



### ***The Family (Around the Dining Table)***

This exceptional print is the work of iconic painter and collage artist Romare Bearden. Depicting a group gathered around a table, it takes a traditional subject matter and re-imagines it to fit a modern-day reality, in much the same way that the Romantic movement removed art from the lofty purview of royalty, religion and mythology and featured common people as subject matter. Who are these people? A central male figure gazes out at the viewer. Larger than the other figures, he sits while a standing figure looks on and two smaller children peer out shyly, with one even seeming to hide behind the other.

The piece plays with dimension and perspective, much like paintings of the early Renaissance. The central figure takes up considerable space, implying importance, yet appears fixed within the flatness of the image, in the same plane as the others. The eye travels to the background, through a door to the simply rendered hills, then to another figure half-hidden behind a door. Both the pose and the semi-nudity of this figure call to mind classical Greco-Roman statuary, almost as a nod to traditional art forms, as well as to portraiture by masters such as Titian (*Venus and Adonis*, 1554; *Venus of Urbino*, 1534) and Velázquez (*Las Meninas*, 1656).

The use of color in *The Family* is extraordinary. Portions of bold pigment take the shape of single elements, a pair of trousers, a hat, the table cloth, without reference to one another or even to what they are coloring. This allows each element to have its own personality and draws attention to the detail in each. Can you find the single disembodied eye?

1975  
Color photo-etching and aquatint  
on paper  
125/175 in series  
15" h x 20 5/16" w

### **Romare Bearden**

(1911-1988)

American

The Blanche and Norman C.  
Francis Collection

#### **LET'S LOOK**

Where is this scene taking place? How can you tell?

How many figures are present? Where are they positioned?

In what ways does this piece resemble collage? What other art forms are referenced?

What role does proportion play in this piece?

Bearden also plays with shadow, light and proportion in an arbitrary fashion in this print. Look at which elements appear shaded and which appear highlighted, and how texture plays a part in this, as well.

## About the Artist

*"Black art has always existed. It just hasn't been looked for in the right places."* – Romare Bearden

Considered one of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the century's preeminent collagist, Romare Bearden was a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance, and was instrumental in promoting the creative work of African-American artists, writers and musicians for almost five decades. Born Fred Romare Harry Bearden in 1911, Bearden served as an advocate for his fellow human and his fellow artists throughout his career, and played a significant role in the founding of numerous artists' associations.

Bearden was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and moved with his family to New York City in 1914, eventually settling in Harlem in 1920. Like many African-Americans during this time, his family sought better opportunities and an escape from the oppression of Jim Crow laws in the South. In New York, his family was active in the arts and social organizations. His father was an accomplished pianist and storyteller, while his mother, a social and political activist, was the New York correspondent for the *Chicago Defender*, a regional African-American newspaper, and the first president of the Negro Women's Democratic Association. The Bearden home became a regular gathering place for many of the intellectual and artistic giants of the Harlem Renaissance, including poet Countee Cullen, Duke Ellington (who was also a cousin), and the actor and political activist Paul Robeson. In 1926, he moved to Pittsburgh to live with his maternal grandparents. His grandmother ran a boarding house serving steel mill workers; many of these men were working-class African-American migrants from the South. Bearden would listen to their stories told around the kitchen table, an experience which he would later draw upon in his collages.

Bearden's artistic life began in Pittsburgh. He first began to take drawing lessons from a neighbor at 15, and as a student at Lincoln University, the country's first Historically Black College and University, he developed an interest in art in earnest, particularly cartooning. He was inspired by Elmer Simms Campbell, the first Black cartoonist to work for major publications like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The New Yorker*. Bearden transferred to Boston University, where he served as the director of the college humor magazine, and then to New York University, where he worked as the lead cartoonist and art editor for the school's student magazine.

After graduating in 1935, Bearden studied mathematics at Columbia University and joined the Art Student's League from 1936-37. There, he studied under George Grosz, a German exile and social critic who taught him about the Old Masters. Grosz also encouraged Bearden's interest in collage, and helped him to realize how he could address Black American life through his art. During this time, Bearden provided illustrations for black publications like the NAACP's *The Crisis*, co-founded the Harlem Artists' Guild and was active with the artist's collective Group 306. He worked various jobs during the Depression and in 1940, had his first solo exhibit. Inspired by movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Post-Impressionism, and Surrealism, Bearden exhibited early figurative paintings at the Harlem YMCA and the Harlem Art Workshop. These early works were realistic and often focused on religious themes.

