

## Romare Bearden: *Figure in Collage*



*The Siren's Song*, 1977. Collage of various papers with paint and graphite on fiberboard, 32 x 44 inches

**May 7 – June 26, 2026**

**Opening Reception: May 14, 6 – 8 pm**

DC Moore Gallery is pleased to present *Romare Bearden: Figure in Collage*, an exhibition that follows the evolution of Romare Bearden (1911-1988)'s approach to the figure. This selection highlights key moments of innovation across Bearden's career, including works from his 1946 Iliad series, 1964 Projections, and 1977 Odysseus series. Featuring collage, painting, and drawing, the works on view explore the wide scope of Bearden's creative methodology, recurring influences, and interweaving of traditions from different eras, geographies, and cultures.

The earliest works in the exhibition, rarely seen drawings from the Iliad Series (1946) show Bearden's initial explorations of abstraction, which led towards his first collage works. The calligraphic linework and division of forms foreshadow the cutout shapes and arrangements of figures that he would soon explore in collage. These drawings also establish the central importance of myth and the Homeric narratives that Bearden would return to thirty years later.

*The Sirens' Song* is one of twenty collages created in 1977 based on episodes from Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, in which Bearden links the ancient hero's quest to Black American life and the search for home. In *The Sirens' Song*, Bearden excels in his bold use of colored papers with

little surface manipulation, with black and brown figures appearing as silhouettes in a vivid blue and green environment. Henri Matisse's longstanding influence on Bearden is clearly felt here, as the artists shared an interest in vivid color, beauty, and sensitivity to line. Bearden's play with flatness also calls to mind ancient Greek black-figure vase painting, adding another layer of narrative complexity.

Scholars believe the *Odysseus* series was profoundly influenced by the island of St. Martin, where Bearden and his wife Nanette built a home in 1973. From that time on, the island became a major source of inspiration for him, as he responded to the luminous colors of the tropical landscape and life by the sea. A precursor to the 1977 series, *Before Troy* (1973), converges the cutout figures with the lush, painterly landscape. Shown alongside are several collaged watercolors done on St. Martin in the later years of the artist's life, as landscape became an increasingly important subject.

Bearden's art is steeped in multiple traditions of storytelling, drawing connections between sources such as West African religion, Greek mythology, the Bible, and his own memories of life in Harlem and North Carolina. His domestic interior scenes use the medium of collage to depict recollected and imagined memories from his youth in Mecklenburg County. *This is a Morning in Mecklenburg County* (1975) exemplifies a meaningful theme in Bearden's work—a nude with a protective spirit nearby. In the collage, the young woman bathing is protected by the benevolent spirit of parental figures, who are likenesses of the artist's own great-grandparents.



*This is a Morning in Mecklenburg County*, 1975. Collage of various papers with fabric, pencil, and paint on fiberboard on board. 15 5/8 x 17 7/8 inches

The image of a woman dressing after her daily morning bath relates to the Biblical story of Susanna and the Elders and Bearden's idea of bathing as a ritual, a key concept in his work. Bearden conceived of ritual as a fundamentally human practice that connects peoples from across time and place, encompassing both spiritual and secular, everyday activity. He stated, "I make every effort to give my works a universal character, and I feel that the meanings can be extended and reinforced by means of myth and ritual."

Bearden experimented with methods of collaging the figure throughout his career, using photographs, fabrics, watercolors, and more, which he cut, layered, painted, and abraded to further the narrative power of his compositions. These shifting textures and patterns make material the multifaceted natures of the figures that inhabit his work, the specific and universal characteristics of life that continue to resonate today.

DC Moore Gallery specializes in contemporary and twentieth-century art. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10am-6pm. For more information, photographs, or to arrange a viewing please call 212-247-2111 or email Caroline Magavern at [cmagavern@dcmooregallery.com](mailto:cmagavern@dcmooregallery.com).