

## ROMARE BEARDEN RENAISSANCE MAN: HISTORY versus MODERNISM

*Holly Johnson*

### **Introduction**

After looking at a variety of topics on Romare Bearden to write about I realized that most of them sounded familiar in that someone else had covered the subject as part of their research. Romare Bearden was an often overlooked artist of the twentieth century especially early in his career. When I looked at the subject matter of this paper I thought I would be researching information readily available because he became famous in the nineteen sixties. However, in looking for Romare Bearden in *Art of the Twentieth Century* by Fernier & Pichon and *The History of Modern Art* by Arneson, I found no references at all. Because he was an important artist of his time and pioneered several collage techniques, I wanted to explore the man and his art from a different view in this centennial of his birth. My probing took me to several catalogs and books written about large retrospective shows of his work. One book *Romare Bearden; His Life and Work*, by Myron Schwartzman, included many interviews with Bearden and his eclectic variety of friends. Many of these friends were artists but many of them were professionals in other fields. Smithsonian magazine's article on Bearden by Paul Trachtman, which ran during his retrospective in 2004, stated "Robert Hughes could have said; he got left out of history books"<sup>1</sup>. Although, he was overlooked by many as a major artist early in his career the foundation set up to honor him has a wealth of information about Bearden and his art.

Next, I noticed how often those writing about him referred to the many subjects he studied in college, his wide array of interests, and the jobs he held. Bearden was indeed a Renaissance man. He was a mathematician, as were many of the Renaissance painters such as Piero della Francesco and Paulo Ucello; he was a poet as was Michelangelo, and the variety of his interests rival that of Leonardo DaVinci. Beyond these obvious comparisons we know he was a voracious reader and an art historian who wrote a book on the subject. As a student of art history myself, I decided I would look at and compare some of the many old masters that Bearden used as subjects for some of his works. Several writers have commented on Bearden's travels and his immersion in art while in Paris but I want to consolidate the pieces he borrowed from and the work that resulted from his love of old masters and then look at some newer artists he borrowed compositions from also. No matter who he saw, or borrowed from he listened to Picasso's advice which was paint your people.

However, after exploring the information further, I realized that Romare Bearden was a storyteller at heart and his forte' was narrative work. At that time, New York and the

art world were under the spell of Clement Greenberg, a famous art critic who espoused the theory that art should have no narrative. Paint should be treated as paint and the artists in his favor were those who had gone beyond abstract expressionism into the realm of the importance of a piece of art simply being that the artist had taken the time to express himself. The rise of Abstract Expressionism meant artists such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko were gaining in popularity and the public did not need to understand any literary reference to enjoy the work. Romare did try to paint in the abstract expressionist style for a while, working in ink on paper for "*The Passion of Christ*" series in 1945 and "*War*" done in lithograph c.1948. But soon went back to what appealed to him the most the formal work of the old masters and later the work of the Cubists and Pop artists but always with his own style and about his people. This is evident when you look at the photo stat Bearden used of actor Morita Kanya by Toshusai Sharaku.<sup>2</sup>

## **Background**

Northwest School of the Arts, the art magnet high school in Charlotte, North Carolina is considered an inner city school because it is located in a low income neighborhood. However, it has several attributes which make it unique; first it is a combined middle school-high school and it is the only art magnet high school in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System. The Charlotte Mecklenburg system is in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile in size in the United States. Two years ago, Northwest won a magnet school of distinction award. Although, it is a public school and cannot turn away any student who wishes to attend, all applicants, in order to be placed in the correct level of classes, must audition for the department with which they wish to study in order to be placed in the lottery drawing. While the students at our school attend for the pre-professional training in the art of their choice, the school is also expected to maintain a high standard in academics. To that end, 62% of the students taking an AP course last year passed with a 3 or higher. In the AP Art History class 18 of the 20 students who took the exam passed with a 3 or higher.

I am a visual art teacher at Northwest and in addition to the visual art classes I teach, I am responsible for teaching the AP Art History class. The AP Art History class I teach is predominantly visual art majors but each year I have a variety of other majors such as music majors or communication majors who also have an interest in art and history. While the course is open to sophomores, juniors and seniors the students are usually upper classmen who are taking or plan to take AP Studio. They have found that studying about a wide spectrum of artists and art styles helps them grow individually as artists and they often find a new muse in their studies. Because this is an AP course and the exam at the end of the course is weighted to give a sixty percent value to the writing about art and only a forty percent weight to the multiple choice section, the students must have done well on their end of grade English score the previous school year. I have found however that scoring well on their English exam does not always prepare them for writing

analytically and I inevitably need to train some of the class to write about analytically about art without including the prose style introductions and endings which are essential to creative writing.

