

ROMARE BEARDEN

Southern Recollections



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A TEACHER GUIDE

2 September 2011 – 8 January 2012

The Mint Museum

Mint

INTRODUCTION

Artist Romare Bearden created visual recollections of the South drawn from his memories, stories, and rituals passed from generation to generation. Bearden’s visual narratives offer literal and symbolic depictions of early 20th century Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, and the South.

This guide will help students understand:

- How Bearden used motifs or symbols in his work to communicate ideas and convey a sense of place.
- How Bearden used the medium of collage to convey character and place.
- How Bearden used art to make sense of his experiences in the South.
- Relevant NC Essential Standards and Common Core State Standards, with emphasis on **4th grade**, **5th grade**, **6th grade**, and **8th grade** Visual Arts and Language Arts:

VISUAL ARTS

ESSENTIAL STANDARD	CLARIFYING OBJECTIVES
<p>Visual Literacy</p> <p>V.1 Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.</p>	<p>4.V.1.3 Infer meaning from art.</p> <p>5.V.1.3 Classify works of art in terms of whether they are realistic, abstract, or non-objective.</p> <p>6.V.1.3 Identify artists' styles.</p>
<p>Contextual Relevancy</p> <p>CX.2 Understand the interdisciplinary connections and life applications of the visual arts.</p>	<p>4.CX.2.2 Apply skills and concepts learned in other disciplines, such as... language arts, social studies, and other arts, in the visual arts.</p> <p>5.CX.2.2 Exemplify how information and skills learned in art can be applied in other disciplines.</p> <p>6.CX.2.2 Understand the connections between art and other disciplines.</p>
<p>Critical Response</p> <p>CR.1 Use critical analysis to generate responses to a variety of prompts.</p>	<p>4.CR.1.1 Use visual clues to interpret the content of art.</p> <p>5.CR.1.1 Judge art through the application of art concepts and vocabulary.</p> <p>6.CR.1.1 Generate responses to art using personal preferences, prior knowledge, and relationship to self.</p> <p>8.CR.1.1 Use convincing and logical arguments to respond to art.</p>

LANGUAGE ARTS

GRADE	CORE COMMON STATE STANDARD
Reading Standards for Literature	
4	<p>Standard 1: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</p> <p>Standard 4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text.</p>
5	<p>Standard 1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</p> <p>Standard 4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.</p> <p>Standard 9: Compare and contrast stories in the same genre on their approaches to similar themes and topics.</p>
6	<p>Standard 1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</p> <p>Standard 4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.</p>
8	<p>Standard 1: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</p>
Reading Standards for Informational Text	
5	<p>Standard 5: Compare and contrast the overall structure of events, ideas, concepts, or information in two or more texts.</p>



Blaine Waller. *Bearden's studio on Canal Street, New York City, 23 October 1976 (detail)* © Blaine Waller, 1976

ROMARE BEARDEN (1911–1988)

- Romare Bearden was born in **Charlotte**, North Carolina, the Mecklenburg County seat, on September 2, 1911. Bearden was born into a middle-class African American family during a period of **segregation** that denied blacks equal access to public spaces, jobs, health care, education, and voting. As a result, many middle-class African American families from North Carolina cities and towns **migrated** to Northern urban areas.
- At age three, Romare moved with his family to the **Harlem** section of New York City. Bearden grew up in Harlem but made several trips back to Charlotte and surrounding rural areas of Mecklenburg County. His **memory** of these childhood experiences and reflections on African American cultural history became subject matter for many of his **collages**.
- During his visits to Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in the 1970s, Bearden observed significant **change** to the urban and rural **landscape**. Bearden responded to these changes in his artworks.
- Bearden wanted to make sense of his shared African American experience. He used his **imagination** to convey the people, places, and ideas he associated with the African American **South**.



The Train, 1974

Collage on paper, 15 ¼ x 19 ½ inches

Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina. Made possible through a Gift from Bank of America. 2002.68.2

Photography by David H. Ramsey

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OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION: *The Train*

What do you see? What's going on in the picture?

OBSERVATION STRATEGIES:

- Have students spend time looking carefully prior to discussion
- Have students pair and share what they notice with each other
- Selected pairs can share observations with the larger group
- Students can list, either alone or in pairs, at least ten things they notice in the work

SYMBOLS are images or objects that represent or communicate certain ideas. Artists use symbols to communicate ideas.

INTERPRETATION / INQUIRY-BASED QUESTIONS:

- What do you know about trains? (personal experience or things read or seen)
- What do you think Bearden intended by placing a train motif in his work?
- How might the bird and train motifs relate to each other? Bearden called trains and flying birds “journeying things.”

