
Romare Bearden (1911-1988) grew up in an influential and creative African-American family living in Harlem, New York, where, from a young age, he was exposed to art, music, and literature, including the works of W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Charles Alston.

In the early stages of his career, Bearden studied with the German immigrant artist George Grosz, who introduced him to social satire and a variety of printmaking techniques. Bearden also met Jacob Lawrence, an African American artist who dealt with social issues, and Stuart Davis, a Cubist-inspired artist, who urged him to “paint as if he were a jazz musician.” While studying at the Sorbonne in Paris in the 1950s, Bearden encountered the Cubist artist Georges Braque and the work of Henri Matisse and the Fauves, to name a few. The Cubists’ textured collages and dissolution of space into block-like patches, as well as the Fauvists’ use of bright colors and expressionistic brushwork were particularly influential to his early artistic development.

Romare Bearden’s print, The Family, typifies the subject matter that made him famous: a work depicting an African American family preparing a meal. Despite the scene’s roots in the rural black experience, the print has a universal, mythic quality that transcends race and social class. Bearden includes a shrouded nude woman, one of his favorite motifs, on the left-hand side, an enigmatic figure based on a long line of art historical precedents. Is she an allusion to a classical Venus, a biblical Susanna, a prostitute, a conjure woman with her kettle, or a composite symbol of wife, mother, and lover? The figure appears in all of these guises throughout Bearden’s career, but her presence in this domestic setting suggests the final interpretation.

Based on a collage from which numerous photo-etching plates were made, the work is among the artist’s most ambitious prints, conceptually and technically. Bearden’s use of photographic snippets derived from popular magazines—like Ebony and The Saturday Evening Post—not only serve to modernize his imagery, but create a distortion of scale that adds to the work’s surreal quality.
Despite the populist, “folksy” tone of his collages, Bearden’s works display a formal and conceptual sophistication. Some works address social issues, others allude to religion, and still others explore ideas of culture and ritual. While he was not afraid to address the specifically African American experience, he hoped to create complex works that spoke to all of society on multiple levels.
Questions to Consider

1. What colors do you see in this image?
2. Can you describe some of the textures Bearden uses?
3. How many people can you find in this image?
4. Can you determine these people’s relationship to one another?
5. How has the artist arranged this interior space?
6. What might be a reason for including the “eye” in the tablecloth on the painting? The extra large hand of the figure to the right?
7. Can you create a story around Bearden’s figures, their actions and placement in the print?

Connections

Historical connections: Civil Rights Movement, Art: popular culture, cartoons, collage, Cubism. Society: African-American culture, foodways

Further Reading


Teachers’ Extensions


Artist: Romare Bearden

Location of work: Indiana University Art Museum (IUAM)
Works on Paper Collection

Vocabulary/Key Concept(s):

Civil Rights Movement The Civil Rights Movement in the United States refers in part to a set of noted events to reform movements to abolish discrimination and racism against African American from a period from 1954-1968.

Jazz is an American music form that was developed from African-American work songs


African American Foodways A food cultures influenced by African-Americans

Art Connection(s):

Collage The process of pasting together various materials such as printed matter, wallpaper, photographs, and cloth, often accented with drawn or painted elements. This term also applies to the completed work, which usually adheres to the convention of the picture plane, in contrast to the more sculptural works of assemblage.

Fauvist A French term meaning “wild beasts.” It described artists whose work was characterized by vibrant, distorted colors and bold drawing.

Cubism a style of art that ‘shattered’ naturalistic forms and space, attempting to represent on a flat surface all aspects of what existed in three dimensions. Analytic cubism presented different views of an object simultaneously and stressed geometric forms and neutral tones. Synthetic cubism, a later stage, reintroduced color and elements of collage.

Printmaking refers to the art of making prints on paper. It is a general term covering engraving, etching, and woodcuts.

Photo-etching [plates] for numerous prints of collage art work:

Light sensitive polymer plates allow for photorealistic etchings. A photo-sensitive coating is applied to the plate by either the plate supplier or the artist. Light is projected onto the plate as a negative image to expose it. Photopolymer plates are either washed in hot water or under other chemicals according to the plate manufacturers' instructions. Areas of the photo-etch image may be stopped-out before etching to
exclude them from the final image on the plate, or removed or lightened by scraping and burnishing once the plate has been etched. Once the photo-etching process is complete, the plate can be worked further as a normal intaglio plate, using drypoint, further etching, engraving, etc. The final result is an intaglio plate which is printed like any other.