This is my fourth year teaching and I have revised the class from the first year I taught by starting the year with the last chapter of the book and emphasizing many of the points the students need to remember by using the latest slang or a personal story. I do this in an attempt to make the subjects I love more appealing to my students. I changed the order of the chapters in response to the information I had received from the AP trainer when I took my certification seminar and a change in the standards last year from the AP Board. Last year the board changed its guidelines for students to say answers using a work of art prior to the Greco-Roman era would be considered weak, I understood this to mean that more emphasis needed to be placed on later art periods. Another possible reason for not using art prior to Greco-Roman work could be the conjecture involved in the documentation of the art. Any art which was not documented by the culture in existence when it was made means there was some comparative analysis used by those documenting the pieces existence.

Studying Romare Bearden in particular will be helpful to the students because it will show them a correlation between learning older art styles and using them to create your own work, while still maintaining your own style and message. Another important aspect of the College Board exam which has developed over the years is the comparison of two art forms or cultural responses, one of which must be as they now call it, beyond the European tradition, for one of the two long essays the students are required to write. I want to be sure the information I pass along is useful and appropriate to my students learning and ability to understand the many different styles and influences in art. I can now link Romare Bearden to several art movements as comparisons, as well as his use of African masks which are of his heritage, I believe this will be beneficial to my students understanding of art and acquisition which is a fairly new phenomenon in the art world. Since this is the centennial of Bearden's birth it is appropriate that we study the link between the old masters and his work, then the change of his style to Cubism and finally his almost Photojournalist pieces done during the Civil Rights struggle in America which related to Pop Art in many ways will help them understand not only his work but also the works he borrowed from for composition and/or subject matter. These themes would be explored with the visual arts classes and the explanation that Bearden's art was always his own style and about the Negro experience in America as he had lived it, not only in the South but also as an adult living in New York.

While art history is my favorite subject to teach I am also a visual art teacher for a variety of other subjects, among them an Introduction to Studio class for high school students and an Art Majors class for Eighth grade. Both of these classes, which are survey courses, focus on the three dimensional electives which are available for our sophomores, juniors and seniors to study. Studying Bearden and having the students

explore his collages or even his fiber wall hanging would be within the art standards set for three dimensional artwork. As a teacher in a public school I am responsible for teaching a course standard course of study set by the state and the government; educating the way students see the world of history as it pertains to art satisfies the goal which addresses the standard relating to history and culture and creating collages of their own as I said covers the standards which pertain to various parts of art making and critique. By teaching lessons on Bearden and his work there are many other intercurricular themes which can be explored. Examples of this would be social studies topics on the Civil Rights era or the Great Migration through writing about his references to travel. I am currently participating in a grant with the local museum, which is showing a retrospective of Bearden's work, to have my eighth grade class see Bearden's work and then create a book about a personal journey. The grant will also include several visits from a local bookmaker to assist the students with the creation of the book. I will also be working with the language arts teacher about the story they each want to put into their book. Other segments of his work are influenced by music, especially the music of the swing era big bands and the jazz genre developed in the fifties. Romare's work in his collages used many themes, all of which can successfully be used by students to create their own collages, making compositions which pertain to their travels and memories.

## **Objectives**

Many of the students who take my class in AP Art History have been introduced to a variety of traditional, sculptural, European styles by my colleagues in classes taken to develop drawing and painting skills. By traditional styles I am referring to the styles developed in the time of the Renaissance when artists learned to create figures which had the appearance of form on the canvas. The term often used is that paintings should look like a window to the world, that is, they should record the information on the canvas as though it was three- dimensional and not a flat surface. This convention of space constructed primarily with one-point linear perspective changed when photography was invented freeing the artist to be more expressive than objective. By studying Bearden as a modern artist who used the works of the masters expressively for topic and composition, not as a copy of their work but rather as an interpretation of his own expression, the students will be able to explore both the older work and the newer version as done by Bearden who always listed himself as a painter first. There is more to Bearden's work as a modern artist though because with the use of his collage materials he is able to flatten the areas as the Byzantine artists and Japanese artists did, a use of space later admired and borrowed by the Impressionist artists, such as Degas in his dancer painting where he used diagonals to indicate space rather than the traditional one point perspective.

For the 3-D classes focusing on Bearden's work will give them a good background in collage as an art form. I will encourage them to look beyond simply pasting magazine

pictures on another sheet of paper, to the many layers of papers, paint, photographs and the combinations of all of those parts to make a cohesive work of art that Bearden did so well. Too often students don't understand Bearden's use of parts to make a whole, by this I mean that they will cut out a whole face from a magazine and place that head on another body they cut out. When one looks at a Bearden collage closely there is a wider variety of parts to make a whole. For example, there are many times when a face is made of several different pictures; some magazine, some photo and maybe part from a photo of one of his previous works or a hand is attached to a body not by a magazine picture he cut out but rather a piece of paper that he painted. Images of African masks have also played a part in the creation of a face Bearden has made and often the shape of a person in a Bearden artwork will be reminiscent of an African statue.

