

Romare Bearden

Visual Jazz

Time: 15 minutes

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Romare Bearden: Visual Jazz is a film about a master of memories - one of our most important and influential African-American artists. "I want to paint the life of my people as I know it," he said, and he succeeded in capturing the collective experiences of his culture. He painted card games on the street, jazz musicians playing, children taking piano lessons in New York, as well as roosters, washtubs, and voodoo women from his native North Carolina. Many of these images reflect the uniquely American art form of jazz music, which evolved from African-American tradition. Romare Bearden is best known for combining painted images with photographs, fabrics and a rich variety of shapes, colors and texture to create vivid collages and photomontages.

TO THE TEACHER

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and his accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

BIOGRAPHY

Romare Bearden (1912-1988) was born in Charlotte, N.C. Shortly after his birth, Bearden's parents moved to New York City where his father worked as a sanitation inspector and his mother became the New York editor of *The Chicago Defender* newspaper and the first president of the Negro Women's Democratic Association. During the Harlem Renaissance, the Bearden apartment in Harlem was a frequent gathering place for such intellectuals as W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson; artists such as Aaron Douglas and Charleston Alston; and jazz musicians, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. A number of night spots were only a few blocks away and Bearden became deeply immersed in jazz and blues as an adolescent.

In 1925, Bearden went to Pittsburgh where he lived with his grandmother and graduated from high school in 1929. New York City, Charlotte and Pittsburgh were the cities of Bearden's childhood and each made an indelible impression on Bearden as inspiration for subject matter in many of his works.

Bearden had not considered a profession as an artist when he enrolled in New York University, where he graduated with a B.S. degree in mathematics in 1935. However, Bearden did work as a cartoonist for the campus humor magazine and did editorial drawings for other papers and magazines. In 1935 he decided to become an artist and joined an informal group of African American artists in Harlem. Bearden enrolled at the Art Students League where he studied under German expressionist George Grosz, who strongly influenced him.

He painted part time and found employment as a case worker in the New York City Department of Social Services. After his discharge from the Army in 1945, he had his first one-man exhibition in a New York gallery. In 1950 he decided to go to Paris to study philosophy at the Sorbonne on the G.I. bill. He met a number of prominent French and American artists and immersed himself in visiting museums and galleries in Europe. When he returned to New York in 1950, he abandoned painting for two years while concentrating on song writing. (A number of his songs were published.) Although he returned to his social work job, he finally resumed painting during the mid 50s.

He experimented with different media and techniques and also explored the relationship between painting and jazz. The turbulent events of the 1960s and the Civil Rights movement sparked the most important stage

in Bearden's career. He used scenes of African American life, and ideas from African sculptures, Chinese calligraphy and European painters in his bold and brilliant collages. During the 70s, motifs inspired by jazz and blues reappeared in Bearden's work and during the 80s, he used Caribbean landscapes, seascapes and portraits.

Bearden authored three books about painting and African American artists. He also organized several important exhibitions and his work is in museums, galleries and collections throughout the world. Bearden received five honorary doctoral degrees and was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1966. A year before his death in 1988, Bearden received the prestigious President's National Medal of the Arts.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.

- Watch for Wynton Marsalis, the famous jazz trumpeter and composer, comparing jazz music and Bearden's work.
- Watch for what people say about the artist.
- Watch for the artist drawing, painting, cutting out fabric for his collage.
- Watch for how the artist works - choice of subject matter, use of materials and techniques.
- Watch for information about his life.
- Watch for how the artist records memories and experiences in creating his work.
- Watch for a painting that is about meeting a jazz singer.
- Watch for a painting that was the inspiration for a Broadway show.

- Watch for the artist's memories of an evening train - a journeying thing.
- Watch for Bearden talking about changing his work.

QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

*Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Romare Bearden and his work.*

? How does Bearden compose his paintings like a jazz musician improvises?

? Wynton Marsalis improvises on the song Happy Birthday. How does he change it?

? Why is Bearden called a Renaissance man? Is this a good description? Why?

? Why do people think Bearden depicts the African American experience better than other artists? Do you agree? Why? What do you see in his work?

? How did music influence his painting?

? How did the artist's degree in mathematics affect his work?

? What jobs did he have? What did he want to be?

? What memories does Bearden recall?

? How did Bearden relate to sound in his painting?

? What can you learn from Romare Bearden?

EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Romare Bearden's message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. Think of memories you have of special times with your family, having fun with your friends, taking an exciting camping trip or vacation. Use these as subject matter for a collage. Find picture from magazines, drawings, paintings, photos, fabrics and other materials to make an interesting composition.
2. Draw a picture with several things that make sounds. Experiment with making sounds for each thing like Wynton Marsalis did for the train. Create a composition by "playing the painting."
3. Listen to two versions of Take the A Train by Duke Ellington. For example, a full orchestra versus a jazz trio and vocalist. Compare the versions for mood, tempo, rhythm, dynamics (soft/loud), instrumentation. Imagine that you are a radio announcer telling your listeners about the two recordings of this song. Why do you think it has been so popular? Tell your audience what the A Train is.
4. Romare Bearden wanted to make prints so more people could see his work. Do you think this was a good idea or is it better just to have one original seen by a few people? Back up your opinions as you debate this issue in the classroom.
5. Think about what Romare Bearden meant when he said, "A work of art is always growing." How can that be possible when no one re-paints the work? What about the role of the viewer? Work in small groups to discuss this issue and submit your answer to an artist in the community. Ask the artist to respond with his/her ideas.
6. Research the lives of Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington and other jazz musicians and listen to their music. Write a brief report to present the class.

7. The artist was always reading and kept a journal. How did that help him with his artwork? Keep a journal for a week recording your experiences and memories. Use it as the basis for creating a work of art. Try oil pastels or watercolors.

8. Pause the video and look at the two paintings with a piano lesson as subject matter. Write down as many descriptive words as you can about each work. Read one of the descriptions to the class, and see if they can guess which artwork you are describing.

9. Imagine that you are the artist. Tell the class about your life and your artworks.

10. Look closely at one of Bearden's abstract collages. Draw a "realistic" version of the collage. How is it the same? different? Ask the class to vote on which version they like the best and why.

VIDEO SERIES

Romare Bearden: Visual Jazz, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about **Romare Bearden: Visual Jazz** and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Productions, Tel: 914-238-9366; fax: 914-238-6324.

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