



CONSTANT EVOLUTION

Romare Bearden's art

by NELL PAINTER

Mary Schmidt Campbell begins *An American Odyssey*, her formidable new biography of Romare Bearden, in the middle of his career, when the civil rights ferment of the 1960s prompted him and other black New York City artists to form Spiral, an artists' association that they hoped would help them play a role in the era's moment. After years of working as an abstract artist, Bearden returned at that time to figuration, themes of black life, and collage, hoping his art might better confront the world around him.

For Campbell, the distinguished art historian, former director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and current president of Spelman College, starting with this turning

point in Bearden's intellectual and artistic life is important, because central to her book's aims is the effort to root him in his social and political contexts. By doing so, Campbell is able to offer her readers a story about Bearden's times as much as his life, tracing his network of collaborators and friends and providing a study of the many "dilemmas," as she puts it, black artists faced in 20th century America. "By his own account," Campbell writes, "Bearden was first and foremost a student of painting," and she does all of this while being careful to offer close studies of his compositions, palettes, and techniques.

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1911, Bearden was the son of well-to-do parents who moved, in the face of tightening racial segregation, to New York City in 1914. His mother, Bessye, was the first black woman elected to

their local school board and wrote for *The Chicago Defender*, becoming a well-known public figure. His father, Howard, kept a lower profile, finding work as an inspector in the New York Health Department. And Bearden made art ever since he was a child, often finding inspiration in New York's uptown and downtown art scenes.

Bearden's college years were peripatetic. He began his studies at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and then spent two years at Boston University before returning to New York, where he graduated from New York University in 1935. His time in college coincided with the Depression, and while a student and in the years that followed, he applied his considerable talents to political art, drawing social realist cartoons for NYU's student magazine and the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper as well as a cover for *Opportunity*, the National Urban League's journal. While taking classes at

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the Art Students League, Bearden found a mentor in the Expressionist George Grosz.

After completing his studies at NYU, Bearden became a social-services case-worker for the city, a job he would hold for decades, but he directed much of his free time to making art, joining Augusta Savage's Harlem Artists Guild and growing close to a group of artists meeting in the studio of his cousin Charles Alston.

As a member of these two circles, Bearden came to know the city's black arts intelligentsia, including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Robert Blackburn, Ernest Crichlow, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, and Katherine Dunham. During the 1930s, Bearden began to exhibit his work—mostly composed in the social realist style—taking part in group shows in Harlem before he mounted a solo exhibition in 1940.

Bearden's burgeoning career as an artist was put on hold during World War II, when he served in the Army. But upon his discharge in 1945, he picked up where he'd left off. Soon the Kootz Gallery engaged him, along with other midcentury modernists like Alexander Calder, Robert Motherwell, and Carl Holty, and Bearden became an important figure in New York's art scene.

In the late 1940s, he established the intellectual and work habits that would stay with him for the rest of his life. During the day, he studied the works of Duccio, Giotto, Rembrandt, Manet, and Matisse—and began to adapt their styles to his own. Bearden learned from the old masters through imitation, in particular their styles of composition and use of color. As Campbell discusses, he was always engaged with the formal properties of a wide range of visual art. While he never lost sight of what she terms the “chain of debates about racial identity and art,” in the 1940s and '50s he began to appear alongside his nonblack contemporaries at venues like the Kootz Gallery and the Whitney Annual Exhibition.

After the war, Bearden focused more on writing, wrestling with the challenges facing black artists as artists and as black Americans. In “The Negro Artist's Dilemma,” published in *Critique*, he defended the autonomy of the artist's work: “The Negro artist,” he concluded, “must come to think of himself not primarily as a Negro artist, but as an artist. Only in this way will he acquire the stature which is the component of every good artist.” (He would later revise this severe sentiment.)

Bearden's career continued to rise until 1949, when the Kootz Gallery shifted to-

An American Odyssey

The Life and Work of Romare Bearden

By Mary Schmidt Campbell

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ward Abstract Expressionism and let him go, precipitating a nervous breakdown. During these wilderness years, he turned away from art, writing popular songs with modest success, including “Seabreeze,” which the popular crooner Billy Eckstine often performed. Bearden found love late, marrying Nanette Rohan, a model and dancer, in 1954. She helped him make his way back to painting—this time as an Abstract Expressionist.

As with so many black Americans, the civil rights movement proved momentous for Bearden, prompting an urgent rethinking of both his art—its subject matter and composition—and the role that artists should play in public life. In an era of struggle for civil rights, black artists needed to make their voices heard on behalf of freedom.