## **Rationale**

To understand the art of Romare Bearden we must first look at his life which began one hundred years ago in Charlotte, North Carolina. He came from a middle class African American family, his great grandparents owned a store and rental properties but his parents left the South, when he was three years old, as many families did however, when they moved to Harlem New York his father found that his college education did not mean much in the north and he took a job as a waiter on a railroad line. His mother established herself as an editor for a newspaper, and was active in the Harlem Renaissance. The home he sometimes lived in was full of famous African American, artists, writers and poets. I say sometimes because there was a year when his parents lived in Canada and then twice he was sent to Pittsburgh to attend school there while living with his maternal grandmother who ran a boardinghouse for factory workers. He also spent summers with relatives in Greensboro, North Carolina and often visited Charlotte. After high school he attended Lincoln College for a year and then Boston University for two years and finally finished his degree, a Bachelor of Science in Education, at New York University. "As it turns out, however, the four semesters he spent at BU(1930-1932) followed by five at New York University(NYU, 1932-1935) were dominated by courses in art..."<sup>3</sup> The jobs he held were as varied as his education. During his early working career, he was a cartoonist, and a baseball player. He took some art courses in college but they are not listed on his transcript. There was also a course in art history which he showed interest in, but just after graduation he while he was creating political cartoons he took the suggestion of a friend and started art classes at the Student Art League in New York. His teacher was George Grosz, Romare started the classes originally to improve his drawing skills but Grosz in the year and a half that he was a student introduced him to some of the master draftsmen of the past; Ingres, Hans Holbein, Durer and Daumier to name a few. But, Grosz went beyond just the masters renowned their drawing and introduced Romare to painters such as Duccio, Giotto and Brueghel. Grosz used technical demonstrations and art reproductions by the masters to

teach his classes because as an émigré from Europe his command of the English language was not good.

The position Bearden stayed with for thirty years was as a social worker for New York City, but during that time he also worked on his art in a studio he rented, created cartoons for a variety of publications and then in 1942 he enlisted in the Army. Although, he wasn't sent overseas to fight, the time spent in the military made him eligible for the GI Bill and there was another turn in Romare's life. All the money for art studies in Paris was being used so he opted for studies in Philosophy at the Sorbonne and spent eight months in Paris visiting the Louvre often and seeing all the art Paris had to offer. Romare never created his own work while there but studied many of the old masters Grosz had introduced him to at school in New York. While in the Louvre he would unroll large pieces of paper to copy artist's such as Delacroix who himself had explained his habit of copying master painters in the Louvre. Bearden read about his habit in a journal that Delacroix had written. However, studying the older artist rather than the latest artists certainly did not place Romare in the circle of artists working on newer art, Abstract Expressionism. He also used the time to travel in Europe to see art in Italy. Once back in the states Romare returned to work as a social worker and continued his art, exhibiting in a traveling show and at the Koontz Gallery. When Koontz closed his gallery Romare wrote a book "*The Negro Artist's Dilemma*", the dilemma as he saw it was making art which conveyed the African American experience, the abstract work of the time did not allow him to create art which not only told of the experiences he had lived but also allowed other African American artists to produce work which let them tell their stories as they wished. "Bearden found the critical opinion that Negro art should be protest art severely limiting, both artistically and ethically, and therefore doubly dangerous"<sup>4</sup> Not sure what path to take he started his career as a song writer. It was not until the 1960s that Romare Bearden was recognized as an artist and could retire from Social Services for the city.

Bearden's art changed many times as he searched for styles he was comfortable using to create his images. He was a storyteller and he used recollections of his life experiences and love of music, to make collages of many sizes and mediums. Bearden's time with Grosz taught him to use Photostats in his collages which made some images quite large and more active in the style of work being done by artists such as Hannah Hoch and Hans Hocke. His religious themes were painted in watercolor in his early work done in 1946-1948 and then collage later and finally when he lived in the Caribbean his choice of medium returned to water color and collage. Beyond these mediums he also used tempera, lithography, and screen printing to update his borrowing themes and subject matter from established masters. His choice of art historical time period was as varied as his mediums, using from time to time the Byzantine, Japanese, Proto Renaissance, Renaissance, and Northern Renaissance to name a few. He also paid tribute to more modern Fauvism, Cubism, Impressionism, Post Impressionism and Expressionism. His final exploration was in the work of the early Pop Art of artists such

as Richard Hamilton. He was considered conservative because of his love for the narrative which he felt described his experiences best.

