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Experience vs. Theory: Romare Bearden and Abstract Expressionism

Matthew S. Witkovsky

From his discharge at the end of World War II until his participation in the Civil-Rights-oriented art group known as Spiral in 1962-63, Romare Bearden was very much involved with the foremost American art movement of that time, Abstract Expressionism. For three years after the war, Bearden exhibited with soon-to-be celebrated Abstract Expressionists such as Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Adolph Gottlieb, David Hare, and others at Sam Kootz's gallery, and his work evolved, both then and afterward, along lines which reflect these and other contemporary artists' formal concerns throughout the late '40s and the '50s. Still, after 1950, Bearden's work was exhibited almost exclusively with that of other black artists, rather than that of the movement's established proponents. After converging ever more visibly with Abstract Expressionism's repertoire of aesthetic and philosophical concerns during the 1950s, Bearden seemed suddenly to reject his work of the previous decade, both in medium and content, and to concentrate on the work in collage that has since brought him lasting recognition.

In fact, however, Bearden's collages and photostats of the mid-1960s onwards bear fundamental resemblances to his abstract and semi-abstract works of the previous years; more importantly, they reveal an attitude towards Abstract Expressionism which has great relevance to the movement's methods and aims. In choosing to base his images on scenes rooted in his own experience, Bearden does not repudiate the need—greatly stressed by the Abstract Expressionists—to convey messages of universal, timeless, and

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hence mythic importance; rather, he claims that universal emotions and actions may be most effectively captured via local, historically specific scenes.

Bearden's evolution parallels that of the core of Abstract Expressionist painters. Beginning around 1938, he studied at the Art Students' League under German political artist George Grosz. Although he never joined the Federal Arts Project, as did several subsequent Abstract Expressionists, he painted within the formal parameters of American Regionalism and Social Realism prevalent during the Depression. In addition, he spent a great deal of time with Harlem artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Augusta Savage, and Ernest Critchlow, who were heavily involved with the Project, its aims, and methods. Although he agreed with many Project artists that art should be "an instrument of social change" ("Rectangular Structure" 11), Bearden early on expressed an interest in formal concerns in art which transcended the specifics of his time and place and of his position as a black artist.

In a 1934 article, Bearden made known his opposition to the efforts of institutional patrons of black art, such as the Harmon Foundation, to limit blacks to depicting their "ethnic richness" in order to convince white viewers of their cultural integrity. Black artists of the day, he felt, were "at best hackneyed and uninspired." "They have looked at nothing with their own eyes. . . . they have evolved nothing original or native like the spiritual, or jazz music" ("The Negro Artist" 371). Bearden praised contemporary art movements for substituting "for mere photographic realism a search for inner truths" and called upon blacks to portray these truths in their own art. He did not, however, demand that any artist sacrifice representational art in order to probe themes of universal importance; after all, he wrote, "Rembrandt painted the ordinary Dutch people about him, but he presented their emotions in such a way that their appeal was universal" (372).

Despite his debatable assessment of Rembrandt, Bearden raised some very important points with this essay. Wanting to expand his freedom as a black artist, he established a potential link between his art, or that of any black person, and one of the most renowned artists of the Western tradition. He saw no reason that an artist of color should not have as much claim to universality as a white artist. Bearden's emphasis on "real-life" source material—the "ordinary people" he saw in Rembrandt's paintings—nevertheless qualified this highly modernist drive toward universal significance in a way which greatly affected his relation to the Abstract Expressionist movement.
During his studies at the Art Students' League, Bearden read avidly and, from 1936 onwards, received a great deal of exposure to European art—in addition to the training Grosz provided—from the writer Claude McKay and fellow painter Carl Holty (Hatch interview). Before he was drafted in 1942, he had begun to take a serious look at twentieth-century artists like Picasso and Cézanne, even though he did not employ what he called their "space ideals"—their revolutionary rearrangement of forms in relation to the picture plane—in his own painting. In his studio on 125th Street, surrounded by members of the Harlem Arts Guild and other uptown cultural movements, Bearden thus pursued interests rather similar to those in which the Abstract Expressionists engaged downtown.

Upon his return from military reserve duty in 1945, Bearden was asked to show at the Samuel Kootz Gallery in New York, and it was here he enjoyed his first broad recognition. He had had exhibits since 1941, including two while he was stationed in the army, but the group and one-man shows Kootz gave him represented a huge improvement in his status. In addition to his higher visibility, Bearden now shared wall space with several artists who, during the later '40s, were beginning to attract some attention in the art press—principally, Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Adolph Gottlieb, and David Hare. Later, Hans Hofmann's and Arshile Gorky's works were exhibited at Kootz (Gorky's posthumously), and Pablo Picasso became a celebrated addition to the gallery with a show in 1947, followed by a permanent contract after Kootz reorganized in the '50s.