Bearden and his New York City colleagues did not participate in the March on Washington in 1963, but they did come together as a group in those years, not only to publicize the demand for civil rights but also to advance the cause of black artists within the larger art world. The association they founded, Spiral, lasted only two years, wracked by internal disagreements over aesthetic tactics and subject matter. Nonetheless, its members helped establish a network that did more than just make their work more visible in New York (which, by then, had displaced Paris as the center of the art world); they also helped Bearden conceive a signature style characterized by figuration and collage, what Campbell calls his distinctive “visual vocabulary.”

In the late 1960s and early '70s, this vocabulary transformed Bearden's work through the production of hundreds of collage-based pieces. Many were made from photographs cut or torn from magazines and used to create vivid narratives of black life and black history, mostly on a small scale. Soon he would be building epic portraits through photostatic enlargement. (Before the age of xerographic reproduction, photostats used a camera to produce a large negative image of a smaller object on sensitized paper. The negative could then be photostatted again to produce a positive image.)

Bearden called this sequence of enlarged photostatic pieces *Projections*, which first appeared in a major exhibition at the Cor-

dier & Ekstrom Gallery in 1964. *Projections* was an immediate success, vaulting him to the forefront of contemporary artists in the United States and making him one of the best-known African American artists of his generation. Besides fine art, he now undertook graphic design—covers for *Time*, *Fortune*, and *TV Guide*—and public art commissions for Times Square, the New York City subway system, and the Berkeley, California, City Council chambers.

Bearden's art changed over time as he embraced motifs drawn from a wide array of sources, including Greek mythology and the vivid palette inspired by his new home in St. Martin. He continued to create using a variety of methods and materials—watercolors, pen and ink, fabrics and miscellaneous items, even bits of metal—with collage as his main process, in works he composed until shortly before his death in 1988.

Campbell's extraordinarily rich biography offers its readers many rewards. Nowhere here is the awkwardness of critics unfamiliar with the history of black art or who isolate it from its frames of reference or consider only how black artists ought to criticize race in America. Hers is a self-confident study of an artist's life in all its contexts.

The assurance of Campbell's narrative and the strength of her critical insights stem from the depth of her experience as an art historian and her leading roles at the Studio Museum in Harlem and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She also has the advantage of having known and corresponded with Bearden for years, even curating an exhibit, “Mysteries: Women in the Art of Romare Bearden,” in 1975. Campbell's proximity to Bearden allows her to capture his generosity as a colleague and mentor as well as his larger role in the art world. (She tells us that he urged her to apply for the directorship of the Studio Museum in Harlem and continued to encourage her as she helped transform it into a pioneering black arts institution.) Her thorough knowledge of his and his peers' work allows her to capture the larger settings in which so much of it was composed and received.

One example is her discussion of “Prevalence of Ritual,” which was a breakthrough for MOMA as well for Bearden. It was only the second retrospective that the museum mounted for a black artist. (The first, in 1937, was for the folk sculptor William Edmondson.) The exhibition helped bring Bearden's work to a wider audience, even though the curators also did it a disservice:

As Campbell notes, although throughout his career Bearden drew on motifs and visual strategies learned from his immersion in the history of art, MOMA showed only those pieces in which he focused on black life. Ignored were the ones inspired by Renaissance painters as well as his engaged depiction of poor and working-class people of all ethnic backgrounds. Thus, a complex body of work was narrowed down to its racial themes, as though a black artist's work could be seen and appreciated only if it was presented as clearly and recognizably black.

Nearly 50 years later, the impulse to conscript the work of black artists into the single task of representing black life has not subsided, for black as well as nonblack curators and audiences. Thankfully, Campbell's account of Bearden—and especially his study of art history, from Europe to Asia and Africa—helps to underscore the far wider range of themes and techniques that inspired his art. She shows him as a strikingly inappropriate artist for narrow-minded critique.

Bearden never renounced his identity as a black artist, even in those moments when he refused to show in racially exclusive exhibitions. Yet he also reworked a wide chronological range of European and African masterpieces, and his work was always inspired by Cubism's flatness. His use of photostatic reproduction was in itself evocative of a whole body of art and a tradition of artistic composition. He always balanced his visualization of black life with canonical influences, creating a many-layered art that cannot be reduced to one tradition alone.

Campbell writes in the spirit of *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, which Bearden and his friend Harry Henderson wrote and which was published in 1993. We learn of his collaborations with artists like the printmaker Robert Blackburn (who deserves a biography of his own) and writers like Derek Walcott and Ntozake Shange. We also learn what this profoundly intellectual painter thought about artists, art history, and the role of artists who are black Americans.

In this particular moment of need for more art critics of color, Campbell demonstrates the intellectual richness that comes from deep cultural and historical engagement. She can show Romare Bearden as an extraordinary 20th century modernist and, at the same time, discuss the networks of colleagues and the lifelong study that enriched his singular art. And she can do something else as well: offer a compelling portrait of the artist in a state of constant evolution. ■