

## Romare Bearden (1911–1988)

Romare Howard Bearden was born to R. Howard and Bessye Bearden in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 2, 1911. He studied at Lincoln University, Boston University, Columbia University, The Art Students League of New York—where he thrived under the tutelage of George Grosz—and New York University from which he graduated in 1935. In the same year, he joined the Harlem Artists Guild and began contributing political cartoons to the weekly *Baltimore Afro-American*. In 1938, he became a case worker with the New York City Department of Social Services—a vocation he would continue through the 1960s.

His career as a painter was launched in 1940 with his first solo exhibition in Harlem; a solo show in Washington, D.C. followed four years later. In 1942 he was drafted into the Army, and in 1950 he traveled to Paris on the G.I. Bill to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. After returning to New York, he married Nanette Rohan in 1954, and the Beardens moved to Canal Street. In 1962, Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and others formed the “Spiral Group,” a New York-based artists’ collective dedicated to supporting the work of emerging black talent in painting, as well as to explore ways of contributing, as artists, to the ongoing black freedom movement. It was again with these aims that Bearden, Lewis, and Ernest Crichlow would later establish the Cinque Gallery in New York City. Bearden was also a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Black Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1964, he was appointed the first art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, a prominent African-American

advocacy group. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1972.

Among his numerous publications are *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, coauthored with Harry Henderson and published posthumously in 1993; *The Caribbean Poetry of Derek Walcott and the Art of Romare Bearden* (1983); *Six Black Masters of American Art*, coauthored with Harry Henderson (1972); *The Painter’s Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting*, coauthored with Carl Holty (1969); and *Li’l Dan, the Drummer Boy: A Civil War Story*, a children’s book published posthumously in September 2003.

Recognized as one of the preeminent artists of the twentieth century, Bearden’s work appears in many major public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. He has had retrospectives at the Mint Museum of Art (1980), the Detroit Institute of the Arts (1986), as well as numerous posthumous retrospectives, including at the Studio Museum in Harlem (1991) and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2003). He received honorary doctorates from Pratt Institute, Carnegie Mellon University, Davidson College, and Atlanta University. In 1984 he was awarded the Mayor’s Award of Honor for Art and Culture in New York City. In 1987 President Ronald Reagan presented him with the National Medal of Arts. Bearden died in New York City on March 12, 1988.