

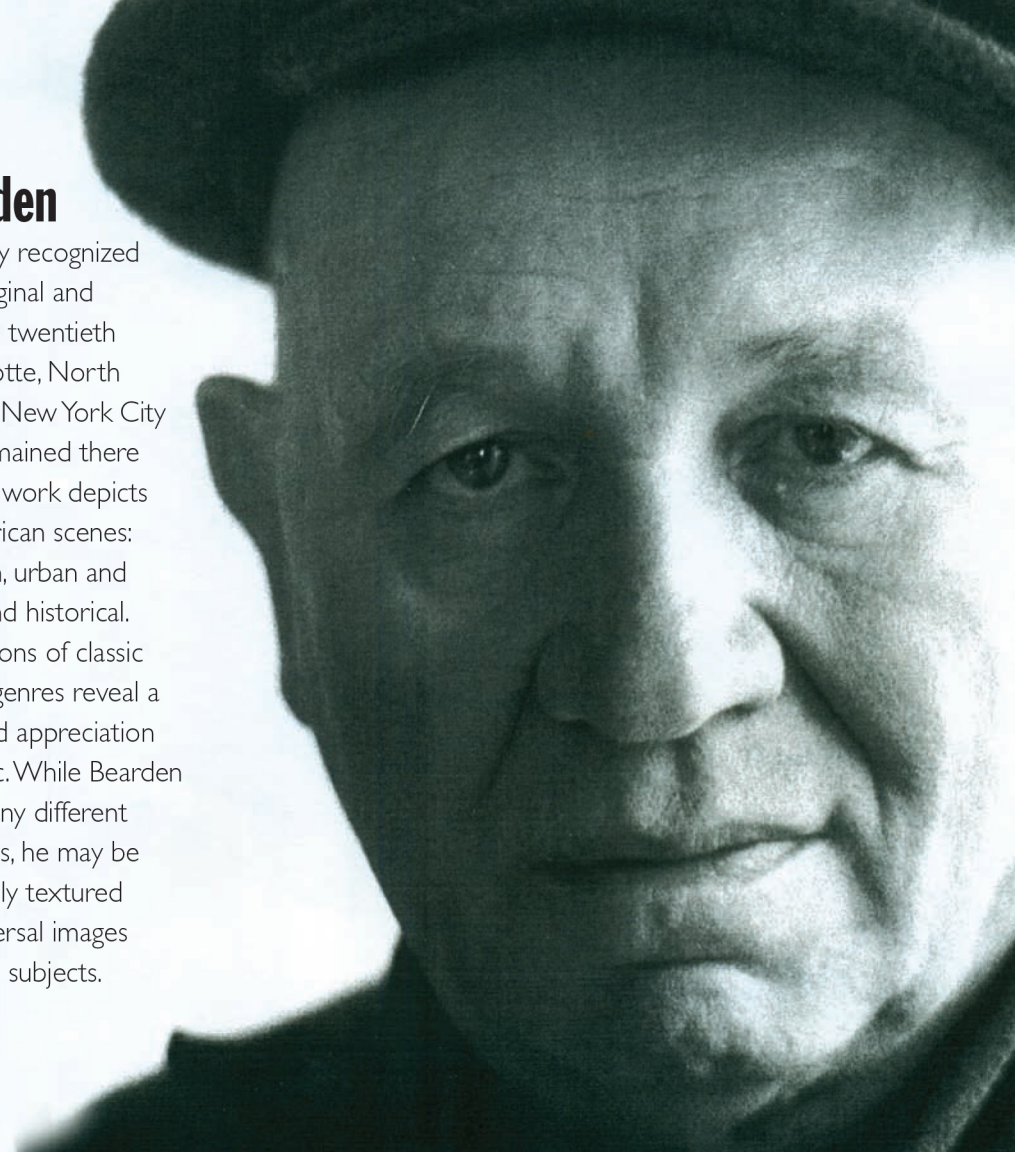
Romare Bearden
A BLACK
ODYSSEY


Smithsonian


STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION

Romare Bearden

(1911 – 1988) is widely recognized as one of the most original and significant artists of the twentieth century. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, he moved to New York City at a young age, and remained there for most of his life. His work depicts a wide variety of American scenes: northern and southern, urban and rural, contemporary and historical. His masterful explorations of classic narratives and artistic genres reveal a deep knowledge of and appreciation for literature and music. While Bearden experimented with many different media and artistic styles, he may be best known for his richly textured collages depicting universal images using African American subjects.



...ALL OF US, from the time we begin to think, are on an ODYSSEY.

— Romare Bearden

Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey

is organized by the Smithsonian Institution
Traveling Exhibition Service in cooperation with
the Romare Bearden Foundation
and Estate and DC Moore Gallery.

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resources are supported by a grant
from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

Find curriculum materials, exhibition video
and audio tour, and other resources at
sites.si.edu/romarebearden.

Battle with Cicones, 1977, collage.

Currier Museum of Art,
Manchester, New Hampshire.
The Henry Melville Fuller
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Circe, 1977, collage.

