Romare Bearden: the prevalence of ritual
Introductory essay by Carroll Greene

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Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)

Date
1971

Publisher
The Museum of Modern Art

ISBN
0870702513

Exhibition URL
www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2671

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ROMARE BEARDEN: THE PREVALENCE OF RITUAL
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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY CARROLL GREENE
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK
TRUSTEES OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART


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Burty Bros. Photographic, Detroit: 12; Geoffrey Clements, New York: 6, 13, 20, 22; Daniel Dembrosky, New York: 1, 18, 21; Jan Jachniewicz, New York: 15; James Mathews, New York: 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11; Sam Shaw, New York: inside front cover; Gary Soichet: inside back cover; Malcolm Varon, New York: cover, 17

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition has required the cooperation of many persons, and I am most grateful for their assistance. I wish to express my appreciation first to Romare Bearden, who spent countless hours in conversation with me concerning his life and work, which this exhibition celebrates. His generosity in supplying information and documentary material cannot be measured.

Members of The Museum of Modern Art staff have been especially generous and helpful in executing important phases of this exhibition. My thanks to April Kingsley, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, for her expert and expeditious handling of the countless details and voluminous correspondence necessary to the exhibition, as well as for her preparation of the chronology for this catalogue. I wish to thank as well Jennifer Licht for her thoughtful advice and suggestions; Judy Goldman for her painstaking compilation of the bibliography; Jane Fluegel for her perceptive editing of the catalogue; Michael Lauretano for his imaginative insight in designing it; Jean-Edith Weissbach and Gilbert Abrams for arranging the assembling, packing, and insuring of the paintings and collages; and Charles Froom and Richard Franklin and their staffs for the actual installation of the exhibition.

Other members of the Museum staff who have assisted me significantly are William Lieberman, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture; Wilder Green, Director of Exhibitions; Richard Palmer, Assistant Director of Exhibitions, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director of Public Information. Finally, I wish to thank John Hightower, Director of the Museum, who graciously invited me to direct this exhibition.

Arne Ekstrom of the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery has given me helpful advice and lent photographs for this catalogue. Samuel Shore of Shorewood Publishers has not only lent works from his collection but has been splendidly cooperative in many ways. I am most grateful to the many collectors who have loaned their works for this exhibition; without their sacrifice and cooperation, the exhibition would not have been possible.
The Prevalence of Ritual marks the mature fruition of a theme that has obsessed Romare Bearden for over thirty years—the aesthetic expression of the life and life style of a people in visual and plastic language. In the collages of this show, dating from 1964 to 1971, he develops the theme that engaged him in his earliest works, beginning with the Southern series on brown paper. The ritual is the choreography of daily life, vibrant in movement and in the myriad shades of feeling and emotion common to humanity; it is nurtured by his knowledge of and experience in black America.

In talking of his art, Bearden comments, "I am trying to explore, in terms of the particulars of the life I know best, those things common to all cultures." His appreciation of an astonishing array of artists spans the continents and centuries and undergirds his mature oeuvre with a range of aesthetic allusions brilliantly absorbed into his own highly assured personal style. His goal consistently has been to create a universal art in a contemporary medium while remaining true to his particular cultural heritage and experience.

Bearden possesses the remarkable ability to embrace a theme and unrelentingly exploit its plastic, visual, and structural potential to his own satisfaction. Then, when satisfied, he gracefully moves on to new ground. Soon after his return from the U.S. Army in 1945, he had his first one-man show in a New York gallery, the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. His semi-abstract paintings created for that show on the theme The Passion of Christ symbolically represented the sufferings of all men. Inspired by the Spanish poet García Lorca, he became preoccupied in the next year with the theme of death in an impressive series—considerably more abstract—on bullfighters. During the early 1950s, Bearden painted intermittently. For nearly a year, he lived in Paris broadening his association with European, African, and American artists and writers. By the mid-50s, his style had become increasingly abstract, and before the end of the decade, his painting was largely non-objective. Yet, by 1961, as abstract expressionism carried the day, Bearden had already begun to reintroduce figurative elements in his paintings, although his one-man show at Cordier & Warren
that year included only his abstract works. He was, in fact, much admired and respected at this time as a skilled abstractionist.

