



Pictorial influences in the collages of Romare Bearden

A comparative study by Heather McReynolds

Example CS by by Heather McReynolds

Introduction

My comparative study looks at Romare Bearden's artistic process and assimilation of concepts from different eras and cultures in art history. The other artists are considered primarily in relation to Bearden's work.

Bearden was born in 1911 in North Carolina, USA, and is celebrated as a humanist, an intellectual and a pioneer of African American art during the 1920's Harlem Renaissance in New York, a period of flowering of African American cultural expression in art, music and literature.

Although the political and social aspects of his work are widely recognized, the primary concerns of this comparative study are aesthetic: the pictorial influences of other artists and how this manifests in his collage making.



Romare Bearden, The Street, paper and magazine collage, 1964

The focus on collage in this study derives from my own artistic interest in this medium, its structural challenges and its evolution as an art form.

Bearden's Three Musicians

Formal analysis: This collage is assembled from scraps of found and hand colored paper densely covering the surface in bright primary colors woven through with neutral tones. The bold, solid shapes of the guitars stand out against the intricate patterns on the clothing and the more complex, mask like faces. A child like sun appears in a deep blue sky and behind the figures, a yard and and a red shack are visible but the space is compact, close to the surface, shallow. The combination of photographic elements (hands, guitar neck, grass) and the flat painted areas creates interest through unpredictability and discontinuity.

Cultural analysis: The image is of three musicians, a banjo and 2 guitars, probably playing the folkly blues of his native Southern United States. The musicians are clearly African Americans in a rural setting- the patchwork patterning suggesting clothing torn and mended, the overalls that of a farmer.

Music was a recurring theme throughout his work, Bearden often included references to both both jazz and blues in his art, evoking historical memory and narrative but also drawing parallels to the use of improvisation in his art making and in jazz musical structures. His use of texture and rhythm has been compared to the riffs, thematic variations and call and response techniques used by jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk. (*Jazztimes*)



Three Folk Musicians, Romare Bearden, paper collage, 1967

Collage is a European tradition: it was the Parisian cubists in the early 20th century who first elevated cutting and pasting from handicraft to fine art, and the techniques' name derives from the French verb coller, to glue or to stick (artspace)

Example CS by by Heather McReynolds

Picasso's Three Musicians

Formal Analysis (what is it, how is it made?)

The apparent flatness of the painting is alluding to cut and pasted paper collage but it is a *trompe l'oeil* effect, entirely painted in oils. The direct, frontal poses and the lack of shading are typical of the style of synthetic cubism. The colors are mostly somber, the three primaries are surrounded by dark colors. The solid, blocky shapes and large size of the canvas gives it a sense of heaviness and gravity.

Function and Purpose (what does it mean?)

This painting by Picasso depicts a masked pierrot, a singing monk, a harlequin and a dog! This playful, whimsical trio possibly represents the poet friend of the artist, Guillaume Apollinaire, who had recently died, and the artist Max Jacob. The faces are mask like rather than portraits.



Pablo Picasso, Three Musicians, oil on canvas, 200x230 cm, 1921, New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)

Comparing Picasso and Bearden

These two works at first glance appear to have a lot in common: The subject matter is the same, a trio of musicians. Both pieces present the figures in the center of the composition, with frontal views, primary colors with neutral tones, and broad areas of flat color. Bearden's work is a collage, consisting of many pieces fused together to make a whole. Picasso's work is a painting that simulates collage, using a collage-like effect to break up the picture surface.

Picasso's *Musicians* reflects the bohemian atmosphere of 1920's Paris, with its artists, poets and entertainers. It also testifies to the development of cubism from its' early analytical stages to the simplified, synthetic cubism seen here. Bearden's collage feels more improvised, with the lessons of cubism already firmly in place, he is free to use its' multiple view points and distortions to evoke his own specific time and place, the roots of the African American blues in the rural south.

If you can imagine the kind of music they are playing, it would sound very different indeed.



Pablo Picasso, *Three Musicians*, oil on canvas, 200x230 cm, 1921, New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)



Three Folk Musicians, Romare Bearden, paper collage, 1967

Comparing Bearden and Brueghel: the richness of life

Bearden studied with George Grosz and it was through Grosz that he came into contact with the work of Brueghel and the Dutch masters. Although from vastly different cultural, historical and geographical contexts, these two art works share a similar sense of humanity, the street and its multitude of activities and the joyful, sorrowful, aliveness of the people.

But the similarities go beyond the populist atmosphere; it appears to me that Bearden was interested in Brueghel's dense and dynamic compositions, with their layering of figures and occasionally odd viewpoints.

Bearden uses collage instead, to create unsettling contrasts of scale and proportion, overlapping figures, bricks and pavement in a crowded, shallow space.

