

## The Genius of Romare Bearden

It is difficult to imagine 20<sup>th</sup> century American art without Romare Bearden, and it is equally challenging to settle on a single topic when presented with the felicitous opportunity to write about his work. Do we choose a little-researched period in the artist's work, or in his life as a painter who was also a social worker, song-writer, traveler, intellectual? Or do we abandon scholarly methods and instead rhapsodize, exalt in the magnificent and meticulous scope of any given Bearden work? Do we think about the art in the context of New York City, Pittsburgh, Paris, St. Maarten, or Mecklenburg County, North Carolina? Do we focus on the medium of prints or consider also his early abstract oils? Dare we neglect the magnificent Bearden collage?

Grant Hill has wisely collected a dazzling group of Beardens that span the artist's career, from the early gouache paintings "Serenade" (1941) and "They That Are Delivered from the Noise of the Archers" (1942) to the great collages of the '80s. Those early paintings give fascinating indications of what he achieves later on. We see his proclivities as the master colorist he fully becomes in the collage form; his interest in the (black) figure seen in geometric components; and, important Bearden icons such as the guitar. Viewers of this collection can begin to understand how a mature style develops by seeing these rarely-seen early paintings. The 1979 collage in the Collection, "Time for the Bass," gives us Bearden in his exhaustive jazz mode. These works translate the energy, rhythm, and movement of jazz music into the flat form. This collection also shows us Bearden's urban and rural modes of Mecklenberg County and Harlem. Bearden's work displays great intimate understanding of those landscapes that outlines the movement of so many black people from South to North in the Great Migration.

The Grant Hill Collection gives an opportunity to see not only the span on Bearden's career but also a generous selection of his collage work. For Bearden's work comes into its most mature form in collage, and it is not hyperbole to state that as a collagist he is without parallel. I

want to focus on collage here first by discussing the work itself but then by thinking about how the Bearden collage gives us a way to think about the complexities of African-American identity. In that regard, we might look at Bearden as an important twentieth century African-American theorist as well as one of its most magnificent visual artists.

Bearden refigured collage via European Cubism, African-American quilting, and idioms of jazz and the blues. His subject matter has ranged from a re-telling of The Odyssey, in vibrant blacks and blues, to scenes from the North Carolina of his early childhood. His iconography is magically commonplace: trains seen through doorways, roosters, doves, saxophones, trumpets, washtubs, clouds. Bearden moved through phases of abstract oils and Cubist watercolors but found his fullest voice in the nineteen-'sixties, when he began to work extensively in collage. His work combines any number of media, from newspaper and magazine pictures, to brightly colored paper, to fabric, watercolor, and thick black "Speedball" pens.

Everything you read and the stories people tell about Bearden say that he was a very clever man, analytical and dazzlingly well-read, humble without being self-effacing, respectful, and aware of himself in relationship to myriad traditions. While writing a paper about him in college, I decided I wanted to speak to him, found him in the New York City phone book, called him, and found him in, answering the phone, and willing to entertain my questions. By the end of the conversation he had sent me to Sun Tzu's The Art of War, any stained glass windows I could find, and Earl "Fatha" Hines's music, so that I might better understand his own work. Bearden had digested a wide range of influences to arrive at the specificity of his vision.

Here is a quotation from Bearden, on his own identity: "I think of myself first as an American, and being an American means four things. One, being in the tradition of Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Melville, Walt Whitman. Second, you have to have the spirit of the whole Negroid tradition. The third tradition is the frontiersman, like Mark Twain and Bret Harte, and the fourth tradition is the Indian."<sup>i</sup> The great W.E.B. Du Bois wrote these lines in 1903, in The Souls of Black Folk: "One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>ii</sup> "One ever feels his two-ness" would become a veritable mantra to legions of students of blackness and Du Bois's image of an ineffably split

African-American consciousness, and of bifurcation as the major twentieth-century trope for African-American consciousness, remains resonant today.