But at this time a massive movement for social justice burst upon the American scene, and Bearden's own Afro-American people were the fulcrum of that movement which would eventually affect all sectors of society. Joining with a group of other New York black artists, he helped to form the Spiral group in 1963; Romare Bearden almost inevitably began to move in a new direction. At first the Spiral artists met informally in Bearden's Canal Street studio to discuss the problems of the black artist in America. Soon afterward the artists acquired a gallery in Greenwich Village where they held regular sessions, and Bearden's friend, the painter Norman Lewis, was the first chairman. In 1965, for their first group show, each member-artist agreed to limit his palette to black and white. It was during this period that Bearden began to create collages thematically culled from his memory and experience of America.

The themes of those collage Projections, however, found their genesis in Bearden's work of the 1940s, when he created his Southern series, the earliest works in the present exhibition. These early scenes, such as The Visitation (1941) and Folk Musicians (1941-42; both Nanette Rohan Bearden Collection), are basically stylized statements of Negro life expressed in simple colorful forms. They provide an insight into the artist's development over the years, for to the flat iconography and pathos of these almost primitive pieces, he has skillfully added elements from Byzantine, Dutch, African, and modern European sources, as well as from American cinemetic techniques. His forms have become intrinsically more complex and plastic and his structures more unified.

In his collages of the 1960s, the images from Bearden's fertile memory were endowed with poignant emotion. They were set forth on his canvases in a free associational manner, but as they developed, the statement became more and more definite. The collages were prolific, immediate, and compelling, steeped in folklore and history, and as contemporary as Lenox Avenue today. Originally small in size and subtly colored, they were "projected," that is, blown up in black and white photographic murals. These forceful works, infused as they were with "memories and experiences," displaced Bearden's non-objective painting as suddenly and abruptly as America's erstwhile "invisible" people had moved into center stage. Projections was the theme of Bearden's one-man show at Cordier & Ekstrom in 1964. It was a startling success.

When asked why he departed from abstract painting and chose the collage, Bearden said simply, "You can't always do things the same way." In fact he has been attempting to create an œuvre in keeping with the restless modern sensibility, exhibiting spontaneity and the element of surprise. "Man's patience," he says, quoting the French poet Paul Valéry, "is destroyed by the machine." Bearden uses elements of the film documentary, allowing a projection of his images "right up front" to create a feeling of immediacy in his viewer. Bearden's Projections, with their haunting eyes and contorted physiognomies, are nothing short of visual confrontations.

In 1967, Bearden began to add generous amounts of color to his enlarged collages, as in the Rites of Spring (Carter Burden Collection). He often used colored paper and fabrics, or paper which he painted and then glued to the surface of the work. Since then his collages have become increasingly more sophisticated in color and design, less compressed, airier, and more elegant, beautifully exemplified in two works from 1970, Patchwork Quilt (The Museum of Modern Art) and Mississippi Monday (Shorewood Publishers). Here is an artist who truly enjoys the plasticity of his medium. In his mammoth effort to explore the formal elements of Negro life and to express its "innerness" visually, Bearden has not only chosen to deal with "black anguish," an undeniably pervasive element, to be sure, but also with a whole range of emotional shadings. "Art celebrates a victory," says Bearden; "I look for all those images in which life expresses that victory." In America's technological society, increasing numbers of people feel that man is becoming dehumanized. Bearden holds that the life style of the black in America is "perhaps the richest because it is the one life style that is talking about life and about the continuation of life . . . and through all of the anguish—the joy of life."

If anguish is present in some of his collages, it is there because anguish is very much a part of the human condition. Anguish is as much a part of the "innerness" of the black experience as piety is part of a nun's. But in Bearden's collages there is also folklore—rural Southern style, with allusions to both American and African origins—that includes spirituals and jazz, card-playing nights and church-going Sundays, family meals and blue Mondays, set against lush Southern landscape and bleak Northern slums. Thematically, Bearden's work since 1964 is often analogous to that of Brueghel. Technically, it is influenced by Mondrian, as is evident in his interlocking rectangular relationships, and also by such older Dutch masters as de Hooch and Terborch. His forms and distortions owe much to African sculpture.

Bearden continues to explore the inter-relatedness of apparently unrelated things—a fragment of patterned linoleum becomes a human arm, moss becomes someone's hair. Southern cabins are telescoped through the windows of decaying urban tenements, and the eyes of a cat become those of the conjur woman. Bearden has never maintained a photographic file nor does he use one. He uses pictures from newspapers and magazines which he skilfully frees from their sources and fashions to the needs of his collages. "Seldom have I used actual faces," states Bearden. "Most of my faces are fragments from different things," frequently African masks, usually varying in scale, and pasted together in a unified whole. Here is a master not only of structure but also of harmony and its achievement out of apparent disharmony. Sometimes a white hand will be attached to a black body. Bearden is not interested in the hand or the separate element as such, for essentially his concern is with the metaphoric use of the disparate elements, that is, the handiness of hands and their aesthetic positioning within the construct of the collage. Bearden juxtaposes elements in order to lend emphasis to a single idea. His world is most often kaleidoscopically compressed in multiple spatial planes and his images are empirically related. "I try to show that when some things are taken out of the usual context and put in the new, they are given an entirely new character."

There are some persistent elements in Bearden's collage paintings—the train, the window, the moon, the haunting eyes of his people. Although Bearden abjures the idea of symbol in his work, he adds, "These elements should not be construed in a literary sense. Each painting envisions a world complete within itself."

The Prevalence of Ritual, then, is more than an exhibition; it is an affirmation, a celebration, a victory of the human spirit over all the forces that would oppress it.

1925 Graduates from Public School 139, New York.
1929 Graduates from Peabody High School, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
1935 Receives B.S. degree from New York University.

Chronology

BY APRIL KINGSLEY

1941 October 16–November 7. The Visitaton (1941) and Woman Picking Cotton (1940) included in exhibition "Contemporary Negro Art" at McMillen, Inc., New York.


May. Discharged from army as sergeant.

June. One-man exhibition of works from The Passion of Christ series at G Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.

October 8–27. First one-man exhibition in New York gallery; works from The Passion of Christ series shown at Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.


December 17. He Is Arisen (1945) acquired by The Museum of Modern Art, New York; first work to be purchased by a museum.

1946 Resumes duties as case worker for New York City Department of Social Services, continuing to serve intermittently until 1949.


April 15–May 4. Included in "Modern American Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger" at Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, New York.

September 4–28. Included in exhibition "In the Sun" at Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, New York.


1946–47 "At Five in the Afternoon" (1946) in traveling exhibition of works owned by the United States Department of State; exhibited at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in "Advancing American Art," October 4–18, 1946, before traveling abroad; exhibition withdrawn by State Department in May 1947 when Congressional Appropriations Committee finds it "subversive."


October 17–November 30. The Annunciation (1947) included in exhibition "Contemporary Religious Paintings" at The Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington, D.C., sponsored...

1950


1951
Returns to New York from Paris. Paints intermittently but concentrates on song writing; joins ASCAP and has many songs published.

1952
Resumes work for New York City Department of Social Services; case load involves assistance to gypsies living in city. Continues to work until 1966.

1954
September 4. Marries Nanette Rohan. Returns to painting, working in an increasingly abstract style.


1955
May 12–June 15. Factory Workers (1942) included in “World at Work” exhibition of paintings and drawings commissioned by Fortune, sponsored by the American Federation of Arts, opening at Arts Club of Chicago; circulates for full year (see bibl. no. 130).


1956
Moves into present studio on Canal Street in New York.

July 1–31. Two works included in “Eight New York Painters” at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor; selected by Hale Woodruff.


1958
Paintings now almost exclusively non-objective.

1960
January 20–February 19. One-man exhibition at
A conjur woman was an important figure in a number of southern Negro rural communities. She was called on to prepare love potions; to provide herbs to cure various illnesses; and to be consulted regarding vexing personal and family problems. A conjur woman was greatly feared and it was believed that she could change her appearance.

January 1969
above THE PREVALENCE OF RITUAL: TIDINGS. (1964)

opposite SUMMER SONG. (1967)
Michel Warren Gallery, New York; non-figurative paintings shown.

1961
April 6–25. One-man exhibition at Cordier & Warren Gallery, New York; again shows non-objective work.
Begins to re-introduce figurative elements in paintings.


1963
July. Spiral group formed, meeting initially in Bearden’s studio; group later opens a gallery. Founded before the civil rights March on Washington, it is concerned with the problems of Negro artists. Other members include Charles Alston, Emma Amos, Calvin Douglass, Perry Ferguson, Reginald Gammon, Alvin Hollingsworth, Felrath Hines, Norman Lewis, William Majors, Richard Mayhew, Earl Miller, Merton Simpson, Hale Woodruff, and James Yergans. Group considers working on a composite project, for which Bearden suggests a collage on Negro themes. He begins to create collages, although group effort does not materialize. Gammon suggests photographing collages and enlarging them.

1964
Appointed to position (still held) as Art Director of Harlem Cultural Council.
June. Collages seen by Arne Ekstrom, who encourages Bearden to make a series for fall exhibition. Bearden spends summer working on them.


October 20–November 20. Included in “. . . Some Negro Artists” exhibition sponsored by Morris County Tercentenary Committee at Fairleigh Dickinson University Art Gallery, Madison, New Jersey.

1965
March 19–April 4. Included in “An Exhibition of Contemporary Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Art” at the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Academy Art Gallery, New York.
May 14–June 5. Included in “First Group Showing (Works in Black and White)” at Spiral Gallery.
opposite THREE FOLK MUSICIANS. (1967)

In the 1920s, during the time of the great migration of Negroes from the South to the big cities, my grandmother ran a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh. Her house fronted Penn Avenue; to the rear was an alley called Spring Way. After supper the boarders would sit in front of the house and talk, or play checkers, or pluck out “down home music” on their guitars. 1966
I did the new work out of a response and need to redefine the image of man in the terms of the black experience I know best.
CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given in feet and inches, height preceding width. All dates are provided by the artist; none appears on the work itself.

1. SACRIFICE. (1941). Gouache and casein on kraft paper, 31 3/8 x 40". Collection Nanette Rohan Bearden, New York
2. SERENADE. (1941). Gouache and casein on kraft paper, 32 x 47 3/4". Collection Nanette Rohan Bearden, New York
4. FOLK MUSICIANS. (ca. 1941-42). Gouache and casein on composition board, 36 3/8 x 46 1/2". Collection Nanette Rohan Bearden, New York
5. FACTORY WORKERS. (1942). Gouache and casein on kraft paper mounted on composition board, 39 3/4 x 31 1/4". Collection Nanette Rohan Bearden, New York
12.-17. PROJECTIONS. Photo-enlarged panels, ca. 6 x 8', made from collages included in exhibition Projections, Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc., New York, October 6-24, 1964
12. THE CONJUR WOMAN
13. THE DOVE
14. EVENING, 9-10, 461 LENOX AVENUE
15. JAZZ 1930'S, GRAND TERRACE BALLROOM
16. MYSTERIES
17. PITTSBURGH MEMORY
18. UPTOWN LOOKING DOWNTOWN. (1965). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 11 1/4 x 15 3/4". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Richard Clarke, New York
21. GUITAR EXECUTIVE. (1967). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 56 1/2 x 44 1/4". Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia
22. LA PRIMAVERA. (1967). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 43 3/4 x 56". Collection Miss Helen Mary Harding, New York
27. SUMMERTIME. (1967). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 56 x 44". Collection Jesse P. Shanok, New York
28. THREE FOLK MUSICIANS. (1967). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 50 1/2 x 60". The J. L. Hudson Gallery, Detroit
29. EVENING MEAL. (1967-68). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 30 x 40". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Theodore W. Kheel, New York
33. STRANGE MORNING, INTERIOR. (1968). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 44 x 55 3/4". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Ellison, New York
34. AWAKENING. (1969). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 32 1/2 x 46". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Daniel W. Dietrich II, Villanova, Pennsylvania
37. BLUE MONDAY. (1969). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 11 x 9". Collection Miss Helen Mary Harding, New York
40. PATCHWORK QUILT. (1969). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 9 x 11 1/4". Collection Miss Helen Mary Harding, New York
41. SUSANNAH. (1969). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 9 x 12". Collection Miss Helen Mary Harding, New York
43. VILLAGE SQUARE. (1969). Collage of paper and syn-
thetic polymer paint on composition board, 24 x 20".
Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc., New York
44. CAROLINA INTERIOR. (1970). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 13 x 15 1/4".
Shorewood Publishers, New York
47. FLIGHTS AND FANTASY. (1970). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 8 1/4 x 11 1/4".
Shorewood Publishers, New York
50. ORANGE MORNING. (1970). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 14 x 18".
Shorewood Publishers, New York
56. THE BLOCK. (1971). Collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board, with a pre-recorded tape collage of street sounds, church music, blues, laughing voices and the sounds of children at play provided by Daniel Dembrosky, 4 x 18" (overall). Shorewood Publishers, New York

FAMILY DINNER. (1968)
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BEARDEN'S STATEMENTS, WRITINGS, INTERVIEWS (arranged chronologically)
2. [STATEMENT]. "I believe the function of the artist . . .," in exhibition catalogue "Romare Bearden," 306 West 141 Street, New York, May 4-11, 1940.