"it is not my aim to paint about the negro American in terms of propaganda...I paint the life of my people as I know it, as passionately and as dispassionately as Breughel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day....my intention is to reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know" Romare Bearden (leonardo)



Romare Bearden, *The Dove*, paper collage, 1964



Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Peasant Dance*, oil on canvas, 1568

Bearden and de Hooch: similarities (visual and cultural analysis)

At a first glance, these two works are speaking very different languages: Bearden's is a modern, flat, abstracted, distorted, simplified collage and de Hooch's is a realistically rendered, genre painting with careful depiction of detail and soft filtered light.

On closer scrutiny, the two works are remarkably similar. Bearden has looked carefully at the Dutch master and used some of the same structural elements- the rectangle within the rectangle, the door opening to yet another rectangle, even the ceiling rectangle, the chair in the foreground and the tiny dog. The scene itself is not dissimilar: both depict people drinking and eating in an intimate interior space. Bearden has understood the solidity and stability of de Hooch's pictorial structure and has created his own piece combining this structural rigor with the playful freedom of collage. Other influences are present as well: African masks for faces, Byzantine stillness and rigidity of figures, Cubist fragmentation, elements from pop culture. Notice the jumps in scale: the enormous thumb holding a spoon, yet the whole composition is perfectly balanced within its geometric container.



Illusionist at 4 pm, Romare Bearden, Paper collage, 1967

Bearden on the influence of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings by Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch on his understanding of structure in painting:

"I came to some understanding of the way these painters controlled their big shapes, even when elements of different size and scale were included within those large shapes....When I begin a work now...I try only to establish the general layout of the composition. When that is accomplished, I attempt ever more definite statements, superimposing other materials over those I started with." RB (leonardo)



Pieter de Hooch, Woman Drinking with Soldiers, oil on canvas, 1658, Louvre

Bearden wrote that he often starts a collage by placing a rectangle of a similar proportion to the canvas, and then building up the surface with more squares and rectangles.

I analyzed Bearden's collages and found the golden rectangle is often the structural basis for his compositions.



Romare Bearden, the woodshed, 1969

The SQUARE and the RECTANGLE

The golden ratio or golden rectangle
 also called the golden section or the divine proportion
 Since **Euclid**, this measurement has been used by mathematicians, architects, musicians, believed to be the most harmonious proportional relationship.
 Also called ϕ (phi) the greek letter, after **Phidias** (Parthenon)

Artists who have used the golden rectangle

MONDRIAN
Le Corbusier
PHIDEAS
ALBERTI
Leonardo
Dali
SATIE (music)

also found in **Nature**
 flowers, shells,

$$\frac{a+b}{a} = \frac{a}{b} = \phi$$

in math, two quantities are in the golden ratio if their ratio is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger.....

you can keep endlessly dividing it into more rectangles

Divine Proportion = aesthetic pleasure
 balance, harmony

The Golden Rectangle

Some other artists who have used the golden ratio to give proportional harmony and balance to their work

- Mondrian
- Le Corbusier
- Phideas
- Alberti
- Leonardo
- Dali
- Mondrian
- Vermeer
- Bearden
- Satie (music)
- Bartok "

Pages from visual journal

Example CS by Heather McReynolds

2 golden rectangles make up the focus of this piece, with the surrounding space kept neutral (mostly). The action happens within the rectangular "windows"

Romare Bearden
 The Woodshed
 Collage, 1969

visual analysis of
Structural Underpinnings in Bearden's Collages

This collage contains a rectangle of similar proportions inside the picture, which can be further divided up into golden rectangles. Windows within windows

Romare Bearden
 Sunrise the china lamp
 collage 1985



The Street, Romare Bearden, paper collage 1964

In his earlier collages, like *The Street*, 1964, Bearden used mostly cuttings from magazines and newspapers, resulting in a more neutral, monochrome palette. In the next decade he began to integrate large areas of bright color, cut mostly from colored paper.

How Bearden's use of collage materials evolved and changed over time. (material and conceptual significance)

His late collages rely much less on sourced printed material and are almost exclusively made from paper he hand colored and cut. In *Sunrise the China Lamp*, a collage from 1985, there are no cuttings from magazines, everything is painted or drawn by the artist. The flat, brilliant planes of color recall late Matisse paper cut outs.



Sunrise, the china lamp, Romare Bearden, paper collage 1985



Henri Matisse, cut paper collage, 1950



Romare Bearden, Mother and Child,

Formal Analysis Bearden

The figures fill the frame in a shallow space that could be a window. The background colors are bold and bright and the figures are composed mainly of contrasting dark tones. The mothers' hands cradle the child as she looks gently downwards, the baby reaches up towards her face yet turns his head towards us. The collage is composed of flat areas of colored cut paper with key features (hands, eyes) cut from magazines or art reproductions.

