

***Baptism* by Romare Bearden**

Artist Fact Sheet

Bearden, Romare 1911-1988

American

Baptism, 1975

Prevalence of Ritual series

32in h x 45in w screenprint

Crist Gallery

SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS WORK:

- a screen print is a printmaking technique that traditionally creates a sharp-edged single-color image using a stencil (which is the negative of the image to be printed) and a porous fabric
- Bearden often enhanced the print surface with graphite, watercolor, gouache, or acrylic paint, thus creating his own hybrid of painting, drawing and printmaking
- a renewed interest in working with paint and more spontaneous brushwork of his monotypes informed the artist's collages, some of which became more painterly over time.
- the collage *Carolina Shout*, 1974, and *The Baptism*, 1964, share similar imagery, depicting a river baptism
- spirituality abounds in this piece - reminiscing of country baptisms of his youth.

SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF ARTIST:

- signature technique was collage
- famous for the deep, rich colors in his work; but loved gray. Gray was the middle ground used in his work- (society grappling successfully or not with weighty moral and political issues)
- art historian, teacher, author/poet, curator, and founder of the Cinque Gallery
- songwriter ("Seabreeze" was recorded by Billy Eckstein)
- subject matter primarily African American life, but Bearden's work was universalized - all beings with basic goodness and commonality of rituals in our daily lives

ANECDOTAL INFORMATION:

One essence of Bearden's contribution was that his art transcended categories by joining the imagery of black life and circumstance to universally understood experiences.

Quote: "What I saw was *black life*, presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its *richness* and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence...It defined not only the **character** of black American life, but also its **conscience**."

-Playwright August Wilson

A voracious reader, Bearden tapped into the mythic and biblical associations of his experiences, presenting black life in a universal context.

Images abound with affection for his birthplace in the South. Charlotte, NC was a hub for railroads-the Piedmont and Northern, and the Southern Railway lines ran through the city. Train tracks were only a few blocks from the home of the Bearden family. Church-going, quilting, and workers in the fields, men in hats and women in headscarves, and hearing southern blues music were etched permanently in Bearden's recollections from his summer visits, and thus incorporated into his art. Among his vivid memories were: women carrying on daily chores, mothering, nurturing; church picnics and rituals of faith, spiritual healers, called 'conjur' women, respected and feared for their powers; shacks, farm animals, fences, outdoor tubs. Trains were a particularly weighted symbol for Bearden signifying the black migration North after slavery.

Quote: "I never left Charlotte except physically."-Romare Bearden

*Sometimes I remember my grandfather's house
A garden with tiger lilies,
my grandmother
Waving a white apron to passing trains
On that trestle across the clay road.*

from "Sometimes," a poem by Bearden published in Romare Bearden in Black and White: Photomontage Projections, 1954

The Beardens moved to Harlem when it was the center of an explosion of African-American cultural achievement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Poets and painters, preachers and politicians, dancers and musicians, entrepreneurs and educators flourished together. Amongst all this creativity Bearden was highly influenced by jazz. Stuart Davis, a fellow painter who he meets in 1938, is also a jazz fanatic. No friend would be more crucial to his artistic development.

Quote: "You got to look at things as musical beats," Davis would tell Bearden. "Listen to what he isn't playing," Davis would say about his beloved Earl Hines. "What you don't need is just as important as what you do need." Like rests in music, Davis would insist, blank spaces in painting create rhythm. Because of Davis, harmony and rhythm in painting became as important to Bearden as color. Davis forever altered the way Bearden made music on canvas.

INFORMATIVE NARRATIVE: ROMARE BEARDEN

In order to "process the meaning of his southern childhood and northern upbringing," Bearden made art from observation and memory-the sights, sounds, and feelings of his personal history. One of his profound gifts to us was a new generation of images-almost nonexistent in American art before him-that measure life's universal journey in terms of authentic black experiences.

After forming the Spiral Group in 1963 Bearden searched for a project that all the black artists could work on by suggesting a collage on Negro themes. He began clipping magazine photos and colored paper and pasting them down in new arrangements, urging his friends to take part. They showed little interest in collaborating, but he continued to develop what was to become his signature style.

TIMELINE: ROMARE BEARDEN

- 1911 Born Fred Romare Howard Bearden on September 2, Charlotte, North Carolina
In the home of his great-grandparents at 401 South Graham Street to Howard
And Bessye
 - 1925 Moves to Harlem during the height of the Harlem Renaissance (1920's-30's);
graduates from P.S. 139 in New York City
 - 1926 Moves to Pittsburgh to live with his grandmother Carrie
 - 1929 Graduates from Peabody High School in Pittsburgh
 - 1935 Graduates from New York University with B.S. in mathematics; helps found
Harlem Artists Guild at 135th Street YMCA
 - 1936-37 Studies with George Grosz at Art Students League; joins 306 group with
Jacob Lawrence and others (Grosz first to encourage him to paint)
 - 1938 Becomes caseworker for New York City Department of Social Services; rents
first studio on 125th Street; meets Stuart Davis
 - 1941 Exhibits in Mc Millen/Downtown Gallery group show
 - 1942 Painting appears in *Fortune* magazine
 - 1942-45 Serves in U. S. Army during World War II; first major solo exhibition at G
Place Gallery, Washington D.C.
 - 1950-51 Studies at the Sorbonne in Paris; meets James Baldwin, Constantin Brancusi,
Georges Braque, and Pablo Picasso
 - 1951-53 Returns to the United States; writes songs; suffers nervous breakdown
 - 1954 Marries Nanette Rohan; begins to paint again
 - 1963 Forms Spiral Group with Charles Alston and Hale Woodruff (stirred by the
Civil Rights Movement)
 - 1964 Creates *Projections* collages
 - 1965 Solo exhibition, Corcoran Gallery, Washington D.C.
 - 1971 Solo exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York City
"Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual"
 - 1980 Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina
Organized a 10-year retrospective, for which he returned to the acclaim of his
native city.
 - 1987 Awarded National Medal of Arts By President Ronald Reagan
 - 1988 Dies in New York City on March 12, at age 76
- Barbara Roberts, Docent 2006

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of Art, Washington D.C., www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/bio

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Driskell, Herb Jackson and Laura Grosch, and Jerald L. Melberg, Mint Museum of Art,
Charlotte, North Carolina, 2002

Romare Bearden Foundation: www.beardenfoundation.org/artlife/biography/biography