Circe Preparing a Banquet for Ulysses 1968 44 x 56 inches
Romare Bearden
Paintings and Projections

Introduction
by Ralph Ellison

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I regard the weakening of the importance given to objects as the capital transformation of western art. In painting, it is clear that a painting of Picasso's is less and less a "canvas", and more and more the mark of some discovery, a stake left to indicate the place through which a restless genius has passed . . .

This series of collages and projections by Romare Bearden represent a triumph of a special order. Springing from a dedicated painter's unending efforts to master the techniques of illusion and revelation which are so important to the craft of painting, they are also the result of Bearden's search for fresh methods to explore the plastic possibilities of Negro American experience. What is special about Bearden's achievement is, it seems to me, the manner in which he has made his dual explorations serve one another, the way in which his technique has been used to discover and transfigure its object. For in keeping with the special nature of his search and by the self-imposed 'rules of the game', it was necessary that the methods arrived at be such as would allow him to express 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.

To have done this successfully is not only to have added a dimension to the technical resourcefulness of art, but to have modified our way of experiencing reality. It is also to have had a most successful encounter with a troublesome social anachronism which, while finding its existence in areas lying beyond the special providence of the artist, has nevertheless caused great confusion among many painters of Bearden's social background. I say social, for although Bearden is by self-affirmation no less than by public identification a Negro American, the quality of his artistic culture can by no means be conveyed by that term. Nor does it help to apply the designation 'black' (even more amorphous for conveying a sense of cultural complexity) and since such terms tell us little about the unique individual-
ity of the artist or anyone else, it is well to have them out in the open where they can cause the least confusion.

What, then, do I mean by anachronism? I refer to that imbalance in American society which leads to a distorted perception of social reality, to a stubborn blindness to the creative possibilities of cultural diversity, to the prevalence of negative myths, racial stereotypes and dangerous illusions about art, humanity and society. Arising from an initial failure of social justice, this anachronism divides social groups along lines that are no longer tenable while fostering hostility, anxiety and fear; and in the area to which we now address ourselves it has had the damaging effect of alienating many Negro artists from the traditions, techniques and theories indigenous to the arts through which they aspire to achieve themselves.

Thus in the field of culture, where their freedom of self-definition is at a maximum, and where the techniques of artistic self-expression are most abundantly available, they are so fascinated by the power of their anachronistic social imbalance as to limit their efforts to describing its manifold dimensions and its apparent invincibility against change. Indeed, they take it as a major theme and focus for their attention, they allow it to dominate their thinking about themselves, their people, their country and their art. And while many are convinced that simply to recognize social imbalance is enough to put it to riot, few achieve anything like artistic mastery, and most fail miserably through a single-minded effort to tell it like it is.

Sadly however, the problem for the plastic artist is not one of ‘telling’ at all, but of revealing that which has been concealed by time, by custom, and by our trained incapacity to perceive the truth. Thus it is a matter of destroying moribund images of reality and creating the new. Further, for the true artist, working from the top of his times and out of a conscious concern with the most challenging possibilities of his form, the unassimilated and anachronistic — whether in the shape of motif, technique or image — is abhorrent, an evi-
idence of conceptual and/or technical failure, of challenges unmet. And although he may ignore the anachronistic through a preoccupation with other pressing details, he can never be satisfied simply by placing it within a frame. For once there, it becomes the symbol of all that is not art and a mockery of his powers of creation. So at his best he struggles to banish the anachronistic element from his canvas by converting it into an element of style, a device of his personal vision.

For as Bearden demonstrated here so powerfully, it is of the true artist’s nature and mode of action to dominate all the world and time through technique and vision. His mission is to bring a new visual order into the world, and through his art he seeks to reset society’s clock by imposing upon it his own method of defining the times. The urge to do this determines the form and character of his social responsibility, it spurs his restless exploration for plastic possibilities, and it accounts to a large extent for his creative aggressiveness.

But it is here precisely that the aspiring Negro painter so often falters. Trained by the circumstances of his social predicament to a habit (no matter how reluctant) of accommodation, such an attitude toward the world seems quite quixotic. He is, he feels, only one man, and the conditions which thwart his freedom are of such enormous dimensions as to appear unconquerable by purely plastic means — even at the hands of the most highly trained, gifted and arrogant artist.

"Turn Picasso into a Negro and then let me see how far he can go," he will tell you, because he feels an irremediable conflict between his identity as a member of an embattled social minority and his freedom as an artist. He cannot avoid — nor should he wish to avoid — his group-identity, but 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 on the scene; a self-assertive and irreverent art which abandoned long ago the task of mere
ted during a tranquil period of abstract painting) began quite innocently as a demonstration to a group of Negro painters. He was suggesting some of the possibilities through which common-place materials could be forced to undergo a creative metamorphosis when manipulated by some of the non-representational techniques available to the resourceful craftsman. The step from collage to projection followed naturally since Bearden had used it during the early Forties as a means of studying the works of such early masters as Giotto and de Hooch. That he went on to become fascinated with the possibilities lying in such ‘found’ materials is both an important illustrative instance for younger painters and a source for our delight and wonder.