There were times with the artists and art movements that he chose to use the subject matter and then other times he chose to use the compositional set up however he never directly copied the work to look exactly like the original works, he always made it his art work and the use of the works became tributes of sorts, he used the works and artists he admired. By changing the work he took an important step away from plagiarism of the art works, a form of emulation. Many older artists in the Renaissance and later had large studios where young apprentice artists studied and copied the masters works. Many works identified as a major painter such as Peter Paul Rubens or Rembrandt have been attributed to the master only to later be classified as a lesser artist in the master's studio. His use of Photostats allowed him to see the people in the art as black face rather than white face, a help in his search for universal themes that anyone could relate to and he could depict as an experience of his people also.

The first Italian works I will look at are the farthest back in time. Bearden's admiration for Duccio, an International style artist, and Giotto who is considered Proto-Renaissance, are shown in his use of the Biblical theme from a series of watercolors he created using the Passion of Christ as his subject matter. The images both titled *Entering Jerusalem* were used as a reference, Giotto more than Duccio in this series because Bearden flattened the space and used a block-like figure so often used by Giotto in his own paintings. The homage to Duccio surfaces again in the subject matter of Bearden's *You are Dead* and Duccio's *Burial of Christ*. The Passion pieces and the group called *Projections* done by Romare at this time are abstract expressionist in style but his composition work shows reference to both older painters.

The Annunciation was an often painted theme by many different artists from the Medieval era thru the Baroque, it is the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her that she would give birth to the Christ child. In Bearden's version, titled *The Visitor* he uses the theme but the composition is different not just because he uses collage as his medium but also because he does the work as two women, one of whom appears to be going on a journey. The train traveling across the pictorial plane is used frequently by Bearden recalling his time in Charlotte when his Grandfather would take him to watch the trains. Trains are also a reference to Bearden's family moving North during the migration of Southern blacks to factory work in the industrial north. He himself, was living in both New York and in Pittsburgh as a child. Bearden was also known to rework his paintings and collages which means there are several versions of the Annunciation theme called *Prevalence of Ritual: Tidings(1964)*, *Prevalence of Ritual: Tidings(1964)* a Photostat in fiberboard and "*The Visitor*", 1970/1974 watercolor and gouache with ink and graphite on paper each one having a slightly different composition. Finally, in an older painting by a Mannerist, there is the theme of *Young Woman with Child* by Bronzino. In the Bearden piece *Mother and Child* he has used the positioning of the

people that Bronzino used but adds his own expression with the typical large hands on the mother another recurrent motif in Bearden's work.

Bearden's interest in the Renaissance era was not just to study the Italian artists who are famous such as Michelangelo, he also studied the Northern artists, choosing again the Biblical themes that the artists of that time painted. His image of choice is Dirk Bout's *Baptism* which Romare re-creates as a water color done in his looser and stronger colors reminiscent of his work done in St. Martin.

In the latest exhibit of Bearden's work there are two pieces which are compared on the wall next to his art work. Again, he chose the subject matter of a master, Pieter Brueghel, in the piece *Return of the Hunters (Winter)* and this time Bearden changes the subject into a vibrant watercolor titled "*Winter, Time of the Hawk*" where we can see that Brueghel's fox has become not just a foil for the block like and flattened figures of the hunters but the central interest of the painting. He enjoyed and used references and works by Brueghel so often that his fellow students at The New York Art League, teased him about being Romare Brueghel.

One of the most famous series done by Romare Bearden was the prints done illustrating the travels of Odysseus derived from *The Illiad* by Homer. The comparison here was between Bearden's "*Prelude to Troy*" and Lucas Cranach's "*The Judgement of Paris*" and unlike the theme being the only part borrowed the composition was also used. But Romare made many of the figures black and used the cut paper motif of Matisse in his prints. These block like figures were also used by Jacob Lawrence in his tempera paintings of *The Great Migration* and *The Story of Harriet Tubman*.

One piece that caught my eye in the newest exhibit was a screen print Bearden created in 1972. In his "*Mother and Child*" the position of the figures and the shape of the mother's face look very much to me like the Byzantine masterpiece called *The Vladimir Madonna*, Bearden even used the stylistic straight nose and tilted face of the older piece. This type of eclectic borrowing, makes it hard to categorize paintings or write about them in a set order.