Bearden and the early Italian Renaissance

Romare Bearden's striking collage of a madonna and child is a direct homage to the Italian masters of the early Renaissance, in particular the Siennese masters beloved by the artist (Leonardo)



Cimabue, Madonna and Child, 1285

Formal Analysis Cimabue

This pre Renaissance painting in tempera on panel is exceptionally life like for its time. The Christ child is awkwardly proportioned , with a very small head, but the face of the Madonna gazes directly and unabashedly at us as the child reaches up and strokes her cheek. The figures fill the arch shaped frame, touching the edges, surrounded by gold leaf. The stylized folds of the Madonna's dark blue robe are outlined in gold and the child is draped in a pink cloth, highlighted to show the form of his legs.

Comparative Cultural Analysis (incl. function and purpose)

The Madonna and child is a **symbol of divine love** in the catholic tradition, and is recognizable by all people as a symbol of love between mother and child. Cimabue's painting was probably intended as an object of worship, an altarpiece for a church. Bearden has taken the iconography, the formal composition and the tenderness of this classical subject and made his own homage to the mother and child love, a *Madonna nera*, a black Madonna, framed by bold colors and geometric shapes instead of celestial gold.



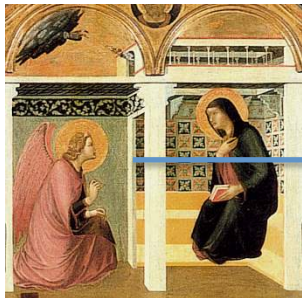
Detail, Romare Bearden, Mother and Child, 1969



Detail, Cimabue, Madonna and Child, 1285

Comparative Visual Analysis: Bearden - Lorenzetti

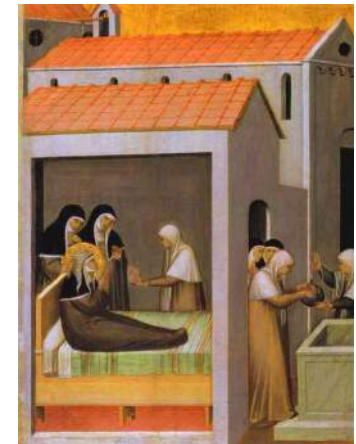
In Bearden's 1971 collage *The Block*, I am again reminded of early Renaissance painting, like these scenes from Pietro Lorenzetti's paintings of the early 1300s. Bearden reveals the intimacy of life going on behind the facades, the windows are pictures within the picture frame. Pietro Lorenzetti tells his stories with warm tones and tender gestures, the cut away walls allow the viewer to see right into the private chambers. Bearden's angel in the window (left) is a technicolor version of Lorenzetti's delicate annunciation on the left. The oversized windows in *The Block* are vividly colored, exalted by the surrounding neutral tones. The whole composition is contained in a grid like structure of rectangles within rectangles.



Pietro Lorenzetti, detail of Annunciation, Arezzo, 1312



Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988), "The Block", detail, 1971. Cut & pasted printed, colored and metallic papers, photostats, pencil, ink marker, gouache, watercolor, and pen and ink on Masonite, 48 x 216 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Samuel Shore, 1978 © Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



Making connections with my own work

Both of these artworks are **paper collages with painted areas**, and they share a **similar color palette of warm, pinkish and brown tones with splashes of cool blue and gray**. Both bend the rules of perspective to create a **disjointed, inconsistent point of view** but Beardens is arranged along a horizontal axis. Beardens's areas of solid color are actually alive with washes and textures as if he paints the paper before gluing it down, something I would like to try.

My collage depicts a familiar scene of a table laid for breakfast, toast popping up, eggs boiled, tea steeping. Beardens shows a rural scene perhaps at sunset, of people on the porch, doing chores or just basking in the evening light. Both evoke a sense of place, of home, of intimacy.



Breakfast, collage and painting by Heather McReynolds



Romare Bearden, Late Afternoon, 1979 Example CS by by Heather McReynolds



Pieter de Hooch, *Woman Drinking with Soldiers*, oil on canvas, 1658, Louvre

Comparing my work

I can also compare *Breakfast* to these two previously considered images, for their **geometric structure** and the compositional device of the **door opening** into another space. In *The Illusionist* this space is simply suggested by **colored rectangles**, in de Hooch's a cabinet is visible in a further room. In *Breakfast*, through the doorway we see a woman with her back turned, a hen and a basket of eggs. The setting in all three is the **interior of a house**, but the figures play more important roles in both Bearden's and de Hooch's pictures, eating, drinking, providing a glimpse of the **intimate life** within. *Breakfast* is more aptly described as a still life, expanding into a **domestic interior**.



