

**Romare Bearden: Collage****Pre- and Post-Visit Activities:  
Romare Bearden Collage****Overview:**

These activities, which support the Staten Island Museum's lesson "Romare Bearden Collage," introduce students to the life of African-American artist Romare Bearden.

**Background Information for Educators:**

Romare Bearden was born in 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Mecklenburg County, where he spent the first three years of his life and where he repeatedly visited until his grandmother's death in 1925.

By 1920, the Bearden family had moved to Harlem, New York. After graduating from New York University in 1935, Bearden attended the Art Students League where he studied with the German artist, George Grosz, who was known for his political satire. Grosz's work introduced Bearden to the social function of art and encouraged him to develop a social commentary about the African-American experience. Bearden worked with a variety of media including: watercolors, oils, screen-prints, lithographs, ink and pencil drawings and collage.

The 1920s marked the birth of the Harlem Renaissance. Bearden loved the pulse of Harlem and the sounds of Jazz music. In 1942 he enlisted in the all-black 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 372<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division of the United States Army. Between 1942 and 1945 he was represented by the Samuel Kootz Gallery. In 1950 he studied in Paris and became acquainted with the author James Baldwin.

During the 1930s, he painted with tempera on brown paper and portrayed figurative scenes of urban life. In the 1940s, he produced work in the social realist style that explored the black experience. By 1950, he was working with oils. The 1960s witnessed a complete capitulation to collage and marked the beginning of three decades of creativity and public recognition.

**Vocabulary:**

- Abstraction Expressionism - art that originated in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. This type of art does not attempt to represent external reality, but seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colors, and textures while conveying attitude and emotion
- Collage - a type of art work in which different kinds of materials are pasted onto a surface to make a picture. These materials can be anything from paper and photographs, to cloth and buttons.
- Cubism - an early twentieth-century movement in painting and sculpture in which objects were represented abstractly by geometrical forms.
- Improvisation - inventing, or making up things as you go along, the strong basis of Jazz music.
- Lithography - the art or process of printing using a smooth stone or metal plate treated so that only the areas meant to print will absorb and transfer ink.
- Memories - things and impressions recalled from the past.
- Modernism - artistic production associated with a movement in art that began in the late 19th century and continued through the late 20th century, during which period an interest in realism

**Romare Bearden: Collage**

and the use of traditional materials diminished and an interest in abstraction and experimentation with materials flourished.

- Photomontage - the technique of making a photographic composition by combining parts or elements of more than one photograph, often with the addition of other graphic material.
- Print - a copy that is made by transferring ink onto a surface through mechanical pressure.
- Printmaking - the art or procedure of making prints.

**Before Your Visit:**

*Grades Pre-K - 5:*

Using Romare Bearden's "The Piano Lesson," students will complete an "I think, I feel, I wonder" graphic organizer (below).

*Grades 6-12:*

Students will read the *New York Times* article "Romare Bearden, Collagist and Painter, Dies at 75" about the life and death of artist Romare Bearden. After reading the article, students will answer in the writing task (Located at the END of this post).

**After Your Visit:**

After your students have completed their own collage at the Staten Island Museum, post either quote:

"What better medium than collage to express the accumulation of memories?" - Art critic about one of Bearden's collage series.

Or

"My purpose is to paint the life of my people as I know it." - Romare Bearden

Ask students if they agree with the quote. Why or why not? Post the image of Bearden's "The Piano Lesson" for students to recall his work.



Romare Bearden, "The Piano Lesson." (1984).

**Romare Bearden: Collage**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

<b>I feel</b>	<b>I think</b>	<b>I wonder</b>

**Romare Bearden: Collage**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

After reading the *New York Times* article "Romare Bearden, Collagist and Painter, Dies at 75," answer the following questions in full sentences.

1. When and how did Romare Bearden die?

2. When and where was Bearden born?

3. List some of the various media Bearden used in his art.

4. Explain what was special about Bearden's art.

5. What other talents did Bearden have?

## Romare Bearden: Collage

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

After reading the *New York Times* article "Romare Bearden, Collagist and Painter, Dies at 75," answer the following questions in full sentences.

1. When and how did Romare Bearden die?

Romare Bearden died on Saturday, March 12, 1988 of bone cancer.

2. When and where was Bearden born?

Romare Bearden was born September 2, 1911 in Charlotte, NC.

3. List some of the various media Bearden used in his art.

Bearden used collage, tapestries, oil on paper, prints, drawing, etc.

4. Explain what was special about Bearden's art.

Varies.

5. What other talents did Bearden have?

Bearden's other talents include writing songs and playing baseball (in college).

**Romare Bearden: Collage****Romare Bearden, Collagist and Painter, Dies at 75****By C. Gerald Fraser**

March 13, 1988

Credit...The New York Times Archives, See the article in its original context from March 13, 1988, Section 1, Page 36

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Romare Bearden, a painter who artistically manipulated pieces of photographs and colored paper and became the nation's foremost collagist, died Saturday after suffering a stroke in New York Hospital. He was 75 years old and lived in lower Manhattan and St. Martin.

He had been ill with bone cancer for a year and a half.

Romare Howard Bearden was one of America's pre-eminent artists. Success, in the form of artistic recognition and financial reward, came early and, subsequently, the art establishment chose him as its favorite black artist and gave him influence and power, which he used to help younger artists.

President Carter honored Mr. Bearden and nine other visual artists in 1980 and President Reagan awarded him the National Medal of Arts in 1987. His works are in the collections of every major museum in New York City as well as more than a dozen across the country. He was a member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters and was on the board of the New York State Council of the Arts. Raised the Medium of Collage

June Kelly, his manager, said a mural by Mr. Bearden would be unveiled later this year at the Social Security Administration office in Jamaica, Queens.