An example of the problem of categories, is evident in the time, theme and style of the following pieces I would like to compare. They are *Noon Day Rest* by Jean-Francois Millet, *Noon Rest from Work* by Vincent Van Gogh *Sleeping Peasants* by Pablo Picasso, and *Down Home* by Bearden. While each of the paintings is painted about the work done on a farm, with the figures used in the paintings depicted during what would be called lunch break today and each painter has used his own style; Millet using the honesty of realism, Van Gogh employing the brush strokes of his painterly style which gives movement even to the still figures, and Picasso using his block-like figures of his monumental style, only Romare brings the scene he has seen in the South and given the painting a sexual undertone of the woman lying naked on the ground. Each of these works was done in response to the previous piece, Millet's being the oldest of the four.



While it is believed that Bearden saw the Picasso work at MOMA, Picasso did his piece in direct response to Van Gogh's which is sub titled "after Millet".

In the "*Adoration of the Wise Men*" by Bearden he has returned to the looser style of painting the figure but this time he has added a heavy outline to each of the pieces of subject matter. "Bearden also employed bold black lines throughout his pictorial field, an emphatic enclosing the color segments...." <sup>5</sup> This outline is reminiscent of George Rouault paintings like "*The Beating of Christ.*" We know that the heavy outline in Rouault's work came from his first trade as a stained glass artist but when Bearden's work was shown he was referred by Carl Van Vechten as "the Negro Rouault ". We can see that the outline is the main feature borrowed by Bearden because his figures again have a looser feel than Rouault's more static figures.

During Romare's many works done about music, musicians and the blues his collage titled *Of the Blues* can be seen as a direct borrowing of the composition when compared with Edgar Degas' *Café Singer*. Both pieces are dominated by a female singer, but where Degas places his singer to one side with the lighting and colors soft, Bearden fills the picture frame with a boldly colored female singer who faces the viewer head on with her arm and gloved hand set against a brightly colored background. The difference in music from the chanteuse to the blues singer is evident and not only thoroughly modernized but typical of the people that Bearden would see in the clubs in New York City.

Romare Bearden was known to have a copy of *The Card Players* by Paul Cezanne in his studio so it is not unusual that he would create his own version of the painting. His piece differed in the placement of the figures and the looks of the faces and large hands of the card players but the reference is unmistakable. While Romare used many compositions by many different artists this piece was even given the same title. Cezanne was an artist who started to flatten the painting of subject matter into blocks of flat color. His work differed from the Impressionist work of the time because he gave form to the objects in his paintings; they were not as nebulous as the painters like Monet who blurred outline and juxtaposed color rather than blending it.

Although, not an Avant Garde artist of Bearden's time Henri Matisse was one of the Fauve painters who followed Gauguin in painting very saturated colors and using the color expressively rather than life like. Bearden recreated two of Matisse's paintings and in one *Ivy With Flowers* he used the composition that Matisse used, with the same white pot but "Bearden seems to have thoroughly digested into his art many lessons gleaned from Matisse."<sup>6</sup> In *Piano Lesson* Matisse's small boy is seen peering over the piano the vertical lines of the doorway in the back enclose a shadowy figure, nearly unreadable, becomes the small girl at the piano with the teacher standing behind her and the diagonals and vertical lines in conjunction with the bright colors lead the viewer outside the house. The outside itself isn't a landscape detail but rather light and a change of color.

Both Matisse and Picasso were known collectors of African art. Neither man collected the work for its beauty alone but both used the flat planes of masks and carvings to flatten their work further than previous artists. Both of these uses influenced Romare and he studied African art as well as every other segment of art history. Eventually, as he painted and collaged work he incorporated pieces of masks into the faces he depicted in both mediums. One of the works by Picasso that he used was *Demoiselles d' Avignon* this break through piece by Picasso was heavily influenced by African masks which show/hide the faces of the prostitutes of Avignon a street in Barcelona which he has painted as nudes with a theatrical style backdrop. Several of the figures are crudely posed or lacking detail. Bearden chose instead to represent the life and spirituality of the African-American in his collage *Two Women* from 1969, by choosing to represent them in forms similar to a reliquary from Nabo, Gabon. Bearden's figure on the left has an area below her head in the same shape is the reliquary and the woman on the right is holding a bowl. These works were created in different mediums but both are Cubist in nature and both speak to the experience and life of the man who made them. Picasso would have seen the African pieces when he visited Matisse, while Romare may have actually seen them in a home he grew up in.

The next two pieces by Picasso and Bearden are both similarly named; Picasso painted *Three Musicians* and Bearden created *Three Folk Musicians*. The younger artist, Bearden, copied the composition but the people are African –Americans similar to those he would have seen on one of his summer trips south to stay with his relatives. While Picasso uses large blocks of color pieced together to create his musicians who resemble harlequins and clowns in many respects, Bearden's men look more like the down home fellas who might gather on a porch or street corner to play for their own enjoyment and maybe draw a group to listen. Picasso also pictures the whole person where Bearden gives us a close up of the men and their instruments.