Courtesy Estate of Nanette Bearden
and DC Moore Gallery, New York

Home to Ithaca (detail), 1977, collage.

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum,
South Hadley, Massachusetts.
Gift of the estate of
Eileen Paradis Barber (Class of 1929)



In 1977, Romare Bearden created a cycle of collages and watercolors based on Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* — an ancient Greek work considered a foundation of Western literature. Filled with battles, struggle, exploration, temptations, loss, sacrifice, and triumph, the story recounts the hero Odysseus's ten-year journey back home to Ithaca after the fall of Troy. The *Odysseus* collages came decades after his first Homeric series called "*The Iliad: 16 Variations by Romare Bearden*," shown in the fall of 1948. Bearden's interpretations bridge classical mythology and African American culture, and move us as universal human tales — about a son's longing for a missing father; a wife's dealings with men who try to take her husband's place, a traveling man's efforts to resist the wiles of goddesses and witches, the greed and hunger of a mass of men, and, most importantly, the search for home.

Sing in me, Muse, and
through me tell the story

**of that man skilled in
all ways of contending,
the WANDERER, harried
for years on end . . .**

— opening lines of Homer's *Odyssey*

The Cyclops, 1977, collage.
Courtesy David and Susan Goode





Bearden and Homer

Bearden's paintings do not serve as illustrations to Homer's words; rather, his projects are collaborative. He brings his own artistic vision to bear so that his new works shed light on ancient ones. As a modernist interested in ambiguity and paradox, he delights in turning some of Homer's episodes completely around. For example, in *Battle with Cicones*, Bearden shows sympathy for the Cicones, an island people invaded by Odysseus's men, and dresses them in garments that reflect Native American culture. He dramatically revises the tale of *The Cyclops* by presenting Homer's mythical monster as a baby with flailing arms — perhaps one that should have been left alone. Bearden's unique collages, with their boldly colored, flat, overlapping rectangles, reveal a multiplicity of new ways of seeing.



Circe Turns a Companion of Odysseus into a Swine (detail), 1977, collage.

Courtesy Estate of Nanette Bearden and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

**You sing
on the canvas.**

**You IMPROVISE — you find
the rhythm and catch it good,
and structure as you go along —
then THE SONG is you.**

— Romare Bearden



Bearden and the Universal

Bearden saw Harlem in Homer's *Odyssey*, and Odysseus in Harlem. Behind the faces of Homer's Greek characters, in the figures of Odysseus, Penelope, Circe, Nausicaa, and others, Bearden detects a blues-like heroism — a stubborn optimism in the face of disarray. To stress the true universality of the ancient epic, he makes all of his Homeric figures black: gods, mortals, heroes, and villains. His *Poseidon*, Odysseus's scowling nemesis, is a powerhouse African masked god. Yet he is also a culturally collaged figure, black in skin color but a man of many parts. Throughout this series, which showcases Bearden's virtuoso scissor work, his cut-out shapes convey the layering of ideas, myths, and history at the core of his art. These collages could only have been done by the omni-cultural Bearden. As an artist he referred to everything from Egyptian and Benin art, to figures on ancient Greek urns, to Matisse and Picasso, to the complex tones and textures of the blues.

We are ALL, as moderns,
travelers through
uncertain seas,
STRUGGLING TO MAINTAIN
our families and ourselves, searching
for a pathway home.

— Robert O'Meally, Curator

The Sea Nymph, 1977, collage.
Courtesy Glen and Lynn Tobias





**Poseidon, The Sea God
— Enemy of Odysseus, 1977, collage.**

Courtesy The Thompson Collection,
Indianapolis, Indiana

...**what I** have tried
to do in my collages is
bring the Afro American
experience into art and
**GIVE IT A
UNIVERSAL
DIMENSION.**

— Romare Bearden

**Odysseus Leaves Nausicaa,
1977, collage.**

Courtesy Estate of Nanette Bearden and
DC Moore Gallery, New York

The Search for Home

Bearden's *Odysseus* series presents the hero as a daringly game improviser who relies on his wits to escape the clutches of those who would keep him from making it back home. Through these works, we see that Bearden himself was a pathfinder; a pioneer; and an improviser. It may be that his search for home — the central theme of much of Bearden's art — is not for a physical place at all but a dreamscape, a magic garden of the mind. More than Homer, Bearden represented a cosmopolitan improviser's stance toward life, an attitude of resiliency and cooperation such that whether in a land as strange as that patrolled by the Cyclops, or in one as dangerous as our own, man is able to not just survive but to find the way back home. The artist's most enduring message: Whether in Greece or Harlem, do as the Greeks and Harlemites do — improvise.



House in Cotton Field, 1968, collage.

Courtesy The Romare Bearden Foundation
and Estate of Nanette Bearden and
DC Moore Gallery, New York

**Where shall a man
find sweetness
to surpass his own home and his parents ?**

**In far lands he shall not,
though he find
a house of gold.**

— Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*