

Romare Bearden

Artist (1911 – 1988)



Photograph by Marvin E. Newman



A block of four stamps honoring Bearden goes on sale in September 2011. An earlier stamp, issued in 2005 as part of a Civil Rights Movement series, also used a Bearden painting.

Romare Bearden was called by *Time* magazine “one of the finest collagists of the 20th century and the most distinguished black visual artist America has so far produced.” He was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and grew up in a middle-class African-American family; his parents Bessye and Howard were both college-educated. When Bearden was three, the family moved north and settled in Harlem. His mother became the New York editor of the *Chicago Defender*, a widely read African-American weekly newspaper, and became a prominent social and political figure in Harlem as well. Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, and other well-known artists, writers, and musicians were frequent visitors to the Bearden family home.

Throughout his New York childhood, Bearden spent time in North Carolina and Pittsburgh. His memory of these experiences, as well as African-American cultural history, would become the subjects of many of his works. In a 1967 interview, Bearden said, “My subject is people. They just happen to turn out to be Negro.”

In 1935, Bearden graduated from New York University with a degree in education and took night classes led by German artist George Grosz at the Art Students League. From 1942 to 1945 Bearden served in the U.S. Army. In 1950, supported by the GI Bill, he traveled to Paris and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne.

Bearden had a life-long interest in music and co-wrote the hit song *Sea Breeze*, which was recorded by Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie. In 1954, he married Nanette Rohan, a 27-year-old dancer and model, who started her own dance company. The couple eventually created the Bearden Foundation to assist young artists.

Bearden wrote several scholarly books, including *A Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting* with the painter Carl Holty (1969), and *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* with journalist Harry Henderson and published posthumously (1993). In June 1987, President Ronald Regan awarded Bearden the National Medal of Arts at the White House. When he died of bone cancer, *The New York Times* called Bearden “one of America’s pre-eminent artists” and “the nation’s foremost collagist.”

Bearden was a member of the Century during the last decade of his life, having been proposed for membership by sculptor SIDNEY SIMON and artist MERVIN JULES.