While many of his later works showed an influence of Matisse and Picasso, neither of these artists were considered the Avant Garde any longer. Bearden's works often referenced Picasso's distorted body parts such as the over sized hands Romare used in a piece called *The Family* where the father's hands dominate the visual space.

Closely related to influences which affected the composition and style of Bearden's work were the murals done by both Jose Orozco and Diego Rivera. The influence of the body styles done by the muralists shows in several of Bearden's cotton farmer paintings. Several of the paintings done by Bearden show the same blocky body style and there is a feeling of distance and alienation among the figures.

The last style Bearden used is the jazz style of Stuart Davis a contemporary of his who advised Romare to feel the music in his work . This style was used by Davis in many of his paintings but the one I feel relates best to Bearden's work and shows the connection is

*House and Street* by Davis which we can see in the division and angles of Romare's *The Block*. Though Davis's use of cubes and rectangles to represent the houses have less detail than Bearden's work, the look of a city and the blocks where people lived still exists.

After viewing all these comparisons we need to look at why Romare did the work he did. All the evidence of the similarities in the works above demonstrate Romare was aware of great art which had been done and in many cases, the works were groundbreaking pieces for their time, but the differences show in how he used the work. First, he remained true to his people and depicting their existence. He related the people and the experiences to African-Americans he knew or had known as a child. The spirituality of the Southern Negro when he was a young man is evident in his religious paintings such as *The Baptism* which is done as a preacher in a river rather than the traditional church basin where a small amount of water is dripped on a startled infant's forehead.

Another difference is that in many ways Bearden stays with the social realism of friends like Ben Shan who used their art to make relevant images of the disadvantaged in society. This can be seen in an early oil on paper, painting by Bearden called *The Soup Kitchen*. In images like this there is a hard existence portrayed. Many of the people in his paintings and collages are shown in a realistic social setting; hard working men in the factories of the North, in particular *Pittsburgh Memory* or share cropping farmers in the South, as seen in his collages *Train Whistle Blues* or *Cotton*. His years as a political cartoonist, right after he finished college continued his social awareness which had started at home with his mother during the Harlem Renaissance.

It is not an unexpected move then for Bearden to remain active in the life of his people, or to make art which applies to their culture in particular, North and South. It also would stand to reason that his ability to tell stories could also stem from a culture which had been forced at various times to maintain an oral rather than written tradition.

One most important fact in Romare's belated rise to the fame he achieved was that he was out of touch with his contemporaries. Because he used narrative and figurative art he was not part of the non-representational art world, touted by Clement Greenberg. Greenberg tended to be overly opinionated and referred to modern art done with any type of reference as kitsch. He was especially contemptuous of the Regional artists such as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton.<sup>7</sup> His emphasis on having the medium look like the medium and to accept and understand the limitations of the medium led to the development of what came to be known as Greenbergian formalism. This type of work left even Romare's foray into abstract expressionism in several of his religious series looking dated.

It has been said that Bearden was even very different than many of the Pop artists but I believe that he tended to be similar to Richard Hamilton or Tom Wesselman who worked

with recognizable images. It was people such as Rauchenberg who took Pop art to a more abstract form by often filling his combines with more abstract components, and sometimes no narrative that Bearden would not have agreed with, his comment when asked about African-American art was that each artist should be able to make whatever type of art he liked. His voice became his experiences as an African-American in a world of art which had no reference. In all his maintaining that each artist should choose his own path place him in a more formal and more conservative circle of artists.

This opinion is shared by Karmel in writing about Bearden's book *The Negro Dilemma*, Karmel states that a look back at Bearden's work would actually place him ahead of the category he has been placed in, that of recollections of earlier modernism. He thinks instead that Bearden should be seen as an artist of postmodern society with its multiple identities and incompatible dreams.

## **Strategies**

My first strategy to assist the students is to plan a scavenger hunt of Romare's borrowings for the students. I will expand the information beyond the text for the course, Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, to include information I have gathered from The Mint Museum in town. I will also add images found on line from a variety of museums as well as the Mint, to give a more historical look at art which develops dramatically during the 1950s. It will be during a visit to the Mint Museum that some of the correlations will be introduced to them as viable art borrowings to study in depth. Each student will be given one particular image to study and do a report on following the research guidelines stated in the rationale section.

