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Guide to the

Romare Bearden papers

1933-1979

Sc MG 74

Processed by Andre Elizee.

Summary

Creator: Bearden, Romare, 1911-1988

Title: Romare Bearden papers

Date: 1933-1979

Size: .3 linear feet (1/2 box)

Source: Gift of Romare Bearden, January 1980. SCM80-2

Abstract: Incoming letters of a general nature, 1933-1972; an undated sketchbook; writings and notes; file on Alvin Hollingworth, artist/teacher; and a program.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Romare Bearden papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

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Creator History

Romare Bearden, regarded as one of the leading Afro-American artists in the United States, was born in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 2, 1914. Although he grew up in Harlem where his family lived, reminiscences of Charlotte where he spent his childhood vacations and the South in general, constitute an important element of his work. As an adolescent, Bearden spent his summer vacations with his maternal grandmother who ran a boarding house in Pittsburgh in the 1920's, and it was in Pittsburgh at the age of 12 that he was first introduced to painting by a handicapped and precocious friend named Eugene. Bessye J. Bearden, Romare's mother and a prominent civic and social figure during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, had wanted her only son to become a successful doctor. With that purpose in mind Bearden, following his graduation from high school in Pittsburgh in 1929, enrolled in Boston University and later transferred to New York University, where he obtained a

B.S. in mathematics in 1935. While on campus, however, Bearden started drawing for the college humor magazine, as well as contributing a regular political cartoon for the influential weekly *Baltimore Afro-American*. The year of his graduation, he joined the Harlem Artists Guild, a Work Projects Administration program for unemployed black artists during the Depression and the "306 Group," an association of black artists living in Harlem. The following year he enrolled at the Art Students League where he studied life-drawing and painting with the German exiled artist George Grosz. By then he had completely cast aside his medical ambitions. In 1938, Romare Bearden began working for the New York City Department of Social Services as a case worker. He continued his artistic endeavors and rented a studio at 125th Street, right above the artist Jacob Lawrence. The artistic community in Harlem was at the time a very closely knit group of people, and Bearden knew many of them. While he was growing up, Duke Ellington, a close friend of the family, Fats Waller and the lyricist Andy Razaf, among others, used to drop by regularly to visit with his mother. Bessye Bearden was an active promoter of young artists, among them, the actor Canada Lee who was one of her proteges. Bearden also became acquainted with the painter and muralist Aaron Douglas, sculptor Augusta Savage and artists in the "306 Group": Charles Alston, Henry Barnarn, Gwendolyn Bennett, Ernest Crichlow, Norman Lewis, the composer Frank Fields, Joshua Lee and Stuart Davis, among others. Romare Bearden's career as a painter was launched in 1940 with an exhibition of his earlier work as a student at the studio of his friend Ad Bates. His work in the 1940's, primarily watercolors of southern scenes on brown paper, were included in various exhibitions at galleries and museums: "American Negro Art" at the Downtown Gallery in New York (1941); the Institute of Modern Art in Boston (1943); the G Place Gallery in Washington, D.C. (1944); the Institute of History and Art in Albany, N.Y. (1945); the Samuel Kootz Gallery where his first one-man exhibition in New York was held in 1945; the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art (1946); and the John Devouluy Gallery in Paris. He was also included in the exhibition of "Abstract and Surrealist American Art" at the Art Institute of Chicago, along with other winners of the 58th Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture. Bearden was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942 and served during World War II in a segregated unit, the 372nd Infantry Regiment. Discharged in 1945 at the end of the war, he resumed his duties as a case worker for the Department of Social Services the following year. In 1950, he went to Paris on the G.I. Bill to study philosophy at the Sorbonne. There, he met the great French artists Brancusi and Braque, as well as prominent American emigres such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin. He recounted later how he did not once touch a paint-brush during his stay in Paris, but rather spent much of his time going to various galleries and museums and studying in detail the works of the great French masters, as well as the more contemporary French painters and sculptors. Bearden left Paris after his G.I. benefits were exhausted and returned to Harlem with one purpose in mind: to earn enough money as soon as possible to go back to Paris. During this period his style matured, becoming more abstract; his colors more solid and vibrant. He also switched from watercolors to oil. But in spite of the heightened quality of his work and his growing popularity in New York, the contradictions and the repressive nature of a racially segregated culture destroyed his confidence in the financial prospects of his art, and, ultimately, in his art itself. Looking for a better financial alternative he turned to song writing, although without conviction and, in 1952 resumed work for the Department of Social Services. His marriage to Nanette Rohan in 1954 renewed his commitment to painting. Convinced, however, of the shortcomings of his formal artistic training, Bearden became involved in new experiments with color and a meticulous and in-depth study of the great masters: Rembrandt, Monet, Veronese and Grotto, among others. By the end of the 1950's his style had become almost exclusively abstract and non-objective. The Beardens moved in 1954 to an artist's loft on Canal Street, which became an informal rendezvous for struggling young artists and some of Bearden's more well known acquaintances. There, in 1963, Bearden and a group of artists including Charles Alston, Alvin Hollingsworth, Norman Lewis and Hale Woodruff, constituted the "Spiral Group," dedicated, in part, to encourage various galleries to exhibit the works of younger, talented black artists. With that same objective in mind, the Cinque Gallery was launched seven years later by Bearden, Ernest Crichlow and Norman Lewis. It was while working on a "Spiral Group" project to present a collective artistic statement during the 1963 March on Washington, that the

relevance of the medium of collage first dawned on Bearden. The decade of the '60's had a tremendous influence on Bearden's artistic style and vision of the world. The energy released by the Civil Rights movement, the revolution in Afro-American culture and society, the anti-war movement, the developments in black music, jazz in particular, and the sheer vitality of youth and life, in general, permeated his art. He abandoned the abstract for the collage, which under his palette, became an almost documentary portrayal of reality. Trains, birds, African masks of women captured in their universal, human dimension, street scenes and music instruments are some of the recurring themes in his work in that period. Bearden described the careful juxtaposition of different planes of reality in his work then as an attempt "to redefine the image of man in the terms of the negro experience I know best." The tremendous success of his collages finally allowed Bearden to leave the Department of Social Services in 1966. The following year, he was awarded the annual prize of the National Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1971, a retrospective of his work was organized under the theme "The Prevalence of Ritual" at the Museum of Modern Art. The show travelled around the country to Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Berkeley, California, North Carolina, and back to New York to the Studio Museum in Harlem. In the 1980's, exhibitions of his collages were held at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, N.C., the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Bearden has written two books: *Six Black Masters of American Art* with Harry Henderson (1972) and *The Painter's Mind* with Carol Holtz (1981). The Bearden family lives in New York but commutes regularly between their apartment in the city and their estate on the island of St. Martin in the Caribbean.

Scope and Content Note

The Romare Bearden Papers consist primarily of incoming CORRESPONDENCE, 1933-1972 which is general in nature. Included among the papers are WRITINGS AND NOTES, a program and a file on ALVIN HOLLINGSWORTH, Artist-Teacher.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American art
African American teachers

Occupations

African American artists
African American painters

Names

Bearden, Romare, 1911-1988
Hollingsworth, Alvin C

Container List

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