Bearden's inclusion in this gallery, which might seem fortuitous or unexpected in retrospect, made perfect sense at the time, because his formal concerns and subject matter coincided with his fellow artists' in a way that could only add to the gallery's thematic unity. Bearden started his tenure at Kootz with a series of watercolors and oils, collectively entitled "The Passion of Christ," based on the Biblical books of Mark and Matthew. Kootz placed it second in his 1945-46 season, installing it in October, and it received praise from a number of New York critics. Edward Alden Jewell, a somewhat forward-looking reviewer for the New York Times, praised Bearden's "develop[ment] from social interpretation of the depression days, Negro subjects, illustrations and genre painting to its present level of semi-abstraction" (Holt 6). Bearden, according to this analysis, had advanced from a supposedly "debilitating" focus on Regionalist and "ethnic" concerns to a stylistic approach which participated in the post-war aims of avant-garde American art.
In an artist's statement prefacing the show's catalog, Bearden expressed a few of the concerns characteristic of the embryonic Abstract Expressionist circle, most specifically the need to depict myths in an attempt to convey universal human values and reactions. "This myth," he wrote, referring to Christ's life, death, and resurrection, "is . . . perhaps the greatest expression of man's humanism." Because of Christ's influence on man's "humanistic" spirit, Bearden maintained, Christ's actual existence is unimportant: "What is important, is that the idea [of him] has lived in men."

Christ's stature as a mythic concept thus transcends his physical existence in time and space, so that his actual life and deeds serve really as mere starting points for any artistic interpretation of his importance. Accordingly, Bearden emphasized the spiritual intent of his work rather than its specific Biblical inspiration: "My concern," he concluded, "is with those universals that must be digested by the mind and cannot be merely seen by the eye." A similar preference for the symbolic, abstracted persistence of certain acts or heroes, as opposed to an attention to their historical contexts, has been observed in the work of a number of New York School artists: in Motherwell's commemoration of the Spanish Civil War (Collins), for instance; in Pollock's investigation of Northwest Coast Indian art (Rushing); in Rothko's and Newman's interpretations of Biblical stories; and in the interest in Greek myth demonstrated by many of these artists. This ahistorical focus on mythical ideas underlies, for instance, Newman's introduction to a 1947 group show at Betty Parsons' gallery, "The Ideographic Picture," in which he claimed that to the Kwakiutl artist a "shape was a . . . vehicle for an abstract thought-complex" rather than an illustration of a specific event.

One of the works in Bearden's first show at Kootz is a portrayal of the Last Supper, showing Christ surrounded at the table by three of his disciples (Fig. 1). Despite his emphasis on the mythical idea of Christ, followed by the assertion that "delineation of the subject matter should not constitute an end in itself" (statement for "The Passion of Christ"), Bearden's figures here are relatively realistic for those in a mid-1940s' avant-garde art work. Such direct usage of literary and artistic models would disappear in Bearden's few 1950s' shows, but this Cenacolo scene is easily identifiable, as are figures in Bearden's other "Passion of Christ" drawings and paintings. Body parts have been stylized into abstract geometric forms, but lines of black ink define distinct and coherent volumetric entities in a manner partly reminiscent of early Cubism, and partly of fourteenth-century religious panels.
Bearden was fascinated, as he later recalled, both by Duccio and by Picasso, but his use of these two artists' styles alters their character in highly innovative ways. His line, for instance, heavily defines each form's contours and accentuates the overlapping of figures which Duccio used to indicate depth, but Bearden breaks
up the solid definition of mass far more than did the Renaissance artist. Nor does this discontinuous formal structure simply further Picasso's planar fragmentation, because Bearden's lines indicate the motion of human interaction as well; they add to the scene's content, rather than simply disrupting its form. Bearden's color expresses a rhythm and Expressionist energy independent of its descriptive function, so that it is only partly the servant of naturalistic representation and partly a pictorial element unto itself.