But over one hundred years later, the “two-ness” trope must be revised. I contend that if the African-American intellectual consciousness is split, it is split multiply rather than doubly, and that that so-called fragmentation, arisen from the fundamental fragmentation of the Middle Passage, has become a source of our creative power. The complex co-existence of a spectrum of black identities in a single space – think of Bearden’s own self-description above for example — represents a particular strength and coherence of African-American cultural production. Formal conflict is the locus of true innovation such as that which is evident in the twentieth-century African-American tradition from Souls back to Anna Julia Cooper’s A Voice from the South to Cane (Jean Toomer), to Invisible Man (Ralph Ellison), to Mumbo Jumbo (Ishmael Reed), to The Bluest Eye (Toni Morrison), among others. In order for Du Bois to make a space for his “type” on the literary continuum, that type being the twentieth-century heretofore unimagined African-American intellectual who would write a book with the formal multiplicity and referentiality of Souls, he had to “make” a multiple self in the text at hand. In other words, the structural hybridity of the book Souls necessarily makes the written space in which he can fully explore aspects of what I would call his “collaged” identity. And collage, as developed and employed by Bearden, is my model to describe the presentation of self-identities in African-American literature and culture. Critics have used collage to talk about the literary works of modernist writers such as Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, as well as in Dadaist novels and various post-modern forms, but the Bearden collage offers a more necessarily historical- and culturally- particular context for twentieth-century African-American literature and culture.

Collage lets us think about identity as a spoked wheel or gyroscope on which its aspects spin and recombine. Collage also allows us to see African-American creative production as cohesive rather than schizophrenic. In other words, the disparate aspects of personalities and of

influence that might seem contradictory can actually coexist in a single personality, or a single identity. When the process of cutting and pasting is visually evident — as it is in the cut and torn edges within Bearden’s collages —, yet obscured — by the fact of the unified whole the picture represents —, creative/constructive process itself is valorized as a crucial and aesthetic component of the path to artistic coherence, and, indeed, an avenue to understanding how “coherence” itself is evaluated.

Collage, in both the flat medium as well as more abstractly in book form and as a metaphor for the creative process, is a continual cutting, pasting, and quoting of received information, much like jazz music, like the contemporary tradition of rapping, and indeed like the process of reclaiming African-American history (or of any historiography). African-American culture from the Middle Passage forward is of course broadly characterized by fragmentation and reassemblage, sustaining what can be saved of history while making something new. Collage constructs wholes from fragments in a continual, referential dialogue between the seemingly-disparate shards of various pasts and the current moment of the work itself, as well as the future the work might point toward. Ralph Ellison said, about Bearden:

[Bearden] has sought here to reveal a world long hidden by the clichés of sociology and rendered cloudy by the distortions of newsprint and the false continuity imposed on our conception of Negro life by television and much documentary photography. Therefore, as he delighted us with the magic of design and teaches us the ambiguity of vision, Bearden insists that we see and that we see in depth and by the fresh light of the creative vision. Bearden knows that the true complexity of the slum dweller and the tenant farmer requires a release from the prison of our media-dulled perception and a reassembling in forms which would convey something of the depth and wonder of the Negro American’s stubborn humanity.<sup>iii</sup>

And here, a quotation from Picasso on collage: “If a piece of a newspaper can become a bottle, that gives us something to think about in connection with both newspapers and bottles, too. The displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly

reassuring.”<sup>iv</sup> Picasso’s displaced “object” could be thought of as the African body, then the African-American body in migration, and collage as the process through which that “body” makes sense of itself in a hostile and unfamiliar environment.

Any discussion of the African-American collage must include a discussion of the quilt. Quilts embody the simultaneous continuity and chaos that characterize African-American history in all spheres. If African-American creativity is always in some way grappling with African-American history by trying to knit together the fragmentation that forms its core and the paradox of fragmentation as a center, quilting is a motif for a creative response to that history. Romare Bearden himself understands how quilting fits into African-American social, creative, and visual history. He has represented the act of quilting in his work and his collages allude to strip weaving, quilts and textiles. He also utilizes actual scraps of fabric. He has called his collage-making “precisely what the ladies (at the quilting bee) were doing.”<sup>v</sup> The bits and pieces that make quilts as well as collages all refer to their uses and places in other lives; the life of the quilt is the aggregate of those pieces, and the work then becomes a referential discussion of both past and present at once.

