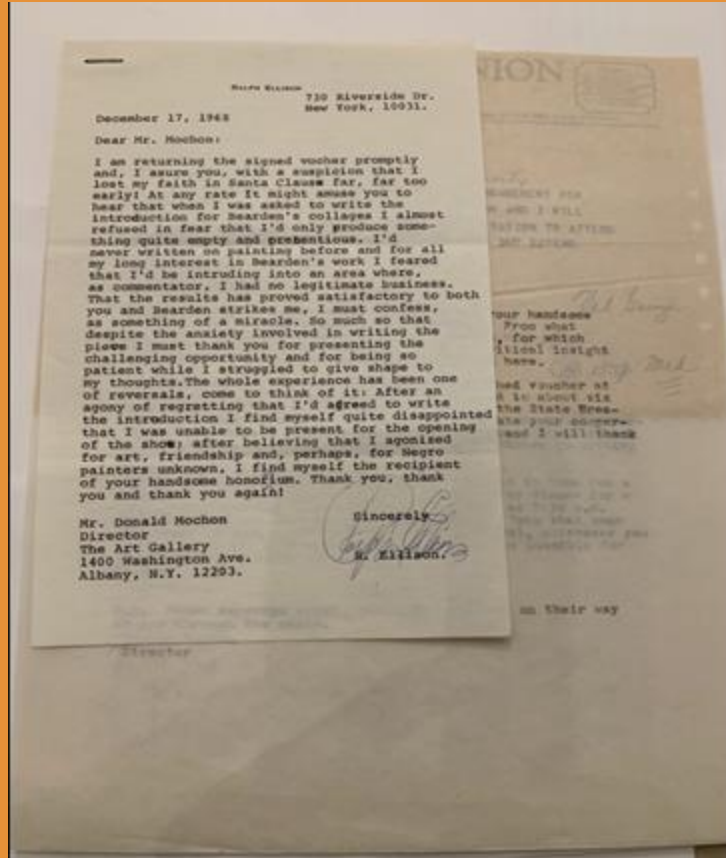




What Ralph Ellison and Romare Bearden teach us about art + activism

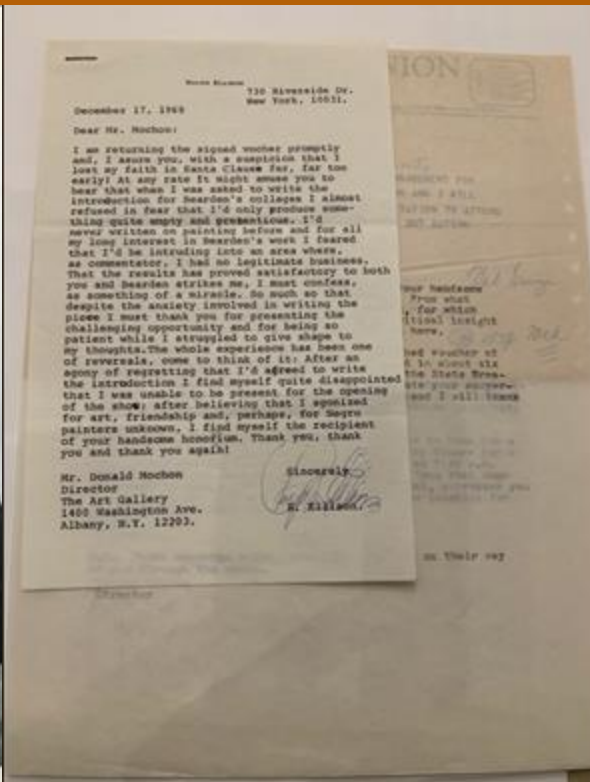
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It started with a discovery....



- The discovery of a letter written by Ralph Ellison to founding director Donald Mochon in March of 2020. The letter was written in December 1968, the same year as the *Romare Bearden Projects and Projections* exhibit, which Ellison wrote an introduction for. This project was originally supposed to be a short exposure of our discovery, written by intern Sydney Pennington, but after reading the letter it prompted her to read Ellison's introduction herself. Ellison's introduction was filled with multiple layers synonymous with the experiences of Romare Bearden and being both African American and a modern artist and visionary in America.

The correspondence between Mochon and Ellison



The correspondence between **Mochon** and **Ellison**

The University Art Museum's founding director Donald Mochon contacted Ralph Ellison about writing an introduction for the Museum's *Romare Bearden Paintings and Projections* exhibit in 1968. Mochon had expressed great excitement for Ellison's participation by writing to Ellison, "This is a belated letter of thanks for your handsome introduction to Romare Bearden's exhibition. From what he tells me it has aroused a lot of interest, for which we're all grateful. His collages and your critical insight have made for a fine and memorable exhibition here."

