

Notes on Romare Bearden (1911-1988)

Julie Fogarty, January 2008

Classroom tie in – Black History Month

Romare Bearden Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pinturicchio and Benin), 1977, collage

Bearden was born in North Carolina, and moved with his family to Harlem as a child. He grew up in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, where family friends included Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson. His family was middle class. He earned a mathematics degree from NYU and then began to study art with the Art Students League, with interruptions for time spent as a professional baseball player in the Negro League. He was offered the chance to play major league baseball if he agreed to “pass” as white, but he refused. He wrote popular jazz compositions, at least one of which (“Sea Breeze”) is considered a jazz classic. It was recorded by Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie.

An early influence was Diego Rivera. His early work was typically set in the American rural South. He served in the Army during WWII and afterward studied philosophy at the Sorbonne on the GI Bill. He organized artists in support of the Civil Rights Movement. This group was known as “Spiral” and its symbol was the cross section of a nautilus shell – representing moving outward and upward. He is best known for his collages, but he worked in oils and pastels and also worked as a political cartoonist. He also wrote books, including a book on African-American artists.

His early collages included newspaper and magazine clippings. They were busy and often reflected city life. He was influenced by cubism at this time. Later his collages became more streamlined, like the work we are looking at.

The word collage comes from the French word meaning “to glue”. It is a work of art made by sticking pieces of paper, fabric, newsprint or pictures to a flat background.

Later in life he spent time in the Caribbean and focused on watercolors and landscapes.

Much of his work has a “jazzy” feel to it.

This piece is part of a 20 piece series on the theme of Odysseus. The composition is based on an Italian fresco, but he made the characters Black and

in profile, based on art from the ancient African Benin culture, emphasizing the universality of the theme.

This work depicts the climax of The Odyssey, Homer's epic poem. King Odysseus was a hero of the Trojan War. It took him 20 years to return to his home. It took so long because the god Poseidon was angry with Odysseus. While he was away, his wife Penelope endures numerous suitors. To ward them off, she tells them that she will marry one of the suitors when she finishes weaving a shroud. Every day she weaves, but at night she unravels her work. Just as the suitors discover this deception, Odysseus sails home, kills the suitors, reunites with Penelope and rules Ithaca once again.

Examine the composition:

- Compare to Pinturicchio's fresco – see copy in folder. Composition is almost identical. Pinturicchio's work is called "The Return of Ulysses" (Ulysses is the Roman name for Odysseus).
- Penelope is at the left, working at her loom
- The central male figure is her son, Telemachus, who has brought back his father (Odysseus) who is barely visible and disguised as a beggar. He can be seen entering the doorway at the upper right with his right arm raised. The other men are the suitors.
- Odysseus' ship can be seen in the window.

This work can be seen at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Glenview Public Library has a 30 minute video on Bearden that I watched as background. I also used a book from the Glenview Public Library – Romare Bearden, His Life and Art (Oversize section, 709.2 - to show other examples of Bearden's work.