West African, Mande-influenced strip weaving in which narrow strips of cloth, sometimes as many as one hundred, were sewn together to make larger pieces of cloth or garments, were a crucial precursor to the African-American quilt. The patterns that made their way into the African-American tradition were the so-called “crazy quilt” patterns, seemingly-irregular contrasts of color and line. These West African fabrics were collaged in the sense of being disparate pieces put together, though they do not have the same system of diverse referents as New World collages; once these textile traditions reached the Americas they arose of different material and historical circumstances, and the textile work, as with other arts and crafts, reflected those new circumstances. Still, the concept of the process of putting pieces together and the improvisational possibilities inherent in the different color and pattern contrast relate to the

concept of collage. Strip weaving and quilting are not the same as cutting a pattern for a dress, where each piece is predetermined and the end outcome of the whole can be anticipated. Rather, when strips of cloth are sewn together, like strips in a quilt, the creative process continues throughout that act, through the matching and setting of color to color and pattern to pattern.

Fon-influenced appliquéd textiles also found their way to the African-American quilting tradition. Those African textiles set up intricate symbolist landscapes and told stories, strongly derivative of Egyptian hieroglyphics. African-American story quilts, in particular Harriet Powers' story quilts, between 1886 and 1898, blend the New World necessity of sewing bed covering with Old World information about textile work, are a New World manifestation of ancestral motifs and narrative impulses.<sup>vi</sup>

An African-American quilt might be made from pieces of blanket wool, worn cotton from an apron, a soft piece of calico from a fourth-hand dress, made of the materials of the new place but could nonetheless reflect the patterns of an ancestral heritage, just as slaves made instruments from whatever was at hand — washtubs, broom handles, even their own bodies in hambone and spoons. A washboard could make sounds and music but was also, or had been, an instrument of work, a historical referent of the condition of the creator. The object had its contemporary life and meaning as well as its ulterior “lives,” all in the same site. If nothing else was available, when even the body was not legally one's own, the body nonetheless could become a site for creative assemblage.

Composite visual works are ancient and cross-cultural. In the twelfth century Japanese calligraphed poetry was made of cut and pasted pieces of delicate paper. Thirteenth century Persian artists cut leather into flowers for bookbinding. In the early seventeenth century and quite probably earlier Mexican feather mosaic pictures were made, and in the same century in Europe mosaic pictures were made of such earthly objects as beetles and corn kernels. Eighteenth-century European collages were made from butterfly wings, and in mid-century the

still-familiar British tradition of Valentines commenced. According to art historian Herta Wescher, there is “nothing very new about the essential idea of collage, of bringing into association unrelated images and object to form a different expressive identity.”<sup>vii</sup> Eddie Wolfram observes, “besides their functional reality, some mundane objects have always held the potential of an ‘inner,’ more magical reality that is connected with man’s wonder about the nature of existence and his own destiny.”<sup>viii</sup>

Collage, per se, entered the art historical lexicon in the early part of this century, as an outgrowth of Cubism, and Cubism, of course developed as its practitioners were becoming familiar with and consequently inspired by different kinds of African art. Gregory Ulmer calls collage “the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation to occur in our century,”<sup>ix</sup> and states that the innovation broke with traditional realism in its interplay between what Bearden called “mosaic-like joinings” and the unified image viewed from a greater distance. Wescher insists that twentieth century collage was scarcely influenced by these earlier developments by “craftsmen, folk artists, and amateurs” folk and religious artists, which seems dubious, but certainly this was the first time that collage was employed by creative artists as the outgrowth of a specific artistic movement.