In the catalogue for a 1986 show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, "Romare Bearden: Origins and Progressions," Lowery S. Sims of the Metropolitan Museum wrote: "Romare Bearden has gained prominence in the last two decades through his artistic achievements as a collagist. He has raised the medium of collage to a mode of expression so intensely personal that it is difficult to think of another artist so closely associated with it."

Arne Ekstrom, of the Cordier and Ekstrom Gallery in Manhattan, said Mr. Bearden was the first artist exhibited when the gallery opened in 1960. Mr. Ekstrom called Mr. Bearden "the pictorial historian of the black world, especially in the South" and he said Mr. Bearden put his "childhood and his whole life" in his artworks.

Mr. Bearden began, according to Ms. Sims, as a "cubist in the strict sense of the word, breaking forms, using color to complement rather than to describe the forms."

**Romare Bearden: Collage**

"In the mid- to early 1930's, when he was studying with George Grosz at the Art Students League, his work was more figurative," she said. "But he had an acute sense of the underlying abstractness."

By the 1960's, Romare Bearden was one of two black artists who regularly showed their work in the increasing number of art galleries in New York City. The other was Jacob Lawrence.

Mr. Bearden was born on Sept. 2, 1912, in Charlotte, N.C., to Howard and Bessye J. Bearden. He grew up in Harlem and in Pittsburgh.

His exhibitions started in 1940. A Harlem wood craftsman, Ad Bates, gave him what he called, "my very first" one-man exhibition in his workshop. Later, Caresse Crosby came across Bearden paintings when she was putting together a show of black artists in 1943 in Washington. Mrs. Crosby and her husband, Harry, had lived abroad and had published expatriate writers, including Ernest Hemingway and Kay Boyle, and they introduced Salvador Dali to America. First Downtown Exhibition

In 1945, after Mr. Bearden was discharged from the Army, Mrs. Crosby introduced him to Samuel Kootz, an art dealer who represented Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell and other early abstract expressionists. That year, Mr. Kootz brought Mr. Bearden to Madison Avenue for his first one-man show downtown. Mr. Bearden had, in all, three solo exhibitions that year.

Mr. Bearden's prominence drew younger artists to him, and he willingly accepted the role of mentor. In the late 1960's, responding to young artists' needs for exhibition spaces, he, Norman Lewis and Ernest Crichlow founded the Cinque Gallery, which has since given hundreds of young artists their first exhibitions. He said he hoped to provide a starting push to good, younger artists "before they are engulfed, before life takes over."

A gregarious man, Mr. Bearden was frequently involved in projects with other artists. He organized the Harlem exhibition, "Art of the American Negro," in 1966. And a year later he and Carroll Greene, an art collector, organized the landmark show in the Great Hall of City College, "The Evolution of Afro-American Artists: 1800-1950," a display of 150 works by 50 artists.

In 1963 he helped found the Spiral Group. The membership included Mr. Alston, Mr. Lewis, Merton Simpson, Emma Amos, Al Hollingsworth and Hale Woodruff. Mr. Woodruff gave the group its name; the spiral meant up and out for black artists.

It was the Spiral Group that gave rise to Mr. Bearden's interest in collage. He thought of a collage as a work in which all the artists could take part. He cut pictures out of magazines and brought the pictures to a group meeting but no one was interested. However, he began to experiment with bits of photographs and colored paper and, in essence, never stopped.

However, he did not make collages exclusively. For his 1981 retrospective exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the catalogue noted that from 1970 to 1980, Mr. Bearden made 342 collages, 128 oils on paper, 24 drawings, 25 prints, 5 tapestries, 4 murals and mosaics and illustrations for film and theater, magazine covers, book jackets, banners and quilts. He also created one of his larger works, "The Block," a piece that is 48 inches high and 216 inches long and owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"I wasn't an abstract expressionist or a pop artist," he once said in an interview. "I believe that it was because I had something unique to say about the life that I knew best. I took an art form that was



**Romare Bearden: Collage**

different. What I had to say took a little different form than most of the paintings around; I used the collage. Especially in some of the earlier collages that I did, I chose some of the photographic materials for a certain reason. I wanted to give an immediacy, like a documentary movie."

Although black life and culture are an integral part of much of his work, he never considered his creations "black art." He said: "Except for the American Indian, everybody who came here or was brought here becomes, starting with the second generation, four things: Part Anglo-Saxon, part Indian, part frontiersman and part black. These are the roots that form American culture. I knew a lot of painters, abstract expressionists, who used to paint to jazz music. They even called it action painting. It wasn't done in Europe. Everything is American that comes out of America."

Despite his early and continued success, Mr. Bearden lived modestly in a fifth-floor walkup on Canal Street, having moved into his loft when the location was neither SoHo nor TriBeCa nor fashionable. Mr. Bearden's other home was in St. Martin, the Caribbean birthplace of his wife, Nanette.

A multitalented man, Mr. Bearden tried his hand at songwriting and baseball. Twenty Bearden compositions were recorded, including "Seabreeze," by Billy Eckstine and Oscar Pettiford. In college at Boston University, where he spent two years before transferring to New York University, he was a pitcher on the varsity baseball team.

He also pitched summers for the Boston Tigers, an all-black team. He was told that because he was light-complexioned enough to pass for white he could play in the major leagues. (Elton Fax, in his book, "Seventeen Black Artists," described Mr. Bearden as "black by choice.") In college, he majored in mathematics, preparing for medical school to fulfill his mother's hopes that he become a doctor. He started drawing in college, made cartoons for the Afro-American, a black weekly newspaper, and the attraction of art triumphed. Mr. Bearden is survived by his wife. A memorial service will be held at a later date.

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