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The Sun

American Stories Masterfully Told

Gallery-Going

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PRESS RELEASE



In the National Archives is a 1944 photo of two uniformed men standing in front of a large painting. The caption reads: "Sgt. Romare Bearden, noted young Negro artist ... is shown discussing one of his paintings, 'Cotton Workers,' with Pvt. Charles H. Alston, his first art teacher and cousin. ... Both Bearden and Alston are members of the 372nd Infantry, a segregated regiment stationed in New York City."

The greatness of the generation who came of age during World War II was apparent in the arts no less than in the military. These artists contributed mightily to the civilization they defended. Romare Bearden (1911–88), second cousin to Duke Ellington and a distinguished chronicler of black life in America, was among them.

In 1977, Bearden created a series of 20 collages based on Homer's "Odyssey." "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey" is the first full-scale exhibition since their original presentation 30 years ago. Included are an additional 23 compositions tethered to the artist's trust in the ability of classical themes to illumine the heroism of the black experience.

Bearden was a great storyteller. He wrenched collage from captivity to strictly formalist ends by putting it to autobiographical and narrative purposes. From the outset, his stories were steeped in the sights and traditions of

black America, from rural North Carolina to Harlem. The social content of his art is all the more compelling because it is expressed through luminous mastery of form and materials.

Bearden's most familiar images are anecdotal ones of the rituals of life in Mecklenburg County, N.C., and of the New York streets and jazz clubs. Yet throughout his career he made use of literary source material: the gospels of Matthew and Mark, the writing of Federico García Lorca, François Rabelais, and Herodotus. Biblical themes appeared throughout his work. Some allusions are overt; some are as subtle as the serpent, subverter of Eden, that winds around Circe's arm in "Circe Turns a Companion of Odysseus into a Swine."

Each collage in the series concentrates on a single scene or episode told in verse by the Greek bard. Dense with incident, "Realm of the Shades" makes visual the Homeric line, "Unhappy men, who went alive to the house of Hades, so dying twice when all the rest of mankind die only once." Pink and fuschia flames, an un-Hellenic touch, recall medieval and Byzantine images of the fires of hell.

"Circe" is breathtaking. The hieratic figure is matte black and draped in yellow touched with green against a red background. She curves gently backward to glance at a grinning skull. Her gesture recalls the stylized motion of figures on an Attic vase. The saturated red of the setting hints at what Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries looked like when the paint was fresh. Bits of foil, paint, graphite, and a variety of papers enliven the surface.

Bearden's full-throated color sense is the glory of his work. Throughout, color is both haunting and ornamental. "Poseidon the Sea God" depicts Odysseus's formidable enemy as an African-masked warrior. The composition is crowded with curves and decorative zigzags, all held in check by the variegated blue that dominates the image. In "Odysseus and Penelope Reunited," the crowned couple glow in white robes against the subdued tones of a cityscape structured on Sienese models. Flecks of red move the eye across the composition and upward to a fiery sun that unsettles without warming.

The tiny watercolor, "Circe's Domain," is the only false note here. Its figures tip into the faux-primitivism encouraged by Carl Van Vechten, white tour guide to the Harlem Renaissance. It comes too close to the racist approach that credits Bearden's greatness to his recapturing Cubism for black people.

He did no such thing. There is nothing to reclaim because Cubism took nothing away from any people. All history is the story of the inevitable reciprocity of cultures beneath the surface of events. Origin has never been destiny. Cubism was a set of pictorial conventions that originated in the syncretist genius of Western culture. Bearden inherited that genius to which his artistry owes significant debt.

Four exhilarating ink drawings from Bearden's 1946 "The Iliad Series" underscore the fruitfulness of his study with George Grosz at the Art Students' League. Grosz introduced Bearden to classical draftsmanship, with particular attention to Hogarth and Ingres. The graphic perfection of Bearden's collages begins here, in the linear amplitude and grace of a cultivated hand. The calligraphic refinement of his execution refutes reductionist notions of cultural separatism or of racial copyright on formal protocols.

Bearden's Homeric sequence achieves the epic sweep of Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series." While Lawrence depicted explicit moments in African-American history, Bearden translates a Homeric poem into a sensuous proxy for black Americans' quest for home. Like Lawrence, Bearden was sustained by a rigorous understanding of the *longue durée* of art history. He was a passionate disciple of the Florentine masters, studying Rembrandt and admiring Picasso, Mondrian, Miró, Leger, Braque, Brancusi and his own contemporary Stuart Davis. The rich wellsprings of his achievement do not reduce to any separate-but-equal black aesthetic.

Lovers of Bearden's art will find much to enrich their understanding in the essay by Robert G. O'Mealley in the accompanying 112-page, full-color catalog. Though the text over-eggs the pudding in service to identity politics, it also offers illuminating juxtapositions. It is a must for anyone unable to attend this exceptional exhibition.

Until January 5 (724 Fifth Avenue, 212-247-2111).