

Harlem Scene and Baggy Jeans:
Reflections of Jazz and Hip-Hop Music on Visual Art

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Scat, trumpets, pianos, brass instruments, wide-brimmed gangster hats lined with pinstripes, doo-wop, tap-dance, break-dance, rapping, street battles, 8-0-8's, baggy-pants, throw-back jerseys and hoodies; red versus blue all the way back to rhythm and blues. Each of these phrases can be used to exemplify the essence of African American society through a socio-musical culture. From the grand era of the Harlem Renaissance, the early 1920s through the '40s, all the way to today's Hip-Hop movement, the vibration of the bass drum along with the shrill tones of the brass trumpet have penetrated more than just the ears of listeners for decades.

Music as a medium in itself is undeniably influential. Much like the popular music of our day, 1920s jazz music had a tremendous impact on American culture and of course the visual arts. Musicians such as Duke Ellington and Fats Waller brought some of the most compelling, original sounds to the newly emerging scene of the Harlem Renaissance. Along with these great men of the music industry of that era, the artist Romare Bearden created works of visual art that embodied the language of "soul" through Afro-centric conventions.

Born in 1914 in Charlotte North Carolina, Romare Bearden used scenes from his young adulthood as inspiration for his profound paintings of the Southern black community and flamboyant representations of New York jazz life. Bearden ended up moving to Harlem, New York, "where blues-idiom music saturated the culture."¹ Through a collaboration of textile materials, vibrant colors, and photography arrayed and collaged across canvas and other supports, Bearden allows his audience to step into a single moment of the blues epoch of his prime.

¹ Graham Lock and David Murray, *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford Press 2009), 176.

During his thirties, after he completed his term with the United States Army during World War II, he began to exhibit his paintings and earnestly pursued art as a serious career. One of his earliest shows was at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC. In an interview with Barbara Lee Diamondstein he admitted, “I first majored in mathematics, and then I went to medical school. Kind of like Gauguin--not that I equate myself with that great master, but I mention him only to say that I started art late--I gave up medicine to go into painting.”²

In the painting *Autumn Lamp (Guitar Player)* (1983) traces of blues are readily identified. Aside from the more obvious indicators of jazz influence such as the guitar the figure in the collage is holding, there are other subtle details about this piece that might imply that Bearden drew from musical sources of the Harlem Renaissance. For instance, note the posture of the guitar player. He is not seated in perfect posture, rather he is comfortable, possibly reminiscing over the melodies of a familiar tune in the tranquility that only a cool autumn evening could bring. The positioning of his shoulders in reference to back of the chair recalls mannerisms spawned from Harlem’s night life, the jazz scene. Bearden made reference to such bodily gestures and their importance in an interview with David Murray.

Regardless of how good you might be at whatever else you did, you also had to get with the music. The clothes you wore, the way you talked (and I don’t mean just jive talk), the way you stood (we used to say stashed) when you were just hanging out, the way you drove an automobile, or even just sat in it, every thing you did was, you might say, geared to groove.³

Bearden’s use of such a rich color palette for his paintings can be linked to the high energy that jazz music contained and motivated in its players and their listeners. The bursts of

² Diamondstein, Barbra Lee, *Inside New York’s Art World* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications 1979), 28.

³ Graham Lock and David Murray, *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford Press 2009), 175-176.

dazzling reds, yellows, and greens seemingly randomly spread across the surface of paper and cloth can be compared to the way jazz musicians might create impromptu compositions. Even Bearden himself made a comparison between his art making processes and the haphazard, spontaneous style of jazz.

You put something down. Then you put something else with it, and then you see how that works...One thing leads to another, and you take the options as they come, or as you are able to perceive them...Once you get going, all sorts of things begin to open up. Sometimes something just falls into place, like piano keys that every now and then just seem to be right where your fingers happen to come down.⁴

Jazz music brought (and still does bring) style to American culture beyond music. One unquestionable aspect would be in the clothing fads it fostered.

Jazz players were great dressers whose autobiographies give considerable space to the hats, shoes, collars, vests, and coats (often with special linings), the diamond stick pins and other jewelry, and the hairstyles that went along with the reigning, in the clubs and theaters where they appeared...well-heeled Harlem audiences, whose members showed up not only to see but to be seen.⁵

The energy of jazz influence is yet evident in other pieces of Bearden's collection. In the famous painting *Carolina Shout* (1974), which happens to get its name from the jazz composition by James P. Johnson, Bearden effectively depicted the spirited themes of jazz customs. For instance, one may look upon his work and recognize that the smooth areas of saturated color appeal to the deep soothing tones of the saxophone, an instrument that often characterizes jazz music. Or one may simply compare the contrast created between the edges of two different collaged materials to the dissonant sounds of two notes arranged in a jazz selection. Other works of the artist that the influence of jazz resonate throughout include *Drum Chorus*

⁴ Graham Lock and David Murray, *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford Press 2009), 177.

⁵ Graham Lock and David Murray, *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford Press 2009), 176.

(1986) and *Jammin' at the Savoy* (1968). Facets of the jazz generation can be perceived through many other images of Bearden's work, highlighting the hype of music and the mingling lifestyles of north and south.