Bearden's career, like many others, was interrupted by World War II. He was drafted and served as a sergeant in the Army. At war's end, he returned to New York and joined the New York City Department of Social Services as a case worker, where he remained until 1969. He also returned to painting, exploring religious subjects and life in the Black church. His work was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and by 1947, he had had a number of prestigious exhibitions at such venues as the Samuel M. Koontz Gallery and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In the 1950s, Bearden took a hiatus from his work with the Department of Social Services to study art history and philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris for two years on the G.I. Bill. There, he made the acquaintance of such leading modernists and thinkers as Pablo Picasso and Jean-Paul Sartre. Bearden soon became a central figure within Paris's expatriate community of African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, which was a locus of the burgeoning Negritude movement. During this period, he developed his semi-abstract collage style, which came to full expression in the late 1960s.

Upon his return to New York, Bearden delved into his musical roots and began writing songs. Ever influenced by jazz, he wrote "Sea Breeze," which was recorded by Dizzy Gillespie. He co-founded a record label, Bluebird Music Company, and joined the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP).

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Bearden continued his multilayered involvement in the arts. He illustrated books, designed sets for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, and, ever the advocate, founded a number of societies, salons and groups dedicated to African-American Art, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Black Academy of Arts and Letters. He also participated in the historic March on Washington in 1963. This advocacy has continued even after his death in 1988, with the establishment of the Romare Bearden Foundation.

## The Great Migration



For roughly 60 years, approximately six million African-Americans made the courageous and arduous decision to leave behind the oppression and poverty of the Jim Crow South to find their fortune in the North, Midwest and West of the country. Known as the Great Migration, this exodus marked the first time in which the Black population in the United States was able to make a decision concerning their own movement and future. In the South, where the hope of the Reconstruction era had given way to Jim Crow laws and increased violence, Black families from Florida to Texas were faced with a decision: whether to stay and live in fear or find better, if unknown, opportunities up North and out West. So move they did, by train, bus and car, often leaving behind family members, seeking, as Richard Wright put it, “the warmth of other suns.”

This migration began in earnest around World War I, when labor jobs became more and more available in the factories in cities like Pittsburgh and Chicago. This in itself was a big change for many, who were leaving small towns and rural areas for metropolises. What’s more, the move changed the entire demographic of the country. Before, 90% of African-Americans lived in the South, where they had been forced to stay since slavery. By the 1970s, this percentage had changed to 47%, with significant populations inhabiting major cities like New York, Chicago, Minneapolis and Los Angeles.

The effect of the migration on the culture of the country was manifold. On one hand, the influx of Black citizens exposed the virulent racism that had quietly existed in these areas. Blacks were often prevented from moving into predominantly White neighborhoods, and with policies like redlining, they were even prevented from obtaining mortgages in their own neighborhoods. On the other hand, Blacks were not only able to fight such discrimination, they and their children were able to self-actualize and pursue their dreams in ways they may never have had if they remained in the South. Some of the greatest figures in Black accomplishment, from the arts to science and athletics, were from families who made the difficult trek. More importantly, the Black movement out of the South opened the way for the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement, spreading the fight for equality throughout the United States.

### **Let’s Look Again**

The figures in this piece are all unique, from their faces to their clothing. Pick one of the figures and create a story about their character, background or personality.

There are a lot of household items in this image. Can you find the mop and bucket? The unshaded lightbulb?

This piece captures a moment in time. In a group of two students, describe what you imagine happened before and after.

### **Writing Activities**

According to his biography in the Encyclopedia Britannica, “The narrative structure of Bearden’s paintings is simple and archetypal; ritual, music, and family are his pervasive themes. His works’

complexity lies in their poetic abstraction, in which layered fragments of colour and pattern evoke the rhythms, textures, and mysteries of a people's experience." Name three ways in which this piece proves this statement.

Bearden was an avid student of art history. Knowing this, what do you think the nude in the background signifies?

Bearden was also a prolific writer, publishing articles in art journals such as *Critique* and *Leonardo* and co-authoring books such as *The Painter's Mind: A Study of Relations of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting* in 1969. Write a paragraph about an issue facing Black artists today.

Bearden's life was marked by activism and advocacy. How is this commitment to society demonstrated in this piece?

### **Hand's On Activity**

Romare Bearden is considered the preeminent collage artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Create your own collage about one his favorite topics of family, music, or spirituality.

#### References:

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