**Social Realism** (also known as Socio-Realism) is an artistic movement, expressed in the visual and other realist arts, which depicts working class activities.

**Geography Connection(s):**
- United States of America – Southern States (culture): *but not limited to*

**Time Line Connection:**
- 1976

**Resources:**

  Connect to web links below by clicking on individual address or access through the NEH site for Additional Resources at: [http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/about.php?subPage=about_ad_res](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/about.php?subPage=about_ad_res)

  National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITEment, *Horse of a Different Color: An Introduction to Color in the Visual Arts* has two lesson plans on color; the first: In-Depth with the Full Spectrum, for Grade 9-12, introduces students to color basics, the color wheel, and how artists manipulate color to draw attention to the aspects of their work.

  Getty Museum Education department Web site, *Teachers’ Programs and Resources*, is designed for K-12 teachers who wish to introduce art and art history into their classrooms. The site uses works form the museum’s collection along with pages A Grade-by-Grade Guide, *The Elements of Art* (teaching the formal components of art such as line and color) and a PDF file, Lesson Template.

  - [http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/](http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/)
  Art Institute of Chicago Education department Web site, Art Access, is arranged by subject matter. Click on the link to open a page with essays on selected works, a link to lesson plans, online family activities, a glossary and maps. Artists covered are: Bearden, Cassatt, Copley, Homer, Lawrence, Sargent, Tiffany, and Whistler.

**Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) Bloomington, Indiana University**
- (812) 349-3050 – To Reserve Resource Materials

**Civil Rights Movement**

*Extraordinary People of the Civil Rights Movement* by Sheila Hardy and P. Stephen Hardy
- Call Number: J920 Jar (Children’s Collection)
- Includes: images, time line, glossary, and additional web sites regarding African American history
The Civil Rights Movement in America by Elaine Landau  
Call Number: J323.1196 La (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: First and Second Series of Cornerstones of Freedom: resource of social studies for young readers.

Life in the Time of Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement by Terri DeGezelle  
Call Number: J323.1196 Deg (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: biographical references, timeline and additional references.

African American Culture

Africans in America PBS Video Series  
Call Number: Volume 4, 973.0496 Afr (Regular Audio Visual Collection)  
Includes: dramatic depiction of the struggle over slavery and freedom in shaping the character of the United States.

American Cultures for Children: African-American Heritage Video Series  
Call Number: J973.0496 Afr (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: provides children with an understanding of the cultural diversity in their classroom and neighborhoods.

Food in Grandma’s Day by Valerie Weber  
Call Number: J641 We (Children's Collection)  
Includes: (foodways) cultural – African American foods and customs

Coming Together: Celebrations for African American Families by Harriett Cole and John Pinderhuges  
Call Number: J305.896 Co (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: Social life and customs of African American families

Tell All the Children: Memories and Mementos of Being Young and Black in America  
By Tonya Bolden  
Call Number: J973.0496 Bo (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: Images, history, biographical information, and additional references

Days of Jubilee: The End of Slavery in the United States by Patricia C. and Frederick L. McKissack  
Call Number: J973.7 Ma (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: Slave narratives, letters diaries, military orders, and other documents to chronicle the various stages leading up to the emancipation of slaves in the United States.

The Block: Collage by Romare Bearden and Poems by Langston Hughes  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Call Number: J811.54 Hu (Children’s Collection)  
Includes art work by Romare Bearden and 13 poems on African-American themes

Romare Bearden: Collage of Memories  
Call Number: J759.13 Bea (Children’s Collection)  
Includes: images of Romare Bearden photomontages
Web sites:

African American Foodways
http://www.answers.com/topic/african-american-foodways
Includes information on diet, “soul food, culture and additional references

Social Realism
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_realism
Includes: information, definitions and additional references

BrainPOP Web Site: Animated, curriculum-based content that supports educators and engages students
http://www.brainpop.com/about

Jazz
http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/jazz/preview.weml
Includes: movie, information and additional references

Civil Rights
http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/civilrights/
Includes: movie, information and additional references

