

# Beardenmania!

BY GAIL GREGG

Exhibitions, concerts,  
artists' tributes,  
and even a postage  
stamp are part of  
the centennial  
tribute honoring  
Romare Bearden



**ABOVE** Bearden in his Canal Street studio, 1976. **OPPOSITE** *Come Sunday*, 1976, lithograph, in "From Process to Print," organized by the Bearden Foundation.



**THE SIGHT WAS A CURATOR'S** dream. Carla Hanzal, curator of contemporary art at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, looked in at her exhibition "Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections" on closing day to find the show packed. "It was down-

right emotional to see so many

people in the galleries," she remembers. But although the show was closing in Charlotte, Bearden's hometown, it was just beginning a tour that would take it to Tampa, Florida; and Newark, New Jersey, where it will be on view through August 19. And it was only the first of hundreds of exhibitions, programs, and performances organized to celebrate the centennial of Bearden's birth.

"It's uniquely imaginative," said Robert O'Meally, Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and director of the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University in New York, of the nationwide celebration of Bearden and his legacy.

It's the party of a century—a fitting tribute to an artist known for his generosity, his gregarious nature, and his engagement with his times.

"He was an extrovert," said June Kelly, the New York dealer who was Bearden's manager until he died, in 1988. "Being around people fueled him with ideas and perceptions and imagery."

Johanne Bryant-Reid and Diedra Harris-Kelley, co-directors of the Romare Bearden Foundation in New York, established by the Bearden estate in 1990 to preserve and perpetuate the artist's legacy, created the template for the centennial tribute. In 2003, when "The Art of Romare Bearden," organized by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., opened at the Whitney Museum in New York, the two contacted other New York institutions, asking if they would consider organizing mini-exhibitions or programs in conjunction with the show. "So we thought in a similar model, but on a much larger scale," said Harris-Kelley of the current activities.

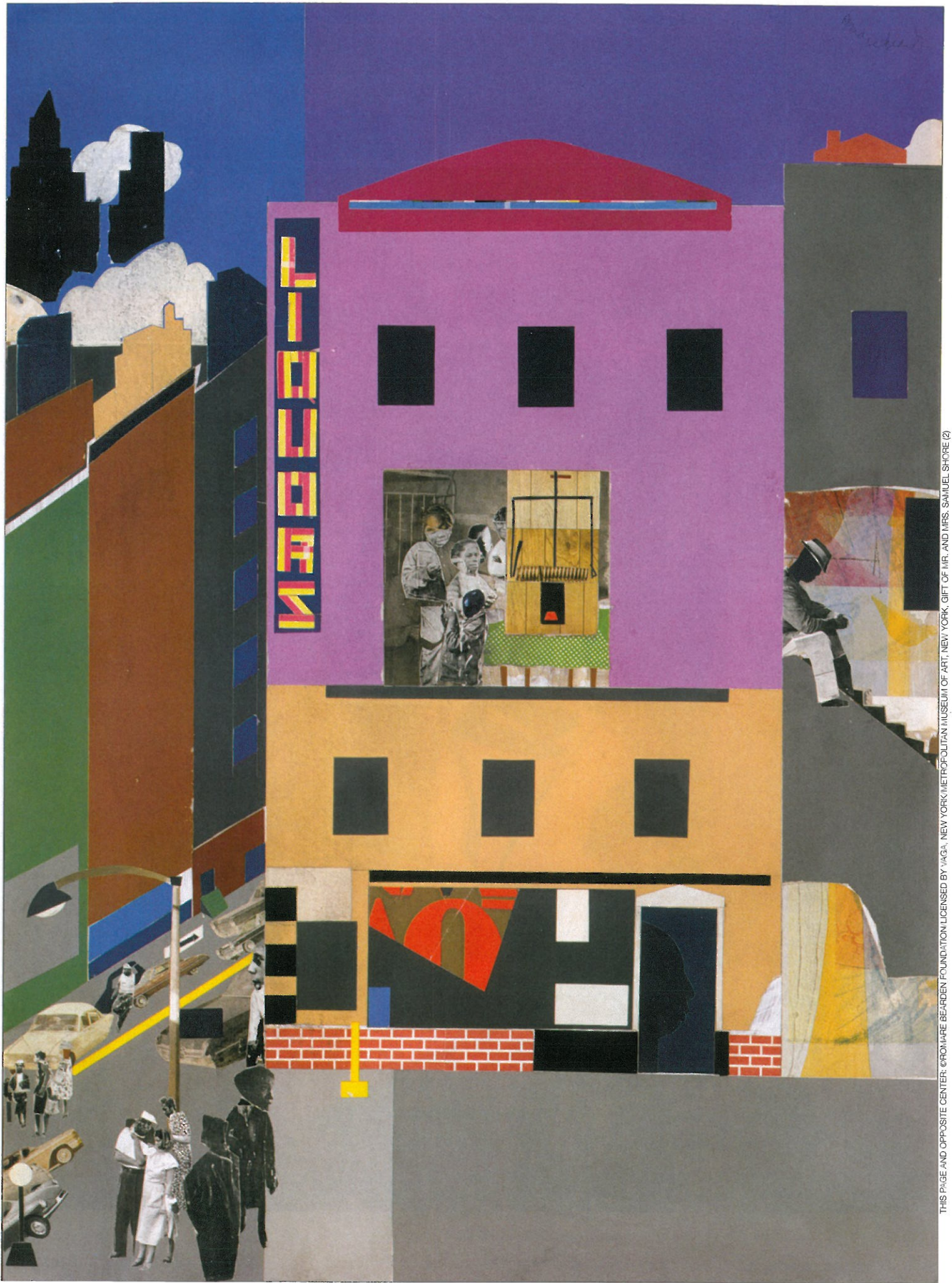
Since 2003, hundreds of thousands of Americans have enjoyed Bearden's work in galleries or museums, packed concerts at which his jazz songs were performed, watched dancers interpret his narratives, and attended symposia about his life and times. In conjunction with the Mint Museum show, live musicians dressed as characters from Bearden's collages performed on local train platforms and in front of an exhibition billboard, as if they had stepped right out of his work.

*Gail Gregg is an artist and writer based in New York City.*











Last year the United States Postal Service launched the festivities by issuing a series of “Forever” stamps based on four of Bearden’s collages. New York’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture mounted a retrospective that included both his first collage and his last painting. The Metropolitan Museum of Art hung his masterpiece *The Block* at the entrance to its contemporary galleries. And dozens of museums across the country pulled Bearden works from storage and put them on view.

#### AT THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM, CURATORS HONORED

Bearden by inviting 100 contemporary artists to make new work inspired by him. The museum, which Bearden helped found in the late ’60s, staged the show in three segments; the final group of pictures is on view through September 2. “I don’t think anybody who was asked refused,” said artist Charles Gaines, who created *String Theory: Romare Bearden* (2011) for the exhibition.

In November, the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University organized “Color and Construction: The Intimate Vision of Romare Bearden” and assembled a panel of Bearden experts to discuss the artist’s legacy. Last summer, the



**Musicians dressed as characters from Bearden’s collages performed under a Mint Museum billboard advertising his exhibition.**

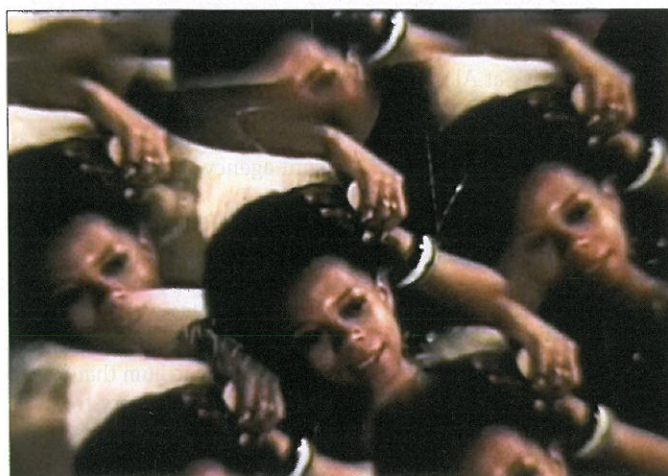


**The Metropolitan Museum of Art brought out Bearden’s 1971 masterpiece *The Block* (detail opposite).**

August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh hosted “Romare Bearden: The Last Years,” an exhibition of photos by Frank Stewart, in conjunction with the traveling print show organized by the Bearden Foundation, “From Process to Print.” This past winter, another Pittsburgh institution, the Andy Warhol Museum, paired his collages with work by Warhol.

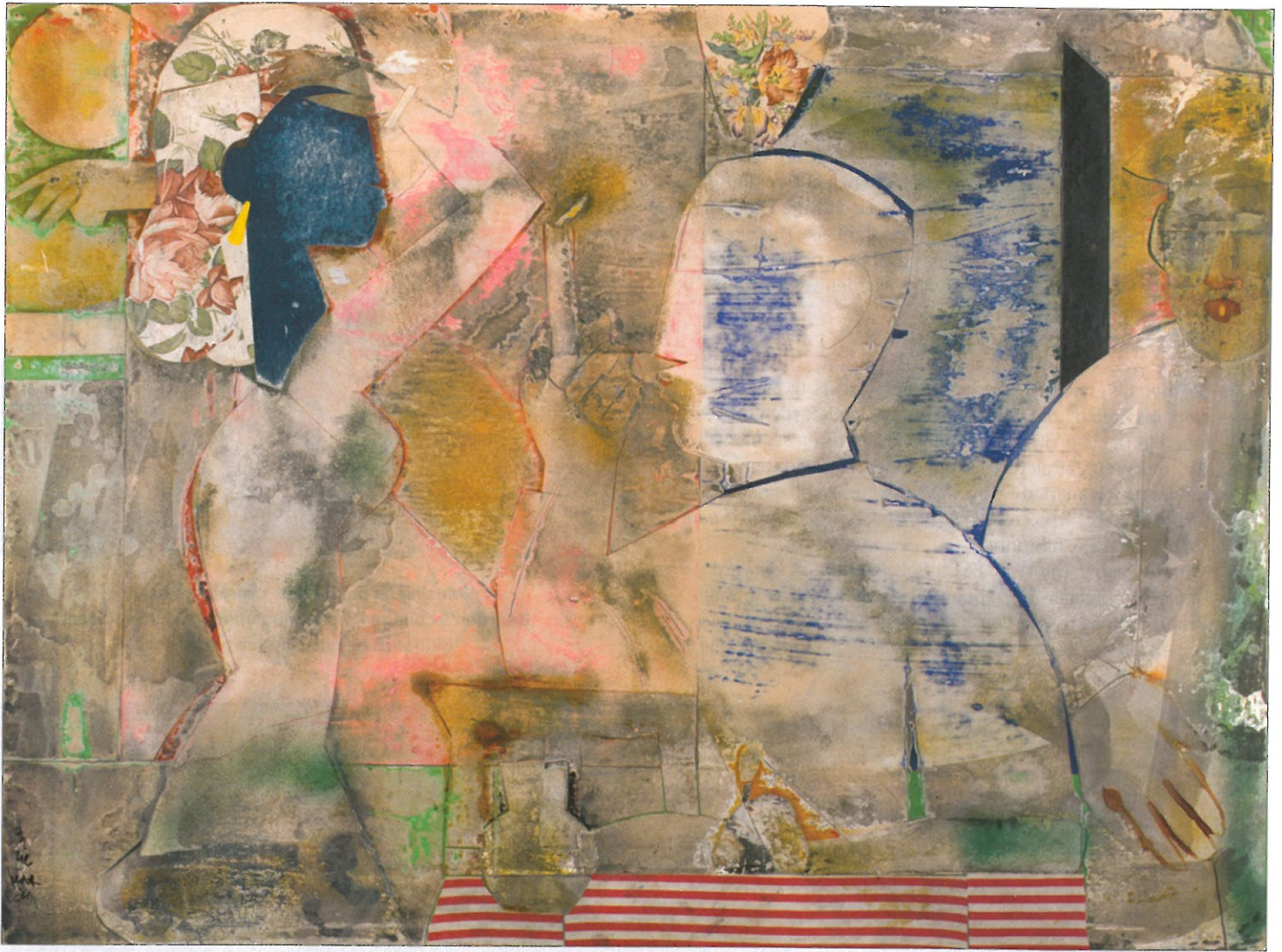
“I think the work’s amazing,” said Ruth Fine, who curated the National Gallery show, the institution’s first-ever solo retrospective of an African American artist. “There have been a lot of people influenced by Bearden in the way a lot have been influenced by Rauschenberg.”

Bearden was known as an artist of great technical mastery, schooled in art history and grounded in modernism, as well as a chronicler who depicted the lives of African Americans with compassion and intelligence. To the late playwright August Wilson, Bearden was a role model, although they never met. “Bearden illuminates black life with a humanity and richness and fullness that I’d never encountered in such a way before,” he told Samuel G. Freedman of the *New York Times* in 1987. “Until then, I guess I’d always felt that the life I knew best didn’t have the value of the other life—white America.”



**Akosua Adoma Owusu’s *Split Ends, I Feel Wonderful*, 2012, from “The Bearden Project” at the Studio Museum in Harlem.**





***Morning by Candlelight*, ca. 1969–72, collage and mixed media, exhibited at Jerald Melberg Gallery in Charlotte.**

Ralph Ellison expressed a similar sentiment in his essay "The Art of Romare Bearden," in the catalogue for a 1968 exhibition of Bearden's work at the State University of New York at Albany. Bearden's genius, Ellison said, was finding a way to "express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world."

Bearden continually reinvented himself. He attracted attention early as an abstract painter, exhibiting at the Kootz Gallery in New York with the likes of Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell. After serving in World War II, he went to Paris to study philosophy and also tried his hand at songwriting. In the '60s he discovered collage, the medium that was to make his reputation. In his appropriation of imagery from popular media and in the photocopying and printing technology he used to compose his collage "paintings," Bearden was ahead of his time.

"It's interesting to me that the whole hip-hop era emerged about '76, '77 in the South Bronx," said Mary Schmidt Campbell, dean of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, who is writing Bearden's biography. "By the time he died, there was a very large culture of appropriation and sampling."

Bearden's work has a rare capacity to engage many different audiences, from schoolchildren who pick out "friends" living on the Harlem streets he painted to classical scholars who ponder his interpretation of the Homeric canon to abstract artists who study his techniques. Says Bridget Moore, of DC Moore Gallery in New York, which represents the Bearden estate, "I think in a way Bearden is opening paths to many people, ways of seeing, ways to think about our culture, our history, ways to think about art."

Bearden's fascination with the world around him also made him a coveted friend, known for his appetite for conversation and his wide-ranging interests. As North Carolina painter Herb Jackson remembers, Bearden's studio became a kind of salon that attracted artists, musicians, dancers, and filmmakers. "The doorbell would ring; people were coming and going all the time. He was always open to everybody. He was very special in that way," Jackson said.

Dance was an important part of Bearden's life, through his wife, Nanette, who died in 1996. Bearden designed sets for her company, the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theatre, and sets and costumes for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.





**Watching the Good Trains Go By, ca. 1969, mixed-media collage, shown at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York.**

### NOWHERE HAVE THE CENTENNIAL ACTIVITIES RIVALED

those in Charlotte, which was for Bearden "almost like Dublin was for James Joyce," according to Hanzal. "It was almost mythological for him, a kind of Eden." Bearden spent his early years in Charlotte, surrounded by a close extended family, before migrating to Harlem with his parents.

In addition to the Mint show, which attracted 44,000 visitors, the city announced a new park in Bearden's honor, scheduled to open in time for the Democratic National Convention in September. The Arts & Sciences Council made an unusual grant to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district to underwrite teacher training about Bearden's life and work and provide museum visits for all 11,000 fifth-grade students in the system.

The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts & Culture exhibited the Stewart photos and works on paper owned by local collectors. Davidson College, where Bearden was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1977, sponsored a symposium; the Jerald Melberg Gallery mounted "Romare Bearden: An Artist Remembers His Birthplace"; the ImaginOn center exhibited the original illustrations for Bearden's children's book *Li'l Dan the Drummer Boy*; the symphony projected Bearden's work during a concert of music by Duke

Ellington and Aaron Copland; and a performance at the museum of short works by August Wilson, "The Dramatic Vision of Romare Bearden and August Wilson," sold out, as did the premiere of a tribute by the North Carolina Dance Theatre.

"It was one of the most significant art experiences we've ever had in Charlotte," said Patrick Diamond, who was development director of the Gantt Center at the time of the centennial. He and a committee are now "working towards creating an annual Romare Bearden festival."

In New York, the Jazz at Lincoln Center series is honoring Bearden's lifelong involvement with jazz in "Paris Blues Revisited: Romare Bearden, Albert Murray and Sam Shaw," a collective project that celebrates Paris, New York, and music. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery assembled a collage show that was the most popular exhibition in the gallery's history. The gallery was crowded six days a week, Rosenfeld said, with people waiting in line to get in.

The Bronx Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Queens Museum of Art were among those that created small exhibitions from their collections.

Dorian Bergen, vice president of ACA Galleries in New York, which represented the Bearden estate for more than ten years, said the gallery will present "Romare Bearden:



## BEARDEN AT 100

Upcoming shows in the Bearden centennial

### Jazz at Lincoln Center

#### New York

"Paris Blues Revisited: Romare Bearden, Albert Murray and Sam Shaw"

Through July 23

### Newark Museum

#### Newark

"Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections"

Through August 19

### Studio Museum in Harlem

#### New York

"The Bearden Project"

Through September 2

### Price Tower Arts Center

#### Bartlesville, Oklahoma

"From Process to Print: Graphic Works by Romare Bearden"

Through September 2

### Hyde Collection

#### Glens Falls, New York

"From Process to Print"

October 6–January 6, 2013

### Reynolda House Museum of American Art

#### Winston-Salem, North Carolina

"Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey"

October 13–January 13, 2013; the exhibition travels to:

### Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

#### Memphis

February 2, 2013–April 28, 2013;

### Amon Carter Museum of American Art

#### Fort Worth

May 18, 2013–August 11, 2013;

### Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin

#### Madison, Wisconsin

August 31, 2013–November 24, 2013;

### Michael C. Carlos Museum

#### Atlanta

December 14, 2013–March 9, 2014;

### Currier Museum of Art

#### Manchester, New Hampshire

March 29, 2013–June 22, 2014;

### Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University

#### New York

November 12, 2014–February 28, 2015.

### ACA Galleries

#### New York

"Romare Bearden: Urban Rhythms and Dreams of Paradise"

October 27–January 12, 2013

### Neuberger Museum of Art

#### Purchase, New York

"Romare Bearden Abstractions"

Fall 2014

Urban Rhythms and Dreams of Paradise" this fall (October 27 through January 12).

Another large exhibition, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) show "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey," will begin its tour at the Reynolda House Museum of American Art, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in October. The show features a series of collages reinterpreting the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* narratives, pictures that were exhibited for the first time in 1977 and reassembled by DC Moore in 2007. The tour will end in 2015 at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University. "This journey story, this odyssey, is a story that every culture tells. It's the story of being human," says Marquette Folley, project director of SITES.

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation in Athens is financing Web access to the "dialogue" created between the Homeric classics and Bearden's work. The Smithsonian is also developing teaching guides for the show, as well as a "visually hip" app featuring Langston Hughes's music, and a bulletin board where audience members can post personal contributions.

### IN GREAT PART, THE BEARDEN CENTENNIAL ACTIVITIES

are designed not only to keep his work in front of contemporary audiences but also to help secure the recognition that many believe was denied the artist as an African American. Bearden enjoyed significant success in his lifetime, with dozens of solo gallery shows; a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971; the publication of *The Art of Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual*, by Abrams; commissions to design sets for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; and large-scale mural projects in New York, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and other cities. He opened his own gallery to promote underrecognized Harlem artists and published several books. "Yet today Bearden is mentioned only in passing in art history surveys, in surveys of American art, and in discussions surrounding what is generally considered the mainstream of twentieth-century American practice," Ruth Fine wrote in a 2005 essay for the American Philosophical Society.

Says June Kelly, "The embracing of African American artists within the mainstream took some time. Bearden should be priced like Louise Bourgeois—a million dollars. He's as important as Jasper Johns or Ellsworth Kelly in terms of what he's given to American culture." At Christie's May contemporary-art auction, Bearden's midcentury collage paintings sold for sums ranging from \$86,500 for a small-scale work to \$338,500 for *Strange Morning, Interior*, a large collage from 1968.

Robert O'Meally, who is writing the catalogue essay and interpretive material for the SITES exhibition, sees Bearden's "Black Odyssey" cycle as a metaphor for the American experience, since migration is a theme common to all citizens. Like the patchwork of Odysseus's life, with its many turns, choices, and diversions, O'Meally says, "Bearden makes it clear that, yes, he's a black man from North Carolina, but he's also from Harlem and an American. And he can be all these things without losing integrity."

**OPPOSITE** *Poseidon, The Sea God, 1977*, collage, from the SITES show "A Black Odyssey."







reviews

# Frank Stella

FreedmanArt

through September 27

and L&M Arts

Drop-dead gorgeous and museum worthy, “Black, Aluminum, Copper Paintings” at L&M Arts gathered together, from museums and collectors, 15 of Frank Stella’s iconic early paintings (1958 to 1962). Straight out of Princeton, Stella astonished the art world with his nervy black parallel stripes shown at MoMA in “Sixteen Americans”—before he’d ever had a solo gallery show. His flat, intransigent materiality, which once seemed profoundly radical, has since become classic Old Masterly pre-Minimalism. As Carl Andre wrote in 1959: “Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his paintings.”

But this wasn’t quite true. There were his aggressive titles, such as those referring to a race-car driver killed in a crash, a matador, and Third Reich atrocities. The hideously provocative title of *Arbeit Macht Frei* refers to the wrought-iron welcome at the entrance to Auschwitz. The paintings and their titles have since been interpreted as a strategic reaction to Jasper Johns’s American flag, as well as a sign to the previous generation of American artists: these deadpan works signaled an end to postwar angst.

Now it is *Delta* (1958), the prototype for the black paintings, that appears so startling for its painterly drips and reddish-brown ground and the roughness of its brushy bands of black. The large and inexorably symmetrical *Die Fahne Hoch!* (1959)—titled after a Nazi song—occupies pride of place in L&M’s upstairs rotunda. Flanking it are two galleries full of equally stunning aluminum and copper canvases, painted with impenetrable metallic pigment and compulsive

geometry. The aluminum ones (made with industrial radiator undercoating) are notched and shaped so the right-angle bands could play extra-logical tricks; the L-, H-, and T-shaped copper ones (made with industrial paint for boat hulls) verge on the decorative. Their impassible mazes and dense airlessness leave nowhere to go.

Except in reverse. If Stella forced illusionistic space from his early works, he went on to explore a new, aggressive three-dimensionality, and he continues to expand on that.

FreedmanArt (through September 27) is showing the 76-year-old artist’s most recent relief sculpture, a continuation of

the “Scarlatti Kirkpatrick” series he started in 2006. Inspired by Domenico Scarlatti’s 18th-century Baroque harpsichord sonatas and musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick’s 20th-century interpretations of them, Stella is now using 3-D rapid prototyping and new lightweight plastics. These tubular works—multicolored, sparkly, impaled on their own rods—swirl forth from oversize wall hooks. Best is *k.359* (2012), a huge gray piece with Lucite and chains, echoing the early stripes.

And in the back gallery are some small tabletop pieces, featuring similar starbursts and polyhedrons but different arrangements and polychromy. A couple of larger, less resolved works suggest Stella may be heading in yet another direction. One tangled piece is nestled in a cartoonlike niche of steel tubes; another seems to burst from its nonsupporting columnar base. Stella can still stop us in our tracks. These new works are explosive yet jewel-like.

Playful, irrational, and painterly, they are also perfectly logical. Puritanical, uninterpretable, and arguably totalitarian, Minimalism always harbored tendencies toward the romantic (Judd), the sublime (Flavin), and the baroque. It may not be irony when Stella, in an interview about these Baroque music-inspired works, claims to be “quite tone deaf.”

—Kim Levin



Frank Stella, from left: *Telluride*, 1960–61, copper oil paint on canvas, 82½" x 99½";

*Creede I*, 1961, copper oil paint on canvas, 82½" x 82½";

*Creede II*, 1961, copper oil paint on canvas, 82¾" x 82¾".

L&M Arts.