Thus, as Christ turns, his face and that of the disciple to his left jump forward a little toward each other, while their bodies fuse in an overlay of reds and yellows. The small green quadrangle that separates their bodies defines, in a similar way, the pocket of energy created by their interaction. To give two other examples, the greenish circle of color that represents a piece of fruit on the table rolls out of the ink-drawn shell that once held it, and the red rectangle used to fill in a hand (bottom left) stretches out beyond its own fingers to grasp the chalice. Color and line describe both three-dimensional forms and flat canvas, but they serve ultimately to evoke a dynamic interchange of human energies, a sort of "communion" that, because of its basis in abstract form, can transcend the specifics of time and place in its value for all humanity.

If Bearden's heavy, fragmentary lines recall Picasso's Cubism, the free-floating color in this and other works suggests an interest in Surrealism, particularly in the explorations of one-time Surrealist Joan Miró. Miró and Picasso were probably the two older artists who most preoccupied the imaginations of new artists in the 1940s, so it is not surprising that Bearden should have studied their approaches. Bearden befriended Miró in New York; one bit of praise he subsequently wrote about the artist, in fact, ties the two seminal figures together and substantiates the approach observed in Bearden's drawing of The Last Supper. "It was Miró," he notes in his journal, "who freed painting from the tight Cubist form. He said, 'I forsook the structure and listened to the voice of poetry'" (26).

As a 1986 show of twenty Abstract Expressionist artists at the Newport Harbor Art Museum demonstrates, this interest in Cubist structure, combined with a desire to overcome its rigidity by following more "poetic" inner drives, guided many artists during the 1940s. Motherwell's 1944 drawing Three Important Personages (Fig. 2), which was included in this show, contains several similarities to Bearden's watercolors. Polygonal cutouts of color relate to one another in a highly abstract, rhythmic way, defining energy as much as spatial relationships among the figures. Bearden
implies less depth, and hence fewer perspectival contradictions, than Motherwell, who sets his middle "personage" on a receding plane of color. His overlapping of bodies in _The Last Supper_, though, echoes the effect achieved by Motherwell's use of connecting lines to unite the three figures' personal energies.

Motherwell and Bearden were more reserved in their exploration of water-based media at this point than in subsequent years, but they have both begun to emphasize fluidity in these works—Motherwell's background planes, for instance, have the same uneven wash and wavering, irregular contours as Bearden's "liberated" fruit. Bearden calls three-dimensionality into question by re-using, in the style of Cézanne, Fauves, and Cubists alike, the device of the upturned table top; Motherwell questions the importance of shading via a schematized crosshatching akin to Picasso's parodic "Neo-Impressionist" dots. In other works, though, such as _Three Figures Shot_ (Fig. 3), Motherwell uses the fluid spots even more for their pure energy and anger, whereas Bearden's tendency toward lyricism keeps him from such violent effects, a
preference which separates him from later developments in Abstract Expressionist art.

On the whole, therefore, Romare Bearden's artistic concerns during this period compare quite closely to those of Kootz's other artists, and to New York artists outside the gallery as well. His formal interests, such as the interrelation of line and color on a planar surface, and his vibrant and energetic compositions correspond to Abstract Expressionist tendencies as much as his stated preference for myths and legendary figures of universal, humanistic importance. If his choice of subject matter during this period stems at all from his own personal background, it is only by virtue of his service in the war. According to one of Bearden's friends, Harry B. Henderson, Bearden "never talked about" the war, but his selection of Christ was seen at the time by Barrie Stavis in his preface to a 1947 show as a young sergeant's recognition of "an unparalleled symbol of man's humanity" during a period when such humanity seemed utterly nonexistent. Bearden's next series, inspired by the poetry of Federico García Lorca, involves portrayals of bullfighters engaged in ritualistic combat (Fig. 4). Sociological rituals fascinated
Bearden all his life, but in this case he may also be paying tribute to Lorca, a victim of Spain’s Civil War, as Motherwell does in his *Elegy to the Spanish Republic (At Five in the Afternoon)*.

The ensemble of Bearden’s series from 1945 to 1948 suggests as well, however, an ongoing interest in literature and its relation to painting, which does set Bearden apart from his fellow gallery artists. Bearden used episodes from Rabelais’ first book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Homer’s *Iliad* as starting points for his own compositional explorations during these years, considering them elemental pieces of subject matter which he then sought to arrange with as much rhythm and force—as complex a system of punctuation, in a way—as he felt the great writers used. Catalog notes for “The Iliad,” held in 1948 at the Niveau Gallery, reveal a desire to maintain the autonomy of this art in relation to Bearden’s subject matter: “The brilliant watercolors by Romare Bearden are not illustrations, as they do not refer to any particular episodes or personages in the *Iliad*.” Nonetheless, Bearden’s interest in literature is undeniable, and his removal of literary subject matter
in the '50s became a source of great difficulty in the organization of his paintings, as we shall see.