Harlem Renaissance
http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/harlemrenaissance/
Includes movie, information and additional references

Lesson Plans on the Web:

Romare Bearden: Piecing Together a Viewpoint by Ravonda B. Oden, Art Educator
Social Studies
Includes: Background and Art History information, Materials, Instructional Schedule, Session Objectives, Extension lesson, Assessment and National Standards

Lesson Plan: Romare Bearden by Connie Ferguson
Social Studies, Art
Grade: 7
Project: Romare Bearden Collage
Includes: Objectives, Instructional Resources, Production Procedures, Assessment, and State Standards

Romare Bearden Jazz Lesson and Art Project by Christine Ramker
Grades: 3-8
Multi-media, Art History, Music, Afro-American Studies
Includes: PowerPoint based on the Era of Blues and Jazz and is an integrated lesson that is cross curricular with concepts in reading, poetry, art, and music. The culmination of the PowerPoint is a art project based on the art work of Romare Bearden.
http://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Romare-Bearden-Jazz-Lesson-and-Art-Project

Romare Bearden-Style Collages by Lois Lewis
Social Studies, U.S. History, Arts and Humanities
Grades: 3-12
Students create collages in the style of African American artist Romare Bearden. Includes: Description, objective, materials needed, assessment, additional resources

Lesson Plans from the Romare Bearden Foundation
Includes many listings (lessons), cross curricular, all grade levels, additional references http://www.beardenfoundation.org/education/lessons.shtml

Indiana Academic Standards – Visual Arts Grade/Level 5
RESPONDING TO ART: History
Standard 1
Students understand the significance of visual art in relation to historical, social, political, spiritual, environmental, technological, and economic issues.
5.1.1 Identify the relationship between a work of art and the geography and characteristics of the culture, and identify where, when, why, and by whom the work was made (Focus: North America).
5.1.2 Identify and compare works of art and artifacts with similar functions.
5.1.3 Identify themes and symbols used in works of art and artifacts throughout history that portray universal ideas and beliefs.
Standard 2
Students recognize significant works of Western and non-Western art and understand the chronological development of art movements.
5.2.1 Identify and be familiar with a range of selected works of art identifying artists, culture, style, and period.
5.2.2 Identify distinguishing characteristics of style in individual artists work and art movements.
5.2.3 Begin to identify works of art and artifacts from major periods or movements of Western art and place on a chronological time line.

RESPONDING TO ART: Criticism
Standard 3
Students describe, analyze, and interpret works of art and artifacts.
5.3.1 Analyze the artist’s use of sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties in a work of art.
5.3.2 Construct meaning in the work based on personal response, properties found in the work, and background information on the context of the work.
5.3.3 Use appropriate art vocabulary.

Standard 4
Students identify and apply criteria to make informed judgments about art.
5.4.1 Listen to multiple critiques of works of art by peers, teachers, people from the art world and identify criteria used.

5.4.2 Apply criteria based on properties found in the work and research from the historical context of the work to make informed judgments.

RESPONDING TO ART: Aesthetics
Standard 5
Students reflect on and discuss art theories and aesthetic issues concerning the meaning and significance of art.
5.5.1 Identify problems or puzzles in a work of art or aesthetic issue, construct a hypothesis, and evaluate alternate hypotheses.
5.5.2 Identify and analyze a variety of well reasoned points of view on aesthetic issues.
(censorship, plagiarism) and develop a personal point of view.

**Standard 6**

*Students theorize about art and make informed judgments.*

5.6.1 Identify artwork made from the artist’s philosophy that art is at its best when it moves people to act for the betterment of society (instrumentalism).

5.6.2 Understand that personal preference is one of many criteria used in making judgments about art.

**INTEGRATED STUDIES**

**Standard 13**

*Students identify and make connections between knowledge and skill in art and all other subject areas such as humanities, sciences, and technology.*

5.13.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple perspectives of different disciplines.

5.13.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

**National Academic Standards – Visual Arts – Level 5**

**Content Standard #3:** Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

*Achievement Standard:*

Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks. Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks.

**Content Standard #4:** Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

*Achievement Standard:*

Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures. Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts. Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

**Content Standard #5:** Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

*Achievement Standard:*

Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art. Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry. Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures.

**Content Standard #6:** Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

*Achievement Standard:*

Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context. Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts.