Romare Bearden

American, b. 1911, Charlotte, NC, d. 1988, New York, NY

Bearden is the most well-known and successful African-American collagist in American art history. Initially his work depicted African-American culture and social scenes which captured the nuances of daily urban life in Harlem. In parallel, the techniques he used manipulated a variety of media such as photography, painting, and collage. His choices of media and selected thematic source material were a unique fusion of theme and process. The narratives in his work were reoccurring themes exploring jazz, urban life, and social relationships. The Bearden family moved to Harlem in 1920. His home was often frequented by his parent’s friends and influential American legends, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Duke Ellington, and Langston Hughes. The eclectic influences of his formative years encouraged the artist to explore the fusion between the arts, especially that of jazz and collage.

In this piece, the erotic narrative is carefully constructed: a muzzled woman undresses before a clothed masked man who cradles a lamp in his hands. The hackneyed green interior and presence of a dog indicate a modest, domestic mise en scène. The simplicity of the naked woman’s form is contrasted by complexity of the man’s black suit, made sinister by the red kerchief and blue accents. Such touches heighten the sexual tension and alienation between the two figures. The artist graduated from New York University in 1935 with a B.A. in education. However, throughout college he took art classes and created political cartoons for local papers. At this time he also began attending the Harlem Artist Guild and the Art Students League. To earn a living, Bearden became a social worker with the New York City Department of Social Services. The artist enrolled in the U.S. military in 1942-1945 which later allowed him to take leave of his position as a social worker and travel to Paris to study art history at the Sorbonne.

In 1987, Bearden was awarded the National Medal of Arts, the nation’s highest honor for artistic excellence presented by the President of the United States. In 1990, the Romare Bearden Foundation was established to preserve the legacy of the artist as well as provide art education, grants, and activities furthering the scholarship of Bearden’s life and times. New York City honored the artist in 2005 with Romare Bearden: A Homecoming Celebration which lasted over six months and featured educational events and family programming that included over twenty cultural institutions throughout the city.



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