Bearden knows that regardless of the individual painter’s personal history, taste or point of view, he must, nevertheless, pay his materials the respect of approaching them through a highly conscious awareness of the resources and limitations of the form to which he has dedicated his creative energies. One suspects also that as an artist possessing a marked gift for pedagogy, he has sought here to reveal a world long hidden by the clichés of sociology and rendered cloudy by the distortions of newspaper and the false continuity imposed upon our conception of Negro life by television and much documentary photography. Therefore, as he delights us with the magic of design and teaches us the ambiguity of vision, Bearden insists that we see and that we see in depth and by the fresh light of the creative vision. Bearden knows that the true complexity of the slum dweller and the tenant farmer require a release from the prison our media-dulled perception and a reassembling in forms which would convey something of the depth and wonder of the Negro American’s stubborn humanity.

Being aware that the true artist destroys the accepted world by way of revealing the unseen, and creating that which is new and uniquely his own, Bearden has used cubist techniques to his own ingenious effect. His mask-faced Harlemites and tenant farmers set in their mysterious familiar but emphatically abstract
representation to photography and the role of story-telling to the masters of the comic strip and the cinema. Nor can he draw upon his folk tradition for a simple answer. For here, beginning with the Bible and proceeding all the way through the spirituals and blues, novel, poem and the dance, Negro Americans have depended upon the element of narrative for both entertainment and group identification. Further, it has been those who have offered an answer to the question — ever crucial in the lives of a repressed minority — of who and what they are in the most simplified and graphic terms who have won their highest praise and admiration. And unfortunately there seems to be (the African past notwithstanding) no specifically Negro American tradition of plastic design to offer him support.

How then, he asks himself, does even an artist steeped in the most advanced lore of his craft and most passionately concerned with solving the more advanced problems of painting as painting address himself to the perplexing question of bringing his art to bear upon the task (never so urgent as now) of defining Negro American identity, of pressing its claims for recognition and for justice? He feels, in brief, a near-unresolvable conflict between his urge to leave his mark upon the world through art and his ties to his group and its claims upon him.

Fortunately for them and for us, Romare Bearden has faced these questions for himself, and since he is an artist whose social consciousness is no less intense than his dedication to art, his example is of utmost importance for all who are concerned with grasping something of the complex interrelations between race, culture and the individual artist as they exist in the United States. Bearden is aware that for Negro Americans these are times of eloquent protest and intense struggle, times of rejection and redefinition — but he also knows that all this does little to make the question of the relation of the Negro artist to painting any less difficult. And if the cries in the street are to find effective statement on canvas they must undergo a metamorphosis. For in painting,
scenes are nevertheless resonant of artistic and social history. Without compromising their integrity as elements in plastic compositions, his figures are eloquent of a complex reality lying beyond their frames. While functioning as integral elements of design they serve simultaneously as signs and symbols of a humanity which has struggled to survive the decimating and fragmentizing effects of American social processes. Here faces which draw upon the abstract character of African sculpture for their composition are made to focus our attention upon the far from abstract reality of a people. Here abstract interiors are presented in which concrete life is acted out under repressive conditions. Here, too, the poetry of the blues is projected through synthetic forms which, visually, are in themselves tragi-comic and eloquently poetic. A harsh poetry this, but poetry nevertheless; with the nostalgic imagery of the blues conceived as visual form, image, pattern and symbol — including the familiar trains (evoking partings and reconciliations), and the conjur women (who appear in these works with the ubiquity of the witches who haunt the drawing of Goya) who evoke the abiding mystery of the enigmatic women who people the blues. And here, too, are renderings of those rituals of rebirth and dying, of baptism and sorcery which give ceremonal continuity to the Negro American community.

By imposing his vision upon scenes familiar to us all Bearden reveals much of the universally human which they conceal. Through his creative assemblage he makes complex comments upon history, upon society and upon the nature of art. Indeed, his Harlem becomes a place inhabited by people who have in fact been resurrected, re-created by art, a place composed of visual puns and artistic allusions and where the sacred and profane, reality and dream are ambiguously mingled. And resurrected with them in the guise of fragmented ancestral figures and forgotten gods (really masks of the instincts, hopes, emotions, aspirations and dreams) are those powers that now surge in our land with a potentially destructive force which springs from the very fact of their
having for so long gone unrecognized, unseen.

