

## Making a Mood Collage

### What Can We Learn about Art from Romare Bearden?

**Duration:** 45 Minutes

**Grade Level:** 2<sup>nd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>

#### Learning Objectives:

- Students will be introduced to Romare Bearden
- Students will learn about the personal experiences that influenced Bearden's artistic style
- Students will be introduced to music as subject and art movements

#### Outcomes:

- Students will develop an understanding of how memory and identity can shape art
- Students will study different art movements
- Students will utilize critical thinking and visual skills by analyzing artwork

#### Associated Activity

- Mood Collage
  - See materials list and instructions below!

## Who is Romare Bearden?



Bearden (1911-1988) experimented with a wide variety of media from watercolor to cartoons to oil paints, but he is most well-known for his collages. His art pulls influence from lots of places as well and are jam-packed with references to history, art history, contemporary social issues, music, people, and places. He grew up in the middle of the Harlem Renaissance, and much of his art reflected that influence from Harlem's link to the South, the connection to music and musicians, and the overall excitement and creative energy that filled and inspired the people of Harlem.

Bearden is best known for his collages of unsettling expressive power. Photographic heads and other details give meaning to shapes in cut and torn paper that would appear purely decorative and abstract out of context. Shifting the collaged images to the print medium provides a visual coalescing. The flattened surface unifies the inevitable untidiness/irregularity of paste-up. *Before the First Whistle* offers that unified visual experience.

*Before the First Whistle* is based on childhood memories of his birthplace in North Carolina, where black people then lived in cabins by the railroad tracks. Critic William Wilson writes that trains haunt Bearden's work with poignant implications, a symbol of the power that can take a man away from his home or bring him to a promised land. The whistle

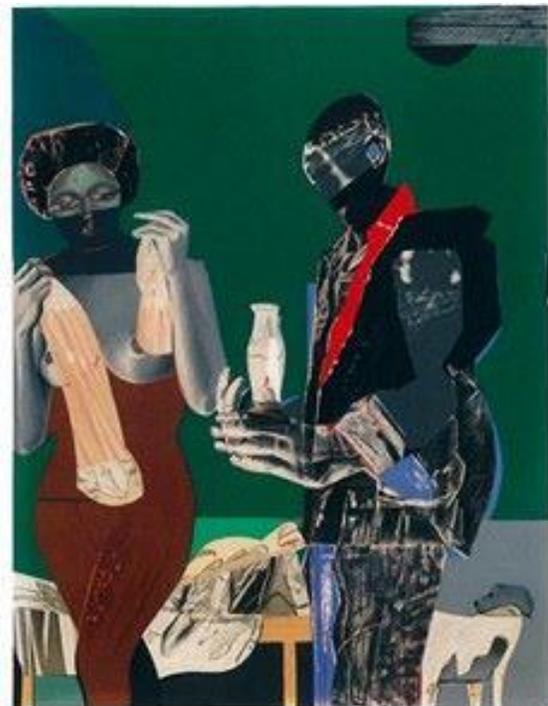


Figure 1 - *Before the First Whistle*, 1973, Mattatuck Museum

refers to one sounded by a nearby factory to announce first shift. The sting of separation resonates in a scene of lovers parting at dawn in *Before the First Whistle*. The domestic scene quietly speaks to a universal experience.

## Music as Subject

Bearden looked to music—jazz and the blues—for many of his subjects. He painted entire series of works entitled *Of the Blues* and *Of Jazz*. They emerged from memory and experience of the South—of gospels and spirituals sung in church, of blue notes bending through warm nights. And they emerged from his life in New York—the sophistication of bands playing Harlem clubs, the excitement of crowded dance floors. Jazz and the blues provided Bearden with many subjects. He grew up hearing rural blues and uptown jazz: Duke Ellington’s orchestra, Earl Hines’ piano, Ella Fitzgerald’s scat singing. For sixteen years, his studio was above the Apollo Theatre, still a Harlem musical landmark.



**Learn More: [Listen](#) to Ella Fitzgerald scat singing in her performance of One Note Samba in 1969**

Another early source of inspiration for the artist was his encounter with the sculptor Augusta Savage, with whom he spent time as a teenager. In Bearden’s words, she was “a flesh and blood artist with a studio which we were welcome to use as a workshop, or even just to hang out in. She was open, free, resisted the usual conventions of the time, and lived for her art, thinking of success only in terms of how well her sculptures turned out.”



## Key Points about Romare Bearden

- Bearden used personal memories, African American cultural history, and literature as the source of his subject matter. He placed aspects of African American life within the context of universal themes.

- Bearden's style was influenced by numerous sources, including Western European art, African sculpture, the art of his contemporaries in America and Mexico, and music—especially blues and jazz.
- Bearden is most famous for his work in collage, which he used in unique and innovative ways. He also made paintings in watercolor, gouache, and oil, edition prints, monotypes, murals, and one assemblage sculpture.
- Through his involvement with the arts community, Bearden empowered and promoted artists of color

## Art Analysis – *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*



Figure 2 - *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1967, National Gallery of Art, collage of various papers with charcoal, graphite and paint on paper mounted to canvas overall: 116.8 x 142.2 cm (46 x 56 in.)

Look carefully. Take your time.

- What is going on in this work of art?
- What is the first thing that catches your eye, and why?

Bearden used many different collage materials in his works, including cuttings from newspapers, magazines, sample catalogues, painted papers, colored paper, foil, wallpaper, wrapping paper, and art reproductions.

- What materials did he use in *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*?

Describe the setting. The three people are probably on a farm.

- How can you tell that they are in the country and not the city?

Imagine what the man in the center is thinking.

- How would you describe the mood of this collage (quiet, still, thoughtful, expectant)?
- Would you like to visit this place? Why or why not?
- If you could ask the artist one question about this work, what would it be?

## Activity – Mood Collage

Channel the artistic spirit of Romare Bearden by making a mixed media collage to express different moods. This is a great art history craft to get kids in tune with their emotions and learn about this prominent African American artist. Much of Bearden's work reflected his memories of growing up, so encourage your child to illustrate a meaningful experience in his own piece.

### What you Need:

- Thick paper or poster board- any size-
- Old magazines or catalogs
- Pencil
- Scissors
- Acrylic pain, crayons
- Markers
- Glue stick
- Imagination

### Instructions:

1. Have your child draw out the setting of his collage on the poster board.



2. Next, paint/color in the simple shapes in the environment, like trees, buildings, or people.
3. Cut out relevant photos from magazines and catalogs that go with their emotion. This is a great time to experiment and use parts from different photos to make up a whole.
4. Once the background painting is dry, begin placing the photos onto the picture. Because they are not yet glued down, move them around until the composition is just right.
5. Glue the photos down and use markers to add some more details on top of the photos to make the piece really pop!