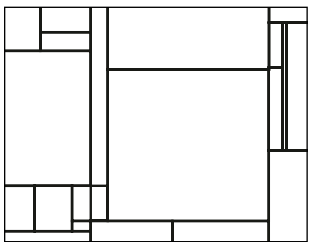
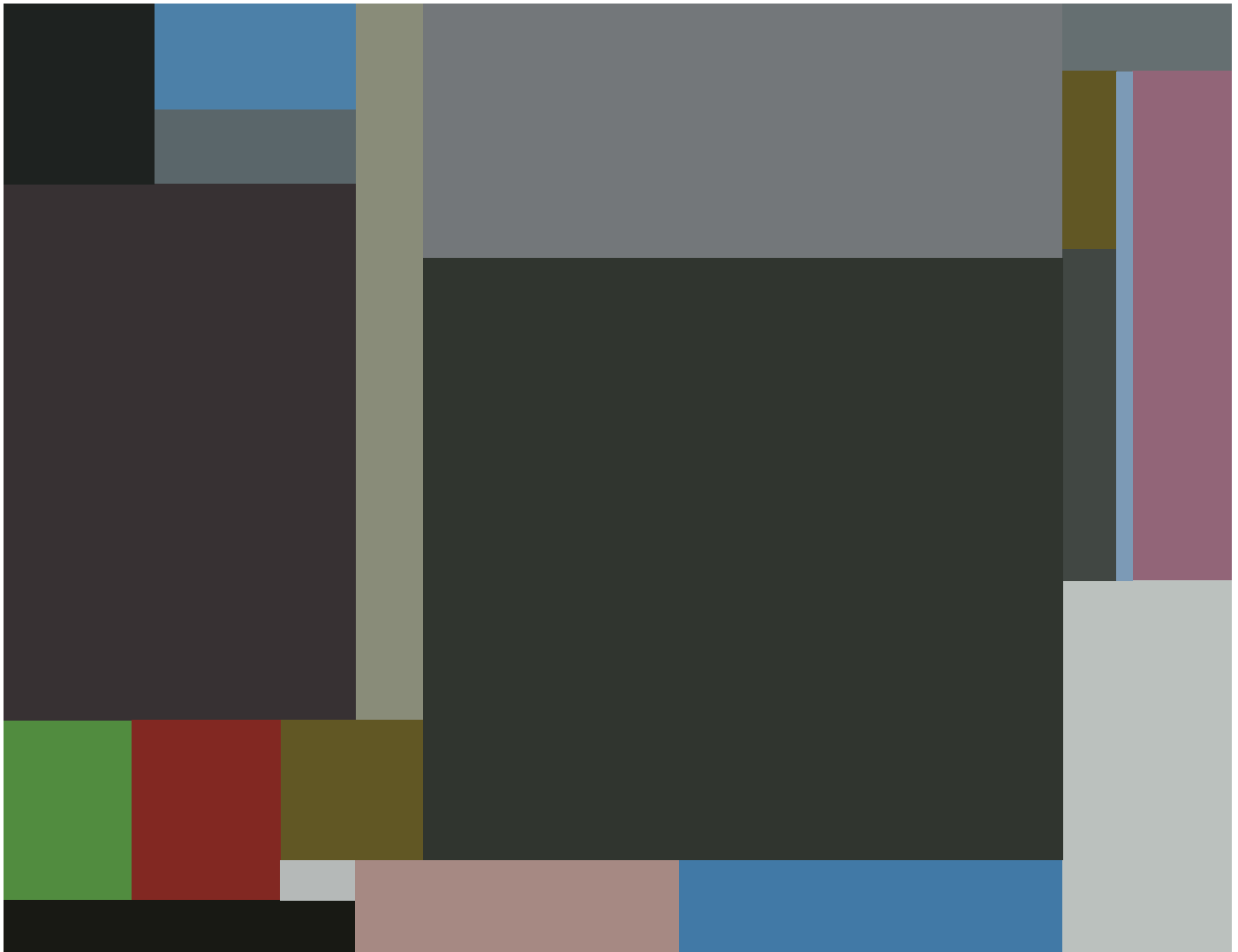
Bearden likely used images of a train to communicate contrasting ideas—the early 20th century African American Great Migration from the South to other parts of the United States, but also the daily intrusion of trains on the lives of blacks in the early 20th century segregated South. Charlotte was a major railway hub: the Piedmont and Northern, and the Southern Railway lines ran through the city. Train tracks were mere blocks from the Bearden family homes. Bearden remembered as a child watching trains move north from Charlotte. Bearden’s great-grandfather and father worked on the railroad, and they were separated from the family for extended periods.

- How do these symbols of migration and intrusion fit in with the rest of the painting?

In combination with symbols, artists convey ideas through particular details to suggest characters, mood, and setting. This combination creates a visual narrative that explores real or imagined experiences.

- How do you think the figures experience the train on a daily basis?
- What do you think the relationship is between the figures?
- Imagine what the woman in the center is thinking. What do you think happened right before? What do you think will happen next? How would you describe the mood of this collage (quiet, still, thoughtful, expectant)?
- Why do you think Bearden might have chosen to depict this particular setting?

The Train depicts multiple generations living together under one roof. The seemingly patched together walls, along with the solemn or weary facial expressions of the inhabitants, suggest a life of hardship and poverty.



