

“Something Over Something Else”: Romare Bearden’s Profile Series

Teacher Resource



“There’s some painting someplace that’s not in a museum and it’s our idea as a painter to put that one thing that is missing there.”

-Romare Bearden

About the Artist

Romare Bearden was born in Mecklenburg County (Charlotte, North Carolina) in September of 1911. A few years later, his family moved to Harlem, New York as a part of the Great Migration – a movement many African American families followed from the rural southern US to urban northern cities. Bearden lived in the center of the cultural boom during the Harlem Renaissance. Musicians and poets of the Harlem Renaissance such as Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes largely influenced Bearden's artistic inclinations. Although he lived in Harlem, he visited Mecklenburg County often throughout his childhood. Both places inspired his work for the rest of his life. Bearden graduated from New York University in 1935 with a degree in mathematics and education. His collages often reflect his mathematical background in his usage of geometric principles. In addition to his visual artistry, Bearden wrote poetry and composed jazz music. These subjects influenced his visual art as well through a means which he referred to as "visual improvisation." Bearden advocated for the work of African American artists throughout his career and continued to be one of the most prolific artists of the 20th century.

About the Exhibition

"Something Over Something Else": Romare Bearden's Profile Series chronicles the years of Romare Bearden's youth and young adulthood during the 1920's and 30's. The collection breaks the decades up into Profile Series 1 and 2. Bearden uses the artistic practice of collage to depict his memories from his life in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, Pittsburgh, and Harlem. The works feature his friends and members of the communities in a way that captures the way of life in these places. Profile 1 of the series focuses on his years spent staying with relatives in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina and the time he spent living with his grandparents in Pittsburgh in the 1920s. In Profile 2, he shares memories of his time in New York during the 1930s. Each collage is accompanied by an insightful caption written by Bearden to deepen the communication from each memory.

Vocabulary

- Profile: something that is seen or shown from the side, such as a side view of the face; an informal biography or description of a person's life
- Collage: the artistic process of gluing and assembling various materials to a surface
- Harlem Renaissance: a period during the 1920s when African American achievements in art, literature and music flourished
- Geometry: the part of mathematics that studies the size, shapes, positions, and dimensions of things
- Memory: something remembered from the past
- Urban: relating to a city
- Rural: relating to the countryside

Activities and Discussion Questions

Kindergarten – Grade 5

1. People and Places

- Romare Bearden used his art to represent moments of his childhood with his family and friends.
- Take a look at *School Bell Time*. Who do you think the people in the collage are? Where do you think the memory takes place?
- Do you have a favorite memory or story to tell? Describe the people you were with and what the place looks like.

2. Bold and Bright

- Romare Bearden also used strong shapes and bold colors to tell about his memories. What shapes and colors do you see in *School Bell Time*?
- If you were to make a work of art about your favorite memory, what shapes and colors would you use?
- Use a variety of colored pencils to sketch out your design. Talk to a partner about how the colors and shapes you chose relate to the people and place in your memory.

*Feel free to expand on this activity by creating individual collages with old magazines, construction paper, any other materials that best represent your story. Encourage students to present their work to the class.

Grades 6-8

1. Home Is Where the Heart Is

- In this exhibition, Romare Bearden's collages depict various places he lived in his youth.
- Compare the rural setting of *Liza in High Cotton* to *Midtown at Sunset*. Read the captions Bearden wrote about these two images. What does this say about how people make a living/work in rural vs. urban life? How does the imagery in the collage itself depict this?
- What sort of community do you currently live in? What do you think would be similar or different about living in another type of community?
- From looking at his work, how do you think Bearden feels about each of the places he depicts in his collages?

2. All that Jazz - "One of the things I did was listen to a lot of music. I'd take a sheet of paper and just make lines while I listened to records..."

- In addition to working as a visual artist, Romare Bearden was also a jazz musician and poet. Many of the same vocabulary words are used to describe music and visual art.
- What words do you know that apply to both music and visual art? Think of how pattern, tone, and texture apply to both.
- Listen to Duke Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing*. Sketch out what the music "looks like."
 - YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVOyJzzSo28>
- Do the same with Ella Fitzgerald's version of *It Don't Mean a Thing*. Compare and contrast your two drawings.
 - YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGesQyNTwlo>

For a longer activity:

- Make a Romare Bearden inspired collage. Think about the way he used geometric shapes in his works. Take notice of rectangles, triangles and circles.

- What do you think this collage would “sound like?” Does it have a fast or slow tempo? Does it change as you move through the collage? Is it loud or soft? What instruments would you use to play it? Does it have lyrics? Clap out the rhythm or tap the beat.

Grades 9-12

Add onto lesson plans from Grades 6-8:

Poetry in *Profile*:

- Use Bearden’s captions to inspire you. Write a short phrase, sentence or poem regarding the story you want to depict in your collage. Think about an important element from the story or a general theme or value you want to express. Make your collage with the words in mind. Alternatively, you could make your collage first then find the words after!

Additional Resources

Bearden Foundation: <https://beardenfoundation.org/>

Harlem Renaissance History: <http://www.american-historama.org/1913-1928-ww1-prohibition-era/harlem-renaissance.htm>

Harlem Renaissance Poetry: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance>

Smithsonian Bio & Collection: <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/romare-bearden-296>

Terms in Art & Music: <https://www.incredibleart.org/files/art-music.htm>