Rhythms of writing and music were not the only nonvisual models for Bearden in the 1940s; his college degree in mathematics influenced the designs of his watercolors a good deal. In Woman on a Rock (Fig. 5), from the "Iliad" show, the many shapes of color relate to one another in a compositional logic independent of any desire to represent this figure naturalistically. Bearden does not undermine his "realism" with multiple or contradictory perspectives, as did artists experimenting with Surrealist techniques. Instead, he allows one to choose, paradoxically, between lines, which describe a figurative volume, and colors, traditionally the enemies of volumetric form. Whereas one's eye identifies the woman's modeling by her inked-in contours, for instance, the abstract sensation of movement these lines create is counterpointed in the precise alternation of colors down her body. Bright red forms bounce from side to side from her head to her legs, while the darker beige swooping across her lap neatly matches washes of a similar color in her face and neck.

Bearden never let logic overwhelm his sense of figuration, though. He marveled at Piet Mondrian's fully geometric rhythms, but felt that they were "in a large sense a result of the man's whole way of life" (journal 24), a way of life far different from his own. As he notes in his journal, "to come into the studio and paint just cubes and circles is in a sense to deny everything one has seen all day" (40). The balanced or "punctuated" movement established by the various colors in Woman on a Rock remains subordinated, therefore, to the figure and her setting, rather than dominating and completely abstracting the work.

Bearden separated color and line far more noticeably in this watercolor than in The Last Supper, though, heightening the tension between his abstract forms and his figures. This tension can, in fact, be considered a paradigm for Bearden's work, and for his particular response to the demands of Abstract Expressionism. On the one hand, Bearden's background as a student of literature and of artistic traditions, and as a black human being, involves very real experiences, figurative and concrete. At the same time, though, he had a great interest as a painter and thinker of the mid-twentieth century in exploring abstraction by considering the formal qualities of line, color, and materials on a flat surface. Barrie Stavis's preface to "New Works by Romare Bearden" illustrates the tension that this divided emphasis on representation and formalism causes with almost every sentence. Bearden's canvases are about to "spill over
the frame,” he writes, but are held in check by Bearden’s figures; similarly, the artist’s interest in mankind—Christ’s humanity, the torero’s ritualism, Rabelaisian man’s joyous relation to life—counteracts an attitude toward colors as “a force” in themselves, integral to the abstract structure of a painting. Stavis concludes by citing Bearden’s fascination with the technique of curve and
counter-curve by which Byzantine artists organized their mosaics; in so doing, he underscores the struggle between concrete representation and abstract formalization which characterizes Bearden’s art.

By around 1950, most Abstract Expressionist artists had resolved this struggle in favor of complete abstraction. All art has subject matter, they claimed, but the potential significance of a fully abstract work transcends any figurative depiction’s meaning, because abstract feelings and essences form the basis for universal reality. As Barnett Newman put it, “The abstract shape is [what is] real” (preface). Newman’s search for ways to express such values sparked, as it did for Bearden, an interest in myths from disparate periods and cultures, but these stories’ essential character, considered indicative of all humankind, seemed to preclude the possibility of depicting any specific figures involved. From 1952 to 1963, Bearden removed figures from his paintings as well, but his reasons for doing so, and the conclusions he eventually drew from this decision, differed greatly from those of the other vanguard New York artists.

In 1948, Bearden left the Kootz Gallery, and after the exhibition of his last series on the *Iliad* at Niveau, he took advantage of the GI Bill to get a year’s stay in Paris. There, from 1950-51, he studied not so much art as mathematics, and spent his free time visiting jazz clubs, along with the occasional artist’s studio. Music and math, for both of which he had an aptitude, occupied the greater part of his time, and even when he returned to New York, Bearden tried his hand more at songs than at paintings. He enjoyed some mild success in this area, even composing a hit in the mid-’50s with “Sea Breeze,” as a result of which he joined the songwriters’ association ASCAP.

