

**Spotlight Essay**  
**February 2007**  
**Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum**



**Romare Bearden (American, 1914 - 1988)**  
***Black Venus*, 1968**  
**Mixed-media collage, 37 x 46 1/2 "**  
**University purchase, Charles H. Yalem Art Fund, 1994**  
**WU 1994.01**

Beginning with Cubism in the 1910s, collage has been celebrated as a particularly well-suited means of responding to and representing the simultaneity of difference within

everyday life. The medium has been variously employed by avant-garde movements throughout the twentieth century, including Futurism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, as a means of achieving the modernist utopia of bridging the gap between art and life. Collage offered artists associated with these movements an inventive means of constructing an image while destabilizing existing views of the world through discontinuity, fragmentation, and the inclusion of everyday objects and materials. Focusing on the work *Black Venus* (1968) by the African-American artist Romare Bearden, this essay will investigate the manner in which the artist appropriated and transformed this eminently modernist strategy in order to register and deconstruct issues of race and identity as they informed his experiences in 1960s America.

In contrast to the essentialist conceptions of African-American cultural identity and the type of Afrocentrism espoused by groups such as the Black Arts Movement, Bearden always emphasized the composite aspects of African American life as an amalgamation of disparate elements.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his writings, Bearden revealed a complex understanding of black subjectivity and identity as something that has itself been “collaged” by the vicissitudes of modern history.<sup>2</sup> “It is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda,” he expressed in his 1969 article “Rectangular Structure in My Montage Painting.” “My intention, however, is to reveal through pictorial complexities the richness of a life I know.”<sup>3</sup> *Black Venus* encapsulates the artist’s dual efforts to acknowledge the significance of the art historical canon while revising its forms to assert new representations of African American identity.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the notion of Afrocentrism and its relationship to the logic of Eurocentrism, see Carole Boyce Davies, “Beyond Unicentricity: Transcultural Black Presences,” *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 96-109.

<sup>2</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Romare Bearden, 1964: Collage as Kunstwollen,” in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 125.

<sup>3</sup> Romare Bearden, “Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings,” *Leonardo* 2, no. 1 (January 1969): 18. See also Romare Bearden, “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” *Critique* 1, no. 2 (November 1946): 22.

It was not until 1963, after spending more than a decade as an abstract painter, that Bearden turned to collage as his primary mode of artistic expression. He began experimenting with the medium because it offered him the means to deconstruct, fragment, improvise, and reconstruct, in a manner similar to that of the improvisational techniques of jazz musicians, a variety of contrary images. Bearden's turn to collage was part of a broader resurgence of interest in this avant-garde medium, as artists in both Europe and the United States searched for ways to address the shifting sociocultural conditions of an everyday life transformed by the rise of a postwar consumer society. In distinction to artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Allan Kaprow, who were experimenting with assemblage, environments, and installation art, Bearden employed the collage aesthetic toward predominantly representational and often autobiographical ends, cutting diverse pieces of magazine and newspaper illustrations and pasting them into a coherent narrative montage. Some of the more radical implications of collage, such as the rupturing of a unified field of representation by the incorporation of ambiguous fragments from daily life and the refusal to subsume these diverse elements into a homogenous whole or a narrative resolution, were sublimated, if not negated, by Bearden's concern for the overall unity of his compositions.<sup>4</sup> In *Black Venus*, for example, the juxtaposition of a diversity of imagery and patterns serves predominantly decorative ends, as Bearden ultimately subsumes these elements into a cohesive framework.

Bearden's incorporation of elements from mass culture shows an engagement with the representational techniques of advertising and marketing; however, his compositions do not challenge the autonomy of the art object, and his borrowings from the art historical canon were never presented as satire. For Bearden, art history provided a preexisting visual vocabulary that the artist must acknowledge and transform according to personal and sociohistorical circumstances.<sup>5</sup> At a time when the country was embroiled in the civil rights movement and struggling over issues of segregation, Bearden's *Black Venus* provocatively took up the long tradition of the female odalisque as a subject in Western art and recast it in an African-American context. The image of a black nude reclining on a sofa that is covered by a patchwork quilt immediately recalls both folk art conventions and the highly ornamental work of Henri Matisse, an artist whom Bearden very much admired.

In addition to clear allusions to the work of Matisse, Bearden's collage may also slyly evoke Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), a canonical image that brazenly depicts a female prostitute accompanied by a black servant and a small black cat at her feet. The subject of prostitution was frequently represented in modernist European painting throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Bearden certainly references this tradition, his inclusion of a guitar player and several musical instruments

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<sup>4</sup> In a 1964 interview Bearden described his turn to collage in terms of the medium's ability to incorporate "a variety of images into one unified expression." See Charles Childs, "Bearden: Identification and Identity," *Art News* 63 (October 1964): 62.

<sup>5</sup> Bearden was notably influenced by the writings of French author and statesman André Malraux (1901-1976). For more on Bearden's borrowings from art historical tradition and his understanding of Malraux, see Sarah Kennel, "Bearden's Musée Imaginaire," *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 140-55.

throughout the scene also recalls the history of jazz music and its emergence from within the high-class brothels of New Orleans. The artist is known to have begun depicting the parlors of Storyville, the legendary turn-of-the-century brothel district in New Orleans, by the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> In light of these dual contexts, one may extend the interpretation of *Black Venus* beyond that of a benign celebration of the beauty of the black woman and read it more critically as a problematic depiction of the black female body. The majority of art historical scholarship on Bearden emphasizes his benevolent representation of the black body, but fails to address some of the key implications of his appropriation of the conventions of the Western high-art nude.<sup>7</sup> Although Bearden did attempt to transcend the widespread stigmatization of black sexuality in popular culture, his works tend to reproduce standard gender tropes and objectifying strategies such as the voyeuristic gaze. In his Storyville collages, as in *Black Venus*, Bearden approached his female subject in a manner similar to that of Manet or Matisse: as an observer of life within which his artistic position enabled him to occupy an intimate place while at the same time remaining an outside observer.

While Bearden's *Black Venus* clearly emulates certain aspects of the art historical canon, his collage also evinces moments of significant confrontation between the themes and techniques of Western art history and black visual culture. For instance, the collaged and mask-like face of the male guitar player in the foreground appears to allude obliquely to the cross-cultural borrowings of early modern artists such as Picasso.<sup>8</sup> As noted by art critic Hilton Kramer, the use of the African mask motif suggests "the morphology of certain forms that derive originally from African art, then passed into modern art by way of cubism, and, are now being employed to evoke a mode of Afro-American experience."<sup>9</sup> It is left unclear if the reference to Picasso is intended as an homage or if it expresses a more critical relationship to his place at the center of the canon. *Black Venus* thus elucidates the profound challenges and contradictions inherent in Bearden's particular practice of collage as he attempted to mediate among a Western tradition of art he so greatly admired, contemporary popular culture, and the politics of the multiethnic and racially divided American society in which he lived.

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth Fine notes that Storyville scenes appeared in Bearden's collages about the time of MoMA's 1970 exhibition of images of Storyville's prostitutes by E.J. See Fine, "Romare Bearden: The Spaces Between," *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 92.

<sup>7</sup> For one of the few feminist interpretations of Bearden's work, see Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 112-22.

<sup>8</sup> In his 1964 series of photomontages known as "Projections," Bearden literally cut and pasted images of African masks to create composite faces in his compositions.

<sup>9</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Black Experience and Modernist Art," *The New York Times* (February 14, 1970), 23.