exhibition who knew Bearden personally are artist and art historian Professor David C. Driskell and Mrs. Driskell; musician and educator Wynton Marsalis; and Marion B. Javits, widow of the late Senator Jacob Javits.

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