Bearden doesn't impose these powers upon us by explicit comment, but his ability to make the unseen manifest allows us some insight into the forces which now clash and rage as Negro Americans seek self-definition in the slums of our cities. There is a beauty here, a harsh beauty which asserts itself out of the horrible fragmentation which Bearden's subjects and their environment have undergone. But, as I have said, there is no preaching; these forces have been brought to eye by formal art. These works take us from Harlem through the south of tenant farms and northward-bound trains to tribal Africa; our mode of conveyance consists of every device which has claimed Bearden's artistic attention, from the oversimplified and scanty images of Negroes that appear in our ads and photo-journalism, to the discoveries of the School of Paris and the Bauhaus. He has used the discoveries of Giotto and Pieter de Hooch no less than those of Juan Gris, Picasso, Schwitters and Mondrian (who was no less fascinated by the visual possibilities of jazz than by the compositional rhythms of the early Dutch masters), and has discovered his own uses for the metaphysical richness of African sculptural forms. In brief, Bearden has used (and most playfully) all of his artistic knowledge and skill to create a curve of plastic vision which reveals to us something of the mysterious complexity of those who dwell in our urban slums. But his is the eye of a painter, not that of a sociologist and here the elegant architectural details which exist in a setting of gracious but neglected streets and the buildings in which the hopeful and the hopeless live cheek by jowl, where failed human wrecks and the confidently expectant explorers of the frontiers of human possibility are crowded together as incongruously as the explosive details in a Bearden canvas — all this comes across plastically and with a freshness of impact that is impossible for sociological cliché or raw protest.

Where any number of painters have tried to project the 'prose' of Harlem — a task performed more successfully by photographers — Bearden has concentrated upon releasing its
poetry, its abiding rituals and ceremonies of affinity — creating a surreal poetry compounded of vitality and powerlessness, destructive impulse and the all-pervading and enduring faith in their own style of American humanity. Through his faith in the powers of art to reveal the unseen through the seen his collages have transcended their immaculateness as plastic constructions. — Or to put it another way, Bearden’s meaning is identical with his method. His combination of technique 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. Through an act of creative will, he has blended strange visual harmonies out of the shrill, indigenous dichotomies of American life and in doing so reflected the irrepressible thrust of a people to endure and keep its intimate sense of its own identity.

Bearden seems to have told himself that in order to possess the meaning of his southern childhood and northern upbringing, that in order to keep his memories, dreams and values whole, he would have to recreate them, humanize them by reducing them to artistic style. Thus in the poetic sense these works give plastic expression to a vision in which the socially grotesque conceals a tragic beauty, and they embody Bearden’s interrogation of the empirical values of a society which mocks its own ideals through a blindness induced by its myth of race. All this, ironically, by a man who visually at least (he is light-skinned and perhaps more Russian than ‘black’ in appearance) need never have been restricted to the social limitations imposed upon easily identified Negroes. Bearden’s art is thus not only an affirmation of his own freedom and responsibility as an individual and artist, it is an affirmation of the irrelevance of the notion of race as a limiting force in the arts. These are works of a man possessing a rare lucidity of vision.

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1  Chicago Grand Terrace, 1964  
   35 x 47 inches

2  Jazz 1930's: Savoy, 1964  
   34\(\frac{7}{8}\) x 48 inches

3  The Walls of Jericho, 1964  
   37 x 29 inches

4  Cotton, 1964, 39 x 49\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches

5  The Dove, 1964, 38\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 54\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

6  The Prevalence of Ritual - Baptism, 1964  
   37 x 48 inches

7  The Prevalence of Ritual - Tidings, 1964  
   27\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 37\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

8  The Prevalence of Ritual - Conjur Woman, 
   1964, 35\(\frac{7}{8}\) x 28 inches

9  The Prevalence of Ritual - Conjur Woman 
   as an Angel, 1964, 38\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 36\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

10  Spring Way, 1964, 27 x 39\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches

11  Watching the Good Trains Go By, 1964  
    29\(\frac{3}{8}\) x 36\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

12  Mysteries, 1964, 28\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 36\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

13  In That Number, 1964  
    39\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 30\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches

14  Train Whistle Blues #1, 1964  
    29 x 37\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

15  Burial, 1964, 39 x 25 inches

16  Evening Meal of Prophet Peterson, 1964  
    28\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 36\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches

17  Other Mysteries, 1964,  
    38\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 30\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches

18  The Street, 1964, 31 x 40 inches

19  Expulsion from Paradise, 1964  
    38\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 37\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches

20  Train Whistle Blues #2, 1964  
    39\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 29\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches

21  Pittsburgh Memory, 1964,  
    27\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 35\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches

22  The Fiddler, 1965, 30\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 24 inches

23  Harlem Courtyard, 1965, 41 x 38 inches

24  Mother and Child, 1968, color, mixed media, 40 x 30 inches

25  The Serenade, 1968, color, mixed media, 45\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 32\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches

26  A Farmer, 1968, color, mixed media, 40 x 30 inches

27  Circe Preparing a Banquet for Ulysses, 
    1968, color, mixed media, 44 x 56 inches

28  Fiddle Riff, 1968, 44 x 56 inches
The Prevalence of Ritual - Baptism  1964  37 x 48 inches
The Prevalence of Ritual - Tidings 1964 27\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 37\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches
Cotton 1964 39 x 49 3/8 inches
Jazz 1930's: Savoy 1964 34½ x 48 inches
Farmer
1968  40 x 30 inches
The Prevalence of Ritual - Conjur Woman
1964 35⅞ x 28 inches
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Donald Mochon, Director
Nancy H. Liddle, Associate Director


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