Bearden did not do this in a very healthy state of mind. “You mustn’t confuse . . . his capacity to write music . . . with his art,” warns Stavis (interview), and Harry Henderson recalls that music and a return to cartooning were more attempts to earn money, and to escape the crisis in his art, than serious alternatives to his career as a painter. As Bearden himself stated a couple of decades later, “In 1950, I was confused about what to do . . . which way to go. . . . I had kind of a breakdown” (Hatch interview). His inspection of the contemporary art scene in Paris left him with the impression that, in good American fashion, “it’s time for the barbarians to invade and introduce new blood,” yet, ironically, he felt incapable of creating the “color, life, fire and elemental things” (Sims 117) that characterize his 1940s watercolors. His work was not selling, which
was discouraging, but in addition, Bearden felt caught in a creator's dilemma. As he later so eloquently described it, "During the early 1950s, I'd come to a plateau in my painting. My color was pulling my forms apart, as if the color wanted a complete life of its own. Form and color were at war with each other; I was the victim" (Henderson).

This, then, is the outcome of the tension visible in Bearden's work of the later 1940s. In the signature pieces of many of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, energetically charged colors represented a thematic struggle which did not require explicitly recognizable subject matter. For Bearden, however, the question of recognizable form—which he thought he must, yet could not, include—constituted a crisis in his art. Commenting on a 1947 group show at Kootz called "Woman," Bearden had observed that Baziotes' effort was not successful precisely because of the artist's devotion to unmediated abstraction. "The greater fantasy," he remarked at the time, "is that which takes off from an object and shows it to the beholder in a new way and yet does this out of the component elements of the object" (journal 40). After his return from Paris, however, Bearden suppressed almost completely the "objects" in his own work, searching instead for forms that would be figurative yet neither literary nor retrograde, nor—essentially—recognizable at all. Components of formal technique, such as line and color, displace scenes taken from the outside world as subject matter in Bearden's paintings of the 1950s; in changing ways, the battle between these differing sources of inspiration would continue to shape Bearden's debate with modernism until his death.

One of the earliest of Bearden's fully abstract works is, not surprisingly, a watercolor; although Bearden included almost as many oils as drawings in his shows at Kootz, he later recalled that at that time "I simply wanted to extend what I had done in watercolor" ("Rectangular Structure" 11), and it took him some years to create a suitable expression for oil on canvas. Untitled (Fig. 6), painted around 1952, indicates some of the approaches Bearden attempted in order to organize his warring factions, form and color, into a unified coexistence on paper; the work also reveals, as might be expected, many similarities to Abstract Expressionist works of the time. Aspects of this watercolor, in fact, raise comparisons with artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Hans Hofmann, and Bearden's friend Carl Holty, all of whom experimented with an overlay of coloristic entities devoid of figures and lines, and with an emphasis on fluid motion rather than taut geometry.
in several works like this one, a more subdued tone prevails.

Helen Frankenthaler's Shaker (Fig. 7), completed in 1963, bears


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enhanced by the thinness of her oils. A neutral ground, through which one can discern the canvas itself, surrounds the central “shattered” form and even peeks through rifts in this shape’s structure, in a way that Bearden came to appreciate more and more in the later ’50s. Shatter, in fact, seems an odd title, for Frankenthaler’s color elements seem to be dissolving rather than fragmenting, just as Bearden’s do.

Bearden’s overlapping, fluid planes in turn anticipate the 1960s’ work of his longstanding friend and mentor Carl Holty, who for most of the 1950s was dispersing small blocks of color in a much more
geometric, fragmentary way. In works done in the '60s, however, such as *Pony* (1965), Holty showed a large-scale fluidity comparable to Bearden's—yet better balanced and integrated than the bigger forms in *Untitled*—and a similar desire to overlap planes of color without building up too thick a surface. In the catalog for a commemorative exhibit of Holty's, Bearden remarked, "Holty's composition depended on an interpenetration of color planes from each side of the canvas . . . " and he cited one of his friend's oft-repeated statements to that effect: "The art of painting is an art of putting something over something else" (preface). In Bearden's case, the interpenetration is a throwback to his pre-Paris designs, and its use in *Untitled* indicates a move toward an all-over composition—"from each side of the canvas"—which Bearden explored intensively in years to come.

Bearden's relation to Hans Hofmann in this and subsequent works is more complex, because Hofmann explores overlapping color and the properties of pure pigment, yet uses coloristic energy—like Motherwell in *Three Figures Shot*—in ways indicative of a direction in Abstract Expressionism Bearden almost never followed. As early as 1944, in his painting *Effervescence* (Fig. 8), Hofmann threw large areas of color into his composition, superimposing on them a multitude of smaller forms in relatively few colors. Aside from the palette, which is much less muted than Bearden's, the overlapping of dripped forms suggests parallels in the two artists' work, but Hofmann's differs markedly from Bearden's in ways it is important to understand. Bearden came to apply paint almost as thickly as Hofmann did here, even though he disliked the "tracks of color" this produced, but his oils never seem this viscous, this gestural, this plastic. Bearden always considered himself a student of the flat surface, and "flat painting" and "shallow space" were crucial components of his praise for everyone from the Byzantines to Giotto, from classical Chinese landscapists to Holty. Hofmann's palpable, encrusted texture, particularly in the thick splotches of white paint, is something Bearden almost always avoided. By adding these large patches of undiluted paint to an already scaleless background, moreover, Hofmann created an impression of size far greater than the painting's actual dimensions, 4 ½ x 3 feet. Although Bearden later produced several canvases of that size and larger, his preference for flatter and more contained shapes gives his work a less imposing appearance and scale.

Similarities and differences to other artists aside, Bearden was, for the most part, exploring a direct result of his own 1940s' watercolors in *Untitled*. Without a literary subject to contain them,
Fig. 8. Hans Hofmann, *Effervescence*, 1944. Oil, India ink, casein, and enamel on plywood, 54 3/8 x 35 7/8". University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley.
the colors spill out and over the paper, enveloping certain harder-edged remnants of the previous decade in an amorphous expansion. Motion and the interplay of forms prevail, in an abstract presentation which Bearden did not even try to contextualize by ascribing to the work a titular subject. The colors themselves have changed considerably, shifting towards a darker palette. Moreover, since the overlapping, which Bearden once achieved by tightly bounded planes, is now accomplished by color alone, there is a sense of thickness to the color itself where different tones converge. The work’s overall mood does not seem very cheerful, and although his sense of color creates a powerful effect, his composition as a whole is not so interestingly organized as his late '40s' watercolors; it wavers between a small-scale coordination of forms (principally in the central portion) and an unprecedented use of overwhelmingly large areas of color, which Bearden seems not to have mastered yet.

By the middle of the decade, Bearden turned to a different aesthetic approach for guidance. As he later recalled, he had returned to an examination of older masters, especially the Dutch seventeenth-century painters De Hooch, Terborch, and Vermeer; even more importantly, though, "I was also studying . . . the techniques which enable Chinese classical painters to organize their large areas" ("Rectangular Structure" 11). These studies took on the character of private lessons, under the tutelage of a Mr. Wu, a calligrapher whom Bearden encountered by chance one day in a downtown bookshop. With his guidance, Bearden not only began to employ new structural devices, such as "the open corner, which allows the viewer a way into the painting," but also to explore Zen attitudes towards art—"letting the paint be paint, and the canvas be canvas" was his friend Henderson’s impression.

Towards the end of the decade, this experimentation with Zen principles and Chinese painting techniques led Bearden to create a number of larger, all-over compositions to which his wife Nanette Rohan gave titles taken from classical Chinese poetry. Blue is the Smoke of War, White the Bones of Men (Fig. 9), painted in 1960, represents—from the title on down—a curious amalgam of Bearden’s earlier concerns, as well as of the radical and uncharacteristic ways he attempted to explore his craft as painter. Most striking about the work, in terms of its relation both to Abstract Expressionism and to Bearden’s earlier art, are its scale and its depth, which seem uncharacteristically expansive. The painting is unprecedentedly large for him, 66 x 60″, and he worked with it on the floor, creating it by adding paint from all sides in a manner unusually reminiscent of the most active "action painters." An indistinct and scaleless
background makes the forms here appear even larger than they are, just as Hofmann's large color patterns do in *Effervescence*; Bearden's spattered white spray evokes as well that painting's feeling of ebullience, even if his other elements here create a more contemplative setting. The contrast between foreground “spray” and background “atmosphere,” in fact, comes across with
distinctive strength in *Blue is the Smoke* . . . , because Bearden offsets his thick, well-defined splotches of white paint with a hazy atmospheric density attributable not only to Chinese brush paintings but, once again, to Joan Miró. Thus, the relatively flat overlapping for which he praises Holty and so many others has temporarily disappeared, replaced by a truly environmental use of depth and scale.

Bearden remains markedly different from Hofmann; ironically, though, he retains many features of older work in this composition. The main technical difference between Bearden and Hofmann and most other Abstract Expressionists is one of materials; Bearden works here in tempera rather than oil. Lowery Sims has suggested that Bearden's several heavily impastoed works in the mid-'50s reflect the influence of "anti-aesthete" Jean Dubuffet (Sims 117-21). These works are atypical, however, producing the unwanted "tracks of color" that Bearden later avoided; Bearden preferred thinner surfaces, and before he started making oils imitative of his watercolors, he used tempera to achieve this result. Here, though, thinner does not mean flatter. Instead, this quality heightens the contrast between a translucent background—in which Bearden lets the canvas "be the canvas"; i.e., show through unpainted—and the denser mini-explosions of white paint very much in the foreground.

Another Bearden convention from the '40s which the artist transposes here is the use of literary subject matter. Bearden agreed to a line of poetic verse for his title, just as he did for his explorations of García Lorca's "Llanto por un torero" in 1946, but here, despite a renewed emphasis on combat, the referent is far more abstruse for the Western mind, and Bearden gives no author. Color is, ironically, once again identified with representational form—blue for smoke, white for bones—, but Bearden's coloristic elements work now to establish an atmosphere of spuming spray and hazy mountains rather than literal and literary objects. The same red square found in * Untitled* 's upper left corner, and which had come to symbolize Bearden's approach of the 1940s, persists alone, while all around it a small-scale literary environment has turned into an enormous Chinese landscape.

Bearden painted several works in this style, at the same time as he was creating the rice-paper compositions which led to his collage work of the mid-1960s and later. In terms of size, formal definition, and texture, the collages represent a direct leap back to Bearden's 1940s' watercolors. In addition, because certain of their themes, such as the Harlem scenes, recall his Social Realist subject matter of the 1930s, it would seem that Bearden repudiated his work
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of the 1950s in this newer art. Bearden apparently overturned his most clearly Abstract Expressionist phase once he finally learned "what to paint" (Sims 117).

For this reason, perhaps, Sims focuses, in her article, more on the differences between Bearden and Abstract Expressionism than on his similarities to the movement. She stresses, for example, Bearden's "French sensibility," evident in his "delicacy and small scale," and emphasizes his avoidance of "the linear play of Surrealist automatism," characteristic of certain Abstract Expressionists, in order to analyze his interest in Chinese landscape painting. Sims is right to point out Bearden's differences from Abstract Expressionism, but she underrates the implications of his inclusion in Kootz's gallery by doing so, as well as the formal and attitudinal similarities between Bearden and this movement that date from his tenure at Kootz.

Even more importantly, however, a focus on the traits in Bearden "antithetical" to Abstract Expressionism obscures his shared interest in the movement's theoretical linchpin—universality. As discussed in regard to Bearden's 1940s' series, literary episodes were for him the "staircase to the universal" that Mondrian felt the grid form to be, and when Bearden saw himself compelled to divest his compositions of literary incident, it was to explore the potentialities of abstract color relationships he considered to be meaningful for all humankind. Bearden never relinquished the notion of universal significance in art, just as he pursued throughout his life a modernist interest in the flat canvas. In contrast to the tenets of Abstract Expressionism, however, Bearden discovered that universal meaning may maintain references to the specific and familiar. In accordance with this realization, Bearden turned at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement from abstract, all-over tonalism to "local color" for his inspiration; he began to cut and paste pictures of African masks and American black people into scenes still imbued with his awareness of a modernist aesthetic.

To date, no one has analyzed the politics of Bearden's collages better than Ralph Ellison, in a 1969 article entitled "Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections." Bearden, like all gifted black artists, claims Ellison, has been constantly torn between "expressing the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world" (81). Ellison thus recasts the conflict between abstract, universal color and figurative form in terms of black realities; to put it another way, the black artist feels an "irremediable conflict between his identity as a member of an
embattled social minority and his freedom as an artist” (82). To define Romare Bearden’s work as black cannot liberate him from this entrapment, because such a term implicitly denies the artist, and his race, access to cross-cultural meanings and aesthetic forms, without providing a clue as to how the infinite diversity of artists who happen to be black reflects upon their heritage.

The modern artist has a further problem, according to Ellison, the one that besets Romare Bearden so greatly: “He flounders before the question of how his group’s experience might be given statement through the categories of a non-verbal form of art which has been consciously exploring its own unique possibilities for many decades before he appeared” (82). How reconcile, in other words, the newly developed language—including drips and spatters, enhanced planar values and automatist technique—of an art form that engages its self-referential, material reality, yet still preserve a connection to one’s life experiences? The beauty of Bearden’s collages is that they transform experience into a visual statement capable of affecting all humanity; they elevate the rituals of a specific culture along theoretical lines consistent not only with that culture, but with modern-day society as a whole.