The second strategy will be to combine the information I gave the students, as lessons, at the beginning of this year with the information about Romare Bearden that they have learned from their museum visit to establish his place in the art of his time. In class discussions, this information will be correlated with an in-depth look at art lectured on from the time of the Proto-Renaissance through Modern art. This will help them understand not only the art produced but also the reason it was produced. Did the writings of Clement Greenberg, a renowned critic at the middle of the twentieth century influence in any way what was seen or how it was understood by the public? Did the Modernist movement itself affect what was seen in museums, how we view art today and was the freedom of expression the cause of reactions in successive art movements? Where did Romare Bearden's work fit into this art period or did it fit at all? Was his conservative emphasis on the use of narrative work a result of his being an African-American or were his themes universal to all people?

The art history class I teach is conducted on an A day, B day schedule, meeting every other day for an hour and a half. Each chapter is introduced historically to meet the NCSCOS standards stating that art is to be placed in context for student learning. During,

the class time I select pieces from the chapter to show slides on and discuss. This meets my syllabus objective which states that historical, political, and cultural context as well as tradition must be studied by the student to develop an understanding and knowledge of art and art movements. In addition to my lecturing and discussion in class about pieces found in the chapters of the text they are obliged to use, the students are required to write a paper on an art subject that is unfamiliar to them. Looking back on the previous papers written I feel they are a good tool to help the student thoroughly understand one segment of art to use in a long essay question they will have to write during the AP exam. I would like to change the written report to require the student to learn about one of Bearden's many styles. I open the course with a review of what the Gardner text has on Modernism and Post Modernism. But, when I did not find anything more than a cursory mention of Jacob Lawrence I decided to expand the information with readings about Romare Bearden and his work. Not just the work's modern aspects but also the references and borrowings from master artists.

To achieve the goal of learning more about Romare Bearden and his links to previous art, especially art that is accepted as some of the best art the European tradition has created. I will ask the students to choose a master, such as de Hooch, from the list I have given them in class. Each student will then be required to meet research deadlines, during the year, on the following:

- Describe fully the art movement of the artist they were given.
- Relate the master's art to prior art and explain how and if the new art was a reaction to previous work.
- Identify and define Romare Bearden's style of art work, in particular his collages.
- Research whether there was a Non-Western influence on his art or the art the master used.
- Determine whether his art is a response to cultural or historical events.
- Link Bearden's art to the master's piece either compositionally or in subject matter
- Evaluate whether the influence was profound and lasting in the development of Bearden's art and their chosen artist.

My use of these points in my unit will help the students understand the role that borrowing played in the development of art being produced today, how some of the work is a reaction to work done previously but not all work is reactive. They will also learn that Romare Bearden was not alone using acquisition of previous art work and that it is a viable tool in the creation of art.

Once I have accomplished the review of Modernism I then take the students back to the beginning of the book to teach them where certain trends started, and how often they were repeated in one form or another until Modernism broke the mold which had developed, in the Renaissance, and has been repeated with minor changes through the

ages. I will make sure they understand the difference between borrowing compositions or subject matter and copying an artist's work. Bearden successfully borrowed from older artists but the story was always his own.

## **Classroom Activities**

### Lesson one

The goals this lesson fulfills are North Carolina Standard four and five, which states that the student will learn to evaluate a range of subject matter and ideas to communicate intended meaning and to understand the visual arts in relationship to history and cultures. To achieve the goal the students are required to write a research paper and present their findings to the class. This unit will be taught as a scavenger hunt for the students . I will assign each student an artist that Bearden borrowed from and they will have to research to find the Bearden painting that is similar. The research will begin during a field trip to the museum which currently is showing a retrospective of Bearden's work. Then the class will spend a period doing research, on the master's work ,in the media center where I will give each student a hand-out explaining the information I expect to be included in their paper. This paper will need to show not only the master's work but also the correlating Bearden work. Each piece will need to be identified completely and analyzed formally. Information is to be written about both artists and the period they worked in when the piece was made. The students will also be required to find an artist influenced by Romare Bearden and supply information about the newer generation artist. They have approximately two months to work on the assignment before they present their research to the class The paper itself should be four, typewritten pages in a font no larger than 12. They are to list a minimum of three sources for their information. Wikipedia cannot be used as a source. They are to use standard (Chicago) footnotes or end note form. An image may be included of each of the pieces of work but must not be more than two or three inches in size..

After the initial visit to the media center further research has to be done predominantly outside of school. To keep them on track, I ask for a fact sheet containing research they found in the media center. Two weeks later each student is to give me an outline of the research they have done. One week before the paper is due I meet with the student one more time to go over what information they will share with the class. They will be able to show the art pieces to the class by using a USB and the class projector.

### Lesson two

The goal the next lesson fulfills is North Carolina Standard number six, this standard says the learner will reflect upon and be able to assess characteristics of the work of others. These skills all relate to being able to look at a piece of art and write about it. The lesson

is in the form of a class trip to the new art museum in Charlotte. It is an introduction to a monthly museum trip they will be required to take to receive credit toward their class grade. A museum report form is to be filled out on the pieces seen. The students are to give a thorough description of the piece they choose to write about to include the following information; Where was it made, Who made it, What is the title of the piece, What medium was used? Did the medium affect the depiction? What period is it from? If there is a figure, how is it depicted?