GENERAL WORKS

ARTICLES AND REVIEWS
27. "American Negro Art," The New Masses (New York), December 30, 1941, p. 27 (illus.).
29. ASHTON, DORE. "Romare Bearden: Paintings," Quadrum (Brussels), vol. 17, 1964, pp. 99-110 (illus.).
42. EMMART, A. D. "Art Notes," The Baltimore Sun, May 21, 1944.
45. GHENT, HENRI. "And So It Is," School Arts (Worcester, Mass.), April 1969, pp. 21-23 (illus.).
54. ______. “Perspective: The Black Artist in America,” The Art Gallery (Ivoryton, Conn.), April 1970, pp. 1–29 (illus.).
58. ______. “Two Afro-American Artists,” The Art Gallery (Ivoryton, Conn.), April 1968, pp. 26–31 (illus.).
60. ______. “Stress on ‘Modern,’” New York Times, December 15, 1946, p. 9 (illus.).
68. MUÑOZ, ELEANOR C. “Reviews and Previews,” Art News (New York), December 1955, p. 58 (illus.).
75. POMEROY, RALPH. “Black Persephone,” Art News (New York), October 1967, pp. 44–45, 73–75 (illus.).
77. RAYNOR, VIV [EY]. “In the Galleries,” Arts Magazine (New York), April 1961, p. 64.
84. “Romare Bearden Bull-Fight Inspirations,” Art News (New York), April 1946, pp. 53–54 (illus.).
85. SHARP, MARYNELL. “Bearden Paints ‘The Iliad,’” Art Digest (New York), November 15, 1948, pp. 32–33 (illus.).
88. WOLF, BEN. “Abstract Artists Pay Homage to Jazz,” Art Digest (New York), December 1, 1946, p. 15 (illus.).
89. ______. “Bearden Abstracts Drama of the Bull-Ring,” Art Digest (New York), April 1, 1946, p. 13 (illus.).
90. ______. “Bearden—He Wrestles with Angels,” Art Digest (New York), October 1, 1945, p. 76 (illus.).
91. ______. “Bearden Sings of the Cup that Cheers,” Art Digest (New York), March 1, 1947, p. 19 (illus.).

ONE-MAN EXHIBITION CATALOGUES
(arranged chronologically)
In my paintings I have no need for models, preparatory sketches, nor do I need to bring to mind a particular scene or landscape. I try not to be self-conscious and only to work with what I see happening as the world of the picture unfolds itself. December 1960
above MISSISSIPPI MONDAY. (1970)
I believe the function of the artist is to find ways of communicating, in sensible, sensuous terms, those experiences which do not find adequate expression in the daily round of living and for which, therefore, no ready-made means of communication exists. May 1940
100. NEW YORK. DANIEL CORDIER & MICHEL WARREN, INC. Romare Bearden: Projections. October 6–24, 1964. 20 works (illus.). Statement by the artist.
102. NEW YORK. DANIEL CORDIER & EKSTROM, INC. Romare Bearden: Recent Collages. February 11–March 7, 1970 (illus.).

GROUP EXHIBITION CATALOGUES
(arranged chronologically)
97. CHICAGO. TANNER ART GALLERIES. The Art of the American Negro (1851 to 1940). July 4–September 2, 1940. 1 work. Text by Alain Locke.


151. NEW YORK MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. October 31–November 3, 1968. 1 work.


153. WARSAW. BIENNALE INTERNATIONALE DE L’AFFICHE, 11e. 1968. 1 work (illus.). Text by Jerzy Wasiennik.

154. NEW YORK. MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. Social Comment in America. 1968–69. 2 works (illus.). Text by Dore Ashton. Exhibition circulated to: Lawrence University, Appleton, Wis., February 25–March 15, 1968; White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., April 9–30; Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Me., June 13–July 7; Bloomsburg (Pennsylvania) State College, September 22–October 13; College of Wooster (Ohio), November 1–22; Municipal University of Omaha, January 3–31, 1969; De Pauw University, Greencastle, Ind., February 21–March 16; Sloan Galleries of American Painting, Valparaiso (Indiana) University, April 8–28; and Mankato (Minnesota) State College, May 19–June 9.

155. NEW YORK. NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH. ART CENTER GALLERY. Inaugural Exhibition, New School Graduate Faculty Center, April 25–June 8, 1969. 2 works. Foreword by John R. Everett. Text by Paul Mocsanyi.


158. LINCOLN, PA. LINCOLN UNIVERSITY. Black Arts Festival. [October, 1969].


163. NEWARK, NEW JERSEY. BAMBERGER’S. Art/Amercia. [n.d.]. 1 work.