In the 1961 work Two Women in a Courtyard (Fig. 10), Bearden represents a typically Southern (and for that matter, Harlem) custom of courtyard gossip, one of the many childhood memories to which he frequently refers in his collage and photostat work. “I try to show,” commented Bearden, “that the courtyard was as important to American Southern life, as indeed it was in the Holland of De Hooch, Terborch and Vermeer” (“Rectangular Structure” 11). Thus, the specifics of this ritual can be transplanted to other times and cultures, in a way reversing the process of cultural comparison which originally motivated Bearden and the Abstract Expressionists to study ancient and “primitive” myths. Bearden’s fragmented body parts and reassembled planes have their greatest relevance with regard to contemporary society, however, and specifically, in Ellison’s terms, with respect to black America: “Bearden’s meaning is identical with his method. His combination of techniques is in itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams which characterize much of Negro American history” (Ellison 86).

If one looks at a scene of the same title from Bearden’s 1948 “Iliad” series (Fig. 11), the formal origins of his more recent work become clearer still. In the “Iliad” watercolor, color struggles characteristically against line, and fragmentation is caused by
overlapping planes fit into a collapsed space, just as in Bearden's other '40s' works. Bearden resolved this tension by using magazine photographs; figuration is inherent in the pictures that are his raw material, yet abstract form necessarily results when these photos

Fig. 10. Two Women in a Courtyard, 1967. Collage, 40 x 30". Unknown.
get cropped for collage. Bearden lets the seated lady's eye be an eye, for instance, but creates an abstract form around the eye by severing it from its original context. In addition, the overlay of paper upon paper produces in itself a flat surface with a slightly perceptible depth. Bearden may choose to increase his perspective, as he does in representing the courtyard, but the physical thickness of the paper achieves quite naturally what Bearden sought to create via Duccio and Cubism decades earlier. Bearden sums up his progression through modernism as follows:

I feel that when some photographic detail . . . is fractured and integrated into a different space, it acquires a plastic quality it did not have in the original photograph. . . . In such a process, something specific and particular can have its meaning extended towards what is more general and universal but never at the expense of the total structure. ("Rectangular Structure" 17)

Such a radical adaptation of his earlier technique, however, stems directly from Bearden's devotion to Abstract Expressionist goals and approaches in the 1950s. His collages are quite powerful, and often fairly large; The Block, for instance, approaches mural size. In the collage Two Women in a Courtyard, Bearden incorporates large, abstract cutouts for the house, courtyard, and background, integrating them with the two women's smaller anatomical fragments in a way far more successful than his first try in 1951-52 with Untitled. Settings for this, The Block, and numerous other collages include the large-scale evocation of landscape, coupled with an insistence on the nature of the background shapes as abstract, colored paper, which Bearden first mastered in the later 1950s.

Most importantly, the lessons Bearden learned by ridding his canvases of subject matter altogether must have played an important role in his decision not to return, after his abstract period, to direct explorations of European literary masterpieces. His 1974 series on a classic work, "The Odyssey," features all-black characters set in a mixture of African and American locales. "A style," Romare Bearden once observed, "is achieved by an artist through his introduction of personal forms into the grand style of his period" (journal 24). This is how the artist himself began, but, in retrospect, one is tempted to conclude that Abstract Expressionism's "grand style" overlooks the personal experience necessary to achieve great, in the sense of truly universal, art.
Fig. 11. Two Women in a Courtyard, 1948. Ink and watercolor, 24 x 18". Coll. June Kelly, New York.

Notes

1Artist’s journal, 13 Sept. 1947: “The sense of space has not so much to do with distances in art, as it has with the feeling of fullness of design, drawing, color and concept” (32).

2“10 Hierographic Paintings by Sgt. Romare Bearden,” 13 Feb.-3 Mar. 1944, and a group show, May-June 1944, both at G Place Gallery, Washington, DC.
Matthew S. Witkovsky

The Holty catalog includes a reproduction of Pony.

There is, in fact, an Untitled from 1960 (in a private collection in New York) which shows that Bearden did experiment at least once with the look of automatism. This work was on view (under the title Old Poem) at the Jamaica Arts Center as part of the exhibition "Abstract Expressionism: The Missing Link," 12 Jan.-25 Feb. 1989. Furthermore, we have already observed Bearden's explorations of large-scale works and vibrant color schemes, so it would seem that Sims' observations are not comprehensive.

Works Cited