Students will also write about a favorite work, by Romare Bearden, from a special exhibit at the museum and make a comparison of figures from two pieces of art. Sketches are to be made of all the pieces that are written about with information about the elements that are in the piece. If applicable the relationship between the piece and its exhibition space should also be discussed.

I added the museum report because this is a new museum and most of the students have not visited it yet. We will be visiting the Bearden exhibit there but the museum also has a permanent collection and another visiting exhibit. There is also a resource center at the museum which can be used for the paper they are writing.

### Lesson three

The goals the third lesson fulfills are North Carolina Standard numbers one, two and three. These goals state the learner will develop skills and be able to organize components to create a work of art. Each one is a part of creating art through the use of the art elements and principles, composition and the use of the media.

This art work will be led by the guest artist and will involve each student in making a book containing a trip and personal memories. It will be an accordion fold book which the students will use for images and text about their memory they are depicting. In preparation for this lesson the students watched a video about Romare Bearden which showed pictures of him working and friends speaking about his work. They then read information about Bearden in a Scholastics magazine on his juxtaposition of pieces in his compositions. There will also be a class discussion on research they have done concerning his art. Before the guest artist arrives to work with the students we will also visit the Bearden exhibit at the museum in town.

The students were required to make a list of trips, vacations and outings they had been on and then list things they remembered about the time spent. The book will incorporate the text and images they collage onto the pages.

### Lesson four

This lesson also fulfills North Carolina Standard numbers one, two and three also. These goals state the learner will develop skills and be able to organize components to create a

work of art. Each one is a part of creating art through the use of the art elements and principles, composition and the use of the media.

This project will involve the students creating a collage in the manner of Romare Bearden. They will be required to do research in the media center and outside of school to find a Bearden image they can relate to personally. Working from this image they will borrow the composition of Bearden but will create the collage to represent themselves in the art they produce. They will read a Scholastic magazine on Bearden and how he built his compositions by juxtaposition of elements.

To make the collage they will use painted paste papers they make, magazine pieces, drawing and coloring in areas. Pieces are to be cut to resemble the style of Bearden, we will discuss in class the elements and themes he uses to make his compositions unique. Because these students are high school students and many take photography classes they will be encouraged to use some of their own photography.

### **End Notes**

1 Trachtman, Paul. "Romare Bearden: Man Of Many parts." *Smithsonian*, February 2004.

2 Ruth Fine, and Mary Lee Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003. P.23

3 Ruth Fine, and Mary Lee Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003. P.7

4 Schwartzman, Myron, and Romare Bearden. *Romare Bearden, His Life & Art*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990. P.71

5 Ruth Fine, and Mary Lee Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003. P.17

6 Ruth Fine, and Mary Lee Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003. P.148

7 [www.art-history-unstuffed.com/tag/clement-greenberg/](http://www.art-history-unstuffed.com/tag/clement-greenberg/)

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Bearden, Romare . Interview by Charlie Rose. Personal interview. New, York, January 22, 2004. A personal look at Romare Bearden.



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Ruth Fine, and Jacqueline Francis. *Romare Bearden, American Modernist*. Washington [D.C: National Gallery of Art ;, 2011. A collection of essays written by modern artists about African-American art.

"NGA | The Art of Romare Bearden: A Resource for Teachers ." National Gallery of Art. <http://nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/> (accessed November 29, 2011). Excellent resource for teachers on the man and his art. Interactive material.

Gilmore, Glenda. "Point Counterpoint Dialogue." Lecture, Demos and Talks from Mint Museum, Charlotte, September 11, 2011. Enjoyable and informative lecture about the research still ongoing, about the artist's life.

*Romare Bearden Photography by Frank Stewart*. San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, 2004. A personal look at Romare Bearden done by his friend who traveled with him.

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[www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/tag/clement-greenberg/](http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/tag/clement-greenberg/) (accessed December 8, 2011). An article by Greenberg entitled Abstract Expressionism: Redefining Art. Part One

[/education/education/shtml](http://education/education/shtml). beardenfoundation.org (accessed November 29, 2011). Thorough collection of Beardens papers, his correspondence and a good timeline of his"education resources." beardenfoundation.org life

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## **Art Supply List**

Pencils; graphite and color

Paper; newsprint, construction, drawing and paste paper

Scissors

Acrylic paints in primary and secondary colors

Collage board or oak tag

Glue

Brushes

Magazines

Crayons and/or oil pastels