The word “collage” comes from the French “coller” meaning to paste, stick, or glue. Claude Levi-Strauss would play with that root when in The Savage Mind he used the term “bricoleur,” for he or she who made do with whatever was at hand, “with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous.”<sup>x</sup> The first collages recognized as such were Pablo Picasso’s Still Life with Chair Caning and Georges Braque’s Fruit Dish, both made in 1912; There is some dispute over who made the first of what we now call collages, Picasso or Braque; both claimed credit, and Picasso may not have pre-dated “Still Life” to place himself first. But at this point of the Cubist movement both artists had similar aims.

In Cubism, painters attempted to show their subjects from as many sides or perspectives as possible at the same time. This concept revolutionized the world of possibilities in modern art by introducing the concept of simultaneity and a departure from the flat, literal surface. Collage juxtaposed seemingly disparate elements into a new context and a new whole. Braque said that in collage he could separate color from form, thus allowing both to “emerge in their own right,” (Perloff, 24) or, exist simultaneously together and apart.

The displaced “object” Picasso mentions in the above quotation is, in African-American terms, first and foremost the displaced African body. There is also a “displaced,” or, to riff on Carter G. Woodson, “mis-placed,” galaxy of cultural and historical references that African-American cultural worker draws upon. Historical distortions are deliberate and not at all haphazard; we are displaced in that we were taken from Africa, and we are misplaced in that we have been put in a place, both literally and figuratively, that does not acknowledge the full complex dimensions of our existence. Culture workers must then continually strive to create, validate, and keep in circulation written evidence, traces, of actual cultural existence. The quilt or collage creates something new that is simultaneously what is was and what it might be, due to its referentiality. The finished product is always a reflected breakdown of selections, the mechanics of choosing. The act of making is inherent in the finished thing itself.

When Bearden cuts colored paper rather than representational newspaper and magazine images, the shapes he makes from the paper become repeated motifs, his ritual shapes and images that continually call attention to a depth and a life behind the canvas itself. Bearden has said:

In most instances in creating a picture, I use many disparate elements to form either a figure, or part of a background. I build my faces, for example, from parts of African masks, animal eyes, marbles, mossy vegetation, [and corn] . . . I then have my small original works enlarged so the mosaic-like joinings will not be so apparent, after which I finish the larger painting. I have found when some detail, such as a hand or eye, is taken out of its original context and is fractured and integrated into a different space and form configuration it acquires a plastic quality it did not have in the photograph. (Bearden, *A Memoria Exhibition*, p. 26)

Bearden first ventured into collage explicitly in 1951 with “Untitled Duke (Ellington) and Billy (Strayhorn)”<sup>xi</sup>, and he experimented with Egyptian hieroglyphics in a “Hierographs” show in the ‘forties as well as pointed shapes and a concern with black, line, and color that would recur in later collages.<sup>xii</sup> It was not until the 1960’s that he was fully involved in collage as his primary art form.<sup>xiii</sup> His watercolors in the forties and early fifties are frequently separated by heavy black lines; he was playing with the idea of blocks or patches of color that would resurface in the collages. But the crucial difference in collage is the concept of overlapping; that separated spaces and block of color do not represent an integration of disparate segments in the same way that overlap and consequent recombination underpins the very concept of collage, especially in the sense that I am using it to talk about identity formation, because I am arguing for an African-American identity that is not segmented but rather a curious whole. Collage becomes a way to remember, and the process of remembering and refiguring, whether literal or metaphorical, is inherent in the African-American literary critical enterprise and find a vehicle in the act of collage. A look at the process of piecing together in Bearden’s work will provide a bridge to understanding the same process at work later in African-American written works.

“Untitled: Duke and Billy,” which appears to be the earliest of Bearden’s published collages, is a whimsical postcard (the catalogue lists size unknown). A dutiful Billy Strayhorn and a jaunty Duke Ellington stroll by a Paris bookstand in a snapshot on the left side of the plane. On the right, Bearden has made ink line drawings of cliché Paris postcard scenes: the Eiffel Tower reaching to the clouds, a bridge over the Seine, a jeune homme in ankle-pants and striped sailor shirt. The background is green, and red white and blue stripes to suggest the French flag govern the frame in titled rectangles. “Duke and Billy” is handwritten in red and blue underneath the photograph. What makes this collage most interesting is that Bearden has pasted cut sections of photo contact sheets of Ellington and Strayhorn in what looks like a Parisian train station. The contact sheet both represent time in the collage — the sense of a whirlwind trip as exemplified in the rapid shifts between the frames — as well as an intimacy: Was Bearden there? Did he take the pictures? They are not posed portraits but rather snapshots; how did he come upon them? Bearden leaves off the last names of his subjects to suggest that either he is intimate with them or that we should be intimate with the subjects, “Duke” and “Billy” to all. The public France of the postcard moves quickly to the intimate France, and the larger cultural juxtaposition is one of these two black American musical greats bringing their black jazz to Europe. This minor collage illustrates how referentiality embedded in the objects juxtaposed on the page opens up the fields of meaning in the work itself.

In Bearden’s collages, you see the simultaneous referentiality — the “past life” of the cut or torn fragment — as well as the contemporary moment or whole that these re-integrated fragments create. Bearden’s 1971 collage “The Block I,” is a long horizontal rectangle, setting up a sense of the forward movement of narrative from the start. Though Palmer Hayden and Archibald Motley are the artistic parents of the African-American street scene, Bearden was the first to go behind the facade of the black inside his subject’s homes and lives. For the buildings he has used plain brown papers, bricks he has painted himself, and what looks to be brick-patterned contact paper, reminiscent of the wood grain paper used by Picasso in those first

collages. He has “cut” into the buildings not solely in the regular spaces where windows would be but rather at random spots, as though cutting through the brick. In this way the viewer feels less like a peeping Tom but rather like a privileged observer placed squarely in the middle of life lived. The irregularity of the cuts adds to the element of spontaneity and therefore “authenticity.” Yet he also makes a viewer aware of this status of invasion, of looking in without having asked permission. Additionally, because we do not see into every room, the viewer is aware that choices have been made of what to reveal and what to keep private. The grave boy looking out might be asking, who are you, as the viewer asks the same questions. The angels burst from the brick at the top of the work, making us aware of the constructed frame that defines and sometimes constricts a community as well as the spiritual necessity of imagining movement beyond those boundaries. Those angels make me think of Robert Hayden’s great poem, “Summertime and the Living...,” just as “The Block’s” urban episodic-ness recalls Hayden’s “Elegies for Paradise Valley.” In “Summertime,” he writes:

But summer was, they said, the poor folks’ time  
of year. And he remembers  
how they would sit on broken steps amid  
The fevered tossings of the dusk, the dark,  
wafting hearsay with funeral parlor fans  
or making evenings solemn by  
their quietness. Feels their Mosaic eyes  
upon him. . .

Oh, summer summer summertime —

Then grim street preachers shook  
their tambourines and Bibles in the face  
of tolerant wickedness:  
then Elks parades and big splendiferous  
Jack Johnson in his diamond limousine  
set the ghetto burgeoning  
with fantasies  
of Ethiopia spreading her gorgeous wings.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the Grant Hill Collection, we see a similar scene in “The Street” (Watercolor and collage on board, 1985). The sense of a public black life and the private life beyond is made clear. The

haunting black faces cut out from other places find themselves at home on this street. Yet their eyes speak of elsewhere, referring again, perhaps, to the Great Migration that was part of Bearden's own experience and that he understood as emblematic to black people in this country as they have moved and reassembled from one country to another, one region to another, even one block to another, adapting and evolving with each geographic shift.

Bearden's interiors also give us a sense of the intimacy with which he knew and saw black life, and his use of collage adds dimension to that sense of intimacy. In "Morning Gingham" (1985) two women prepare for the day, one bathing and the other preparing water or food. They occupy the same space, faced in opposite directions, each performing her own ablutions, distinct yet together. The gingham in the collage is actual fabric which serves both to represent a woman's skirt and a window curtain, but also to allude to a culture where nothing is wasted, where materials are recycled, and where stories are imbedded in objects or materials. The recent Whitney Museum exhibit "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" magnificently showcases women who work together intimately — so in a sense this is collective or communal work — but their individual voices and aesthetics are also blazingly clear. The so-called Negro spirituals came from a collective context and collective authorship, yet they made space for the solo voice to be heard, individuality out of community.