Bearden began making collages using small boards typically about 8.5 x 11 inches. His compositions always began with geometric shapes as background:

"I first put down several rectangles of color some of which... are in the same ratio as... the rectangle [picture plane] that I'm working on."

Bearden used the design principles of unity and variety to arrange the rectilinear shapes. Repeated shapes help unify the composition and allow the viewer to experience the work as a whole. The variety of shapes, sizes, and colors hold the viewer's interest in the composition.



Bearden then arranged organic shapes, including figures, in the composition:

“I paste a photograph, say, anything to just get me started, maybe a head, at a few...places...I try to move up and across [the picture plane]. What I am trying to do then is establish a vertical and horizontal control of [the picture plane].”

Bearden intentionally and meaningfully used magazine photo fragments of heads and hands with flat-colored and textured papers to create disproportionate faces and figures in various settings.

- How do you think his artistic methods or style help convey his ideas about trains?
- Each face confronts the viewer: the youthful face in the center, unlike the flanking figures, does not have disproportionate elements; why do you think Bearden made this choice?



Of the Blues: Carolina Shout, 1974

Collage and acrylic and lacquer on board, 27 ½ x 51 inches

Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina. Museum Purchase: National Endowment for the Arts Matching Fund and Charlotte Debutante Club Fund. 1975.8

Photography by David H. Ramsey

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OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION: *Carolina Shout*

What do you see? What's going on in the picture?

OBSERVATION STRATEGIES:

- Have students spend time looking carefully prior to discussion
- Have students pair and share what they notice with each other
- Selected pairs can share observations with the larger group
- Students can list either alone or in pairs at least ten things they notice in the work

INTERPRETATION / INQUIRY-BASED QUESTIONS:

- Why do you think Bearden borrowed a song title for this work?
- How do you think a song may have inspired Bearden to create this scene?

***Carolina Shout* depicts a baptism—an important religious event in rural southern life. Bearden would often listen to jazz or blues music when he worked. He named *Carolina Shout* after the title of a famous Harlem piano jazz composition by musician James P. Johnson.**

- How does he convey connections between a baptism and jazz music in the use of elements and principles of design in the work?
- How might this scene compare to a scene at a concert or dance hall?
- How is this connection conveyed in the way the figures are portrayed?

Bearden used color in specific ways: a background rectangle of warm pinkish red contrasts with the cool blacks of the foreground figures to indicate spatial depth and distance. The warm red also creates a mood—the excitement and passion within the celebration. Bearden contrasts this mood with the figures overlapping the blue-green water; they tend to recede from the viewer and suggest a calm or subdued mood.

The figure wearing a collar, left of center in the composition, represents a preacher. The figure directly opposite him holds a smaller figure who may be a child. The preacher is performing a baptism and pours water over the smaller figure's head. The other people may be family members who are celebrating the baptism or participating in the baptism rites.



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OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION: *Carolina Shout* continued...

Blues and jazz music evoked religious Southern experiences and Bearden's Harlem experiences in the jazz music clubs and dance halls. Linking the title of the collage with a religious event, Bearden made connections between both gospel church music and the jazz music that derived from it.

Bearden was interested in his African-American heritage. African masks and sculpture often inspired the figures and the faces in his settings. Characteristics of African art include an emphasis on and a simplification of the face. For instance, the torso, legs, feet, and hands are less detailed, and special emphasis is given to the head, which is believed to be the most spiritual part of the body. Such facial features as the eyes, lips, and nose are simplified, exaggerated, and are created by using geometric (squares, triangles, squares) shapes.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY:

1. Listen to Johnson's musical composition, *Carolina Shout*.
2. Create a word bank in reaction to the musical composition. List at least ten words—adverbs, adjectives, and verbs—that describe a sensory reaction and feeling about the work.
3. Next, view Bearden's *Carolina Shout* and again create a word bank.
4. Look for overlaps between the two word banks.
5. Select several words that can serve as inspiration for creation of individual collages.
6. Students can use photocopies of hands and faces from their own photographs as subject matter.
7. Using the concept of memory and their word bank words, students can borrow Bearden's use of horizontal and vertical planes of color, and his compositional focus on hands and faces, to create their own memory collages.
8. Through written reflections, students can connect their observations and selected words to their own creative product.



Watching the Good Trains Go By, 1964

Collage of various papers on cardboard, 13 3/4 x 16 7/8 inches
Collection of Phillip J. and Suzanne Schiller American Social Commentary Art 1930-1970. Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio
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OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION: *The Train* and *Watching the Good Trains Go By*

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY:

Compare and contrast *The Train* and *Watching the Good Trains Go By*: Use a Venn diagram to help identify similarities and differences between the two collages. Using these Venn diagrams as prompts, have students respond to these looking questions:



- Think about Bearden's use of color in each work: how is it used to create depth and mood?
- Think about characters and place in each work: how does each convey a narrative about African American life in the South?
- How does Bearden use his compositional techniques in each work?

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