Moving to our current scene, we can see a similar engagement of the visual arts with hip-hop music through the paintings of contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley. Thirty-one year old Wiley is a Los Angeles native who began his career in the style of classical portraiture. Like Bearden, his muse developed within the urban society that thrived in the streets of Harlem, NY. Also like Bearden, Wiley has exhibited at the Mint Museum. Though Bearden's style in mixed-media collage differs from Wiley's photo-realistic taste in oils, both artists share the impact of original African American music on their work.

Wiley's work has attracted a range of critical tags from revolutionary to subversive. Partially this is due to his depictions of young black men in poses inspired from famous examples from high culture found in the traditions of white European art. His work has been said to glorify the urban black male by featuring him in a position of power and hierarchy. This is not only reflected through the body-language of the subject but also through the actual scale of the paintings. A typical painting may be larger than eight feet tall. According to David Greenberg,

By repopulating art-historical imagery with young black men, Kehinde Wiley has been infusing histrionic poses from the past with an edgy street dynamism for almost a decade now. The result of this conceptual project has been a kind of hip-hop baroque, where familiar and gaudy signposts of contemporary culture disrupt the social and political hierarchy inherent in much traditional portrait painting.⁶

⁶ Greenberg, David, "Kehinde Wiley Down at Deitch Projects." *Art in America*, no. 3 (March 2009): 134.

Although Wiley's style of painting and the positioning of his figures highly reference the old masters, his paintings are clearly hip-hop in subject and style.

As we have done previously in Bearden's work, let us examine the body language of his figure. In Wiley's *Portrait of Andries Stilte II*, a painting entitled after the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck. Wiley paints a black figure clad in a long white T-shirt, loose denim jeans with a Spurs decal on the front, and finished off with Timberland boots. Although we are aware that the pose was explicitly lifted from the original stance of Verspronck's model, there is still something about the upward tilt of the head that suggests additional implications.

It seems the posture of the model alludes to a confidence and perhaps arrogance through this slight gesture of the chin tilted upward. Does Wiley intentionally position his models this way as a means of communicating a social message about black men to his audience? Perhaps. In my opinion this gesture is an innate one among youthful black males absorbed in the hip-hop music industry that has become the major fuel of urban culture today.

In Bearden's days, to be laid-back and exhibit a nonchalant attitude was covered by the word "stashed." In today's hip-hop culture, the word "stashed" may be replaced by the term "swag", which is short for "swagger." It is indeed a slang term, hence sources for an accurate definition are limited, but according to *Dictionary.com*, a popular website fueled by Ask.com, the most appropriate definition for swagger is as follows:

Swagger:

1. to walk or conduct oneself in an insolent or arrogant air; strut

2. to brag; boast ⁷

Visual characteristics of swagger can be identified through exaggerated gestures of masculinity that are only too evident in hip-hop music. Although there is a masculine aura about the position of the subject's head, there is a subtle femininity in the gaze of the model. This may appear to be more evident in Wiley's painting, *The Prophet and the King*, after Rubens' seventeenth-century oil painting. Wiley explains in an interview with Emil Wilbekin regarding the "sensuality in the posturing and body-language"⁸ that "there is something very sexualized about it. Desire has a lot to do with that. For me raising a certain type of homoerotic gaze in my work is something that I thought would be really powerful not just for me, but being true to what great work has been driven by in the past."⁹

It is far too common for rappers to brag about the extent of their wealth through the lyrics of popular hip-hop beats. Whether the verse is about clothing, jewelry, or flat out bills of money, hip -hop culture, like that of the Harlem Renaissance, is a flashy one. These lyrics in turn reflect the style of clothing that is marketed to urban youth. In a rap song collaboration called, "Swagga Like Us," co-written by Dwane Carter (Lil Wayne) and Shawn Carter (Jay Z), Shawn Carter raps, "can't wear skinny jeans 'cause my knots don't fit, no one on the corner got a pocket like this, so I rock Roc jeans 'cause my knots so thick... you can learn how to dress just by

⁷ Dictionary.Com An Ask.Com Service. "Swagger Definition" Ask.Com.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/swagger>.

⁸ Joe Houston, B.K. Jackson, and Emil Wilbekin, Columbus (Ohio: Roberts and Tilton 2007), 21.

⁹ Joe Houston, B.K. Jackson, and Emil Wilbekin, Columbus (Ohio: Roberts and Tilton 2007), 21.

checkin' my fresh.”¹⁰ Clothing lines such as G-Unit and Roca Wear, to name a few, have been some of the leading brands in urban fashion to thrive off of the implications of such lyrics. In Wiley’s painting, *Portrait of a Venetian Ambassador* (2006), such urban styles are depicted along with other images from Wiley’s portfolio.

As much as it was Bearden’s agenda to fuse the cultures of the North and the South through sassy collages that celebrate black American music, it is also the agenda of Wiley to bridge the gap between contemporary urban black America and fine art. Hip-hop and jazz are fundamental devices used to bring recognition to a group of people who have for so long been deprived of any admirable representation throughout society, let alone the world of fine art and high culture. Yet, somehow as America’s historical timeline extends, there always seems to be room for the kind of transformation that is brought about through the art form of hip-hop and jazz.

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¹⁰ Metrolyrics, “Swagger Like Us” AOL Music, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/swagger-like-us-lyrics-lil-wayne.html> (accessed April 9 2009).

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