You don't have to believe in magic to believe that objects carry something from one person to another. Think of the old wedding tradition that a bride should wear something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue. The "something borrowed" is meant to bring good luck and blessings to the bride from the person who first wore the brooch or carried the handkerchief. Few would dare break with such tradition. So it isn't a leap to understand that the bits of cloth that came from garments someone actually wore bring a bit of that person with them. To translate this to Bearden's artistic practice, as one imagines that many of these previous owners were unknown to him, he is bringing something of the actual spirits of black people into his work in a way that paint alone never could. In the Grant Hill Collection we

see this especially in “Morning Charlotte” (1985) and “The Evening Guitar” (1987). For what is DuBois’s double-consciousness than the sense that we are scrutinized even as we make private space, that we are imagined even as we imagine ourselves? Bearden understood that paradox profoundly, and he managed the feat of making it visibly manifest in his collaged work. He also gave us a world of its own integrity, that could be spectated, if you will, at the same time that it enjoyed the free play of imagination and self-invention, and that most importantly, it managed to convey profound intimacy. Bearden’s genius is placed in context of a long and fruitful career in this Collection.

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<sup>i</sup> Romare Bearden 1911-1988: A Memorial Exhibition. (New York: ACA Galleries, 1989), p.3.

<sup>ii</sup> W.E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, in Nathan Huggins, ed. W.E.B. Du Bois (New York: The Library of America, 1986), pp.364-5.

<sup>iii</sup> Ralph Ellison, “The Art of Romare Bearden,” in Going to the Territory (New York: Random House, 1986), p.234.

<sup>iv</sup> Pablo Picasso in conversation with Francoise Gilot, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, “The Invention of Collage,” Collage (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1983), pp. 5-47.

<sup>v</sup> Romare Bearden: Origins and Progressions. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), p.41.

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vi. Vlach, John Michael. The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 45-48. See also Gladys-Marie Fry, Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts in the Ante-Bellum South. (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990); Robert Farris Thompson, "Round Houses and Rhythmic Textiles: Mande-Related Art and Architecture in the Americas," in his Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 193-224; Maude Southwell Wahlman and John Scully, "Aesthetic Principles in Afro-American Quilts," in Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts, ed. William Ferris (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), pp.79-97; and Alvia Wardlaw's introduction to John Beardsley, et. al, The Quilts of Gee's Bend (Atlanta: Tinwood, 2002).

<sup>vii</sup> Herta Wescher, Collage (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), p.8.

<sup>viii</sup> Eddie Wolfram, History of Collage: An Anthology of Collage, Assemblage and Event Structure (New York: MacMillan, Inc. 1975), p.7.

<sup>ix</sup> Gregory Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in Hal Foster, ed., The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p.84.

<sup>x</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p.17.

<sup>xi</sup> Bearden, A Memorial Exhibition, p. 21. This is the earliest published Bearden collage that I have found, though it is possible that others exist in private collections or family papers.

<sup>xii</sup> Ten Hierographic Paintings by Sgt. Romare Bearden. (Washington DC: G Place Gallery, 1944).

<sup>xiii</sup> Mary Schmidt Campbell writes: "In 1964, [Bearden] abruptly abandoned his nonobjective oil paintings...when he began making his collages...Having lived with a number of different ideas of art, he had come back to the subject matter he started out with – Black American life as he remembered it in the South of his childhood in North Carolina, and in the North of his coming of age in Pittsburgh and Harlem, and, later in life, the Caribbean island of St. Martin." Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden 1940-1987 (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991), p. 8

<sup>xiv</sup> Robert Hayden, Collected Poems (New York and London: Liveright, 1985), p.39.