Illusionist at 4 pm, Romare Bearden, Paper collage, 1967



Example CS by Heather McReynolds

Connections through content and form: Domestic Interiors with still life elements... a table, a figure, an open window, are a favorite subject with Bearden, and with **Pierre Bonnard** too. The structure of these (painting or collages) is again based upon a rectangle within a rectangle, the window opening the picture to another space beyond. The cut off oval of the table appears in all three pictures too, it's elliptical shape softens the rigor of the rectangular structures. Both Bonnard and Bearden use warm, saturated colors, with accents of cool lavender. In all three, the figure is a presence, but not the primary subject.



Romare Bearden, Big sister, 1968



Pierre Bonnard, Dining Room, oil on canvas, 1913



Breakfast, collage/painting by Heather McReynolds

Example CS by by Heather McReynolds



Romare Bearden, Madeline Jones Wonderful Garden, paper collage 1977



Romare Bearden, *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967 collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund

Places and spaces...

My collage *Villa Dreaming* depicts an imaginary landscape, composed of fragments of real landscapes pieced together in a hodge-podge way without attempting a logical sense of scale. In Bearden's xxx he pastes oversized leaves and flowers in a flattened, shallow space, evoking a primitive, dreamlike garden. The other Bearden collage xxx, also an enchanted, sun dappled garden, is built on a more grid like structure, each piece of cut paper a building block that is used to construct the picture. *Villa Dreaming* is also composed of mostly rectangular sections of paper which gives it a cubist, fragmented look. Bearden's collages feature figures from the rural deep south where he grew up and seem to tell stories of people and place. There are no figures in my collage, but it evokes a place where I've lived for many years now.



Heather McReynolds, *Villa Dreaming*, collage and paint on wood

Reflections on own development:

By observing and analyzing these works by other artists I have become more aware of some key aspects of my own work

- Multiple viewpoints, fragmentation
- A patchwork quality of composition.
- The inconsistency of scale and therefor disproportional relationships.
- The importance of sense of place, often nature, as subject matter



Heather McReynolds, *Familiar Path*, collage and painting on wood panel, 50 x40 cm



Heather McReynolds, *Exquisite Trees*, photo collage, wall construction



Heather McReynolds, *Magnolia*, collage and oil painting on canvas, 100x100 cm

And some aspects I want to develop or investigate further

- Use a wider range of source papers in collage: pre painted, textured, art reproductions
- Try different supports?
- Experiment with underlying geometric structures
- Possibly introduce the figure??

Example CS by Heather McReynolds



Romare Bearden,
***Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967**
collage of various papers with charcoal and
graphite on canvas, National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Paul Mellon Fund

The title of this piece is taken from "Good Chib Blues," recorded in 1929 by Edith Johnson (1903-1988):

*"Aah, tomorrow I may be far away
Oh, tomorrow I may be far away
Don't try to jive me, sweet talk can't make me
stay...."*

Sources used for investigation

Romare Bearden

Source: Leonardo, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1969), pp. 11-19

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Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1571921> .

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List of images used in the order they appear

Romare Bearden, *The Street*, paper and magazine collage, 1964

Romare Bearden, *Three Folk Musicians*, paper collage, 1967

Pablo Picasso, *Three Musicians*, oil on canvas, 1921, New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)

Romare Bearden, *The Dove*, paper collage, 1964

Pieter Breughel the Elder, *Peasant Dance*, oil on canvas, 1568

Romare Bearden, *Illusionist at 4 pm*, Paper collage, 1967

Pieter de Hooch, *Woman Drinking with Soldiers*, oil on canvas, 1658, Louvre

Romare Bearden, *The Street*, paper collage 1964

Romare Bearden, *Sunrise*, the china lamp, paper collage 1985

Henri Matisse, cut paper collage, 1950

Romare Bearden, *Mother and Child*, 1969

Cimabue, *Madonna and Child*, 1285

Pietro Lorenzetti, detail of *Annunciation*, Arezzo, 1312

Romare Bearden, *The Block*, 1971

Romare Bearden, *the woodshed*, 1969

Romare Bearden, *Late Afternoon*, 1979

Romare Bearden, *Big sister*, 1968

Pierre Bonnard, *Dining Room*, oil on canvas, 1913

Romare Bearden, *Madeline Jones Wonderful Garden*, paper collage 1977

Romare Bearden, *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1966/1967

collage of various papers with charcoal and graphite on canvas

List of my own art works

Breakfast, collage/painting

Villa Dreaming, collage and paint on wood

Familiar Path, collage and painting on wood panel,

Exquisite Trees, photo collage, wall construction

Magnolia, collage and oil painting on canvas,