

BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS

Romare Bearden (1911 – 1988) – “Summertime” “The Dove”

Romare Bearden, painter and collage maker, fills his works with the symbols and myths of the American black experience.

Romare Howard Bearden was born on September 2, 1911, to Howard and Bessye Bearden in Charlotte, North Carolina, and died in New York City on March 12, 1988, at the age of 76. His life and art are marked by exceptional talent, encompassing a broad range of intellectual and scholarly interests, including music, performing arts, history, literature and world art. Bearden was also a celebrated humanist, as demonstrated by his lifelong support of young, emerging artists.

Romare Bearden was honored during his lifetime and posthumously with numerous prestigious awards, publications and exhibitions. Along with representation in the important public and private collections he was awarded the National Medal of the Arts and honored with a groundbreaking retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. A master collagist, Bearden is celebrated today as a preeminent, highly prolific artist of exceptional and multifaceted talents and interests. He was a jazz aficionado, and author of scholarly books, a song writer/lyricist as well an arts activist and an engaged humanist. Bearden incorporated into his artwork a rich montage of influences from American, African, Asian and European art and culture and took inspiration from memories and experiences of the rural South, the urban North and the Caribbean.

After he served in the army during World War II, Bearden's work appeared in several well-publicized shows. During the 1940s, he combined African symbols, such as masks and "conjur women" with stylized realism. In 1950, he went to Paris and enrolled at the Sorbonne. In Paris he met James Baldwin, Constantin Brancusi and George Braque, all of whom influenced his work. He returned to New York City in 1954. After his stay in Paris, Bearden's work became more abstract. He used oil paint almost as if it were watercolor, layering washes of indistinct shape over thickened bars of woven colors. Shapes seem to float on the surface, in part because of their softened, muted tones.

Bearden was profoundly influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. During this period he used collage to express the rhythms of black music. Symbolic masks and faces float in interiors and landscapes. Throughout his career, Bearden has promoted opportunities for black artists. He has served as art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, and helped organize the Cinque Gallery. In 1969, he wrote *The Painter's Mind* with Carl Holty.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Name all the different things you see in these pictures.
2. Look closely at these reproductions. Are they paintings? What are they? (collage)
3. How are these works assembled? Why would someone make such a work of art? Is this art?
4. Does a composition like this bring questions to your mind and make you think about it, or can you grasp the entire meaning of the picture at a glance?
5. What different kinds of materials did the artist use in these compositions? (photos, cloth, paper, ink) How did he mix or combine them in the picture? For example – is a picture cut in half with each half located in different places or is only one half used?
6. What is the texture: How can it be used effectively to create interest? What kinds of texture do you see in Bearden’s work? What other ways can you think of to create texture in a collage?
7. Note how the colors are used in the collages. How would you describe Bearden’s use of color? Do the colors make any shape or form appear more, less, three-dimensional? What devices does he use to achieve a three-dimensional effect? (examples in “Summertime”: photos, color areas joined in shapes that model the woman’s blouse, two colors in the man’s face on the left)
8. Note the areas of smooth, flat color and compare them to the photographs, which are in black and white, yet show texture. Do you think this is an accident on the part of the artist or did he deliberately plan this effect? How could you achieve a contrast in texture and color that is different than Bearden’s method?
9. What is there about these pictures that suggest their titles? “Summertime” “The Dove”
Could you think of a different name for either that would fit? Do the things in “Summertime” the same things you think about when you think of summer? What would you use in a collage about summer?

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

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1. Collage – Ask the teacher ahead of time to have students bring items in for this project.

Materials: Whatever you can gather together: construction paper, magazines, photos, chalk, paint, cloth, yarn, and any other suitable items that students can bring in.

Discuss with the class what the topic for their collages should be. Come up with two or three ideas together. These could be based on something in the news, a topic they are studying, etc. As students work to create their collage, emphasize thought, arrangement of color, texture, subject matter.

2. Season of the Year painting

Materials: paper, tempera paint , water colors, or pastels

Have students pick their favorite season of the year. What symbols remind them most of that season? What feelings do they have during that season? Express these feelings with paint and paper.