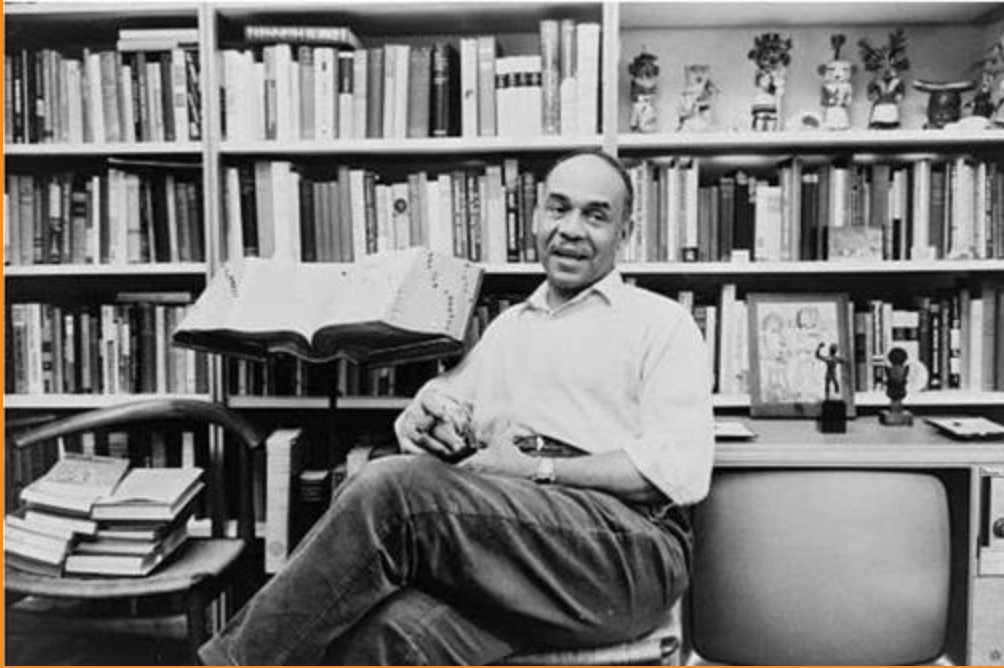
To which Ralph Ellison responded that he had almost turned down writing the introduction and was struggling to find a way to comment on art in a way that seemed extremely knowledgeable. Nonetheless, he wrote, "I must thank you for presenting the challenging opportunity and for being so patient while I struggled to give shape to all reversals."

Ellison Background

- Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and was named after poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- Ellison had described himself and his friends as Renaissance men growing up with a heavy interest in culture and intellectualism as a source of identity. Similar to Bearden, Ellison had a different plan regarding his career.
- He took up the cornet at the age of eight, moved to the trumpet a few years later and then attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he studied music with the ambition of becoming a symphony composer.



Tuskegee campus, 1916



Ellison in his study (left)



Ellison photographed by Gordon Parks (right)

Ellison Background

- In 1936, he moved to New York City over the summer to cover his college expenses and he began to work as a writer and researcher for the New York Federal Writers Program, which led him to becoming friends with writers Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke. He then ventured into publishing his essays and short stories while he worked as the managing editor for *The Negro Quarterly*.
- Ellison is most notably known for his existential novel *Invisible Man*, which he started working on while at a friend's farm in Vermont.
- The novel does a similar job in conveying the experiences of African Americans as Bearden's collages, through its description of an African American civil rights worker who increasingly becomes alienated from society mainly due to the racism within it.
- The novel went on to win the National Book Award a year after its release in 1952 and remains an influence on generations of writers and thinkers that follow.





The Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism, 1964



Young Students, 1964

Bearden challenged common held ideas of art — more specifically what it meant to be an **African American artist**

Ellison speaks on Romare Bearden:

“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.... 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.”

Bearden challenged common held ideas of art — more specifically what it meant to be an **African American artist**

Ellison made it a point to start with this to set the precedent for all of Bearden's work and what it meant to African Americans and all artists alike.

Bearden spent the better part of his career looking for new ways to express his experiences and ideas.



Spring Way, 1964

Bearden Background

- Bearden's family moved to New York City when he was a toddler, his mother eventually becoming president of the Negro Women's Democratic Association. His home was a place of discovery of leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes and W.E.B DuBois.
- While living with his grandmother in Philadelphia, he graduated high school and moved back to N.Y.C to go to college with plans to attend medical school. He went to New York University and earned a Bachelor's degree in science. While he was a student however, he worked as a cartoonist on the school's human magazine and became the magazine's editor in his senior year.
- This prompted him to join a Black artist group after college, where he became more invested in modern art, particularly Cubism, Futurism, post-Impressionism and Surrealism.
- Bearden is most notably known for his collages that he created later in his career. Some of which made an appearance at the University Art Museum in the 1968 exhibition *Romare Bearden Paintings and Projections*.
- His collages were created from a period in his artistic career where he was looking for a way to express both his experiences as a Black man and the ambiguity of abstract painting. He was moving away from the more realistic and religious work he had done and felt abstraction wasn't clear enough for him so he began to experiment more.
- He used images from magazines and colored paper including images from mainstream pictorial and Black magazines *Life*, *Look* and *Ebony*, and *Jet*, as well as different textures such as sandpaper, graphite, and paint.
- Influenced by the civil rights movement, Bearden's work was also more representational and socially conscious.



Tomorrow I May Be Far Away, 1967 (left)

Empress of the Blues, 1974 (right)

Expressing Duality

After reading the web story and Ellison's letter it is clear that Bearden was expressing duality through the collages he created. Ellison himself exclaimed that Bearden was looking for new ways to honor the experiences of African Americans through art as a way to address the world and its harsh reality. We see this through his beautiful collages.



The Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism, 1964

The influence of Jazz



Train Whistle Blues, No. 1, 1964

- Jazz is an art form that drew inspiration from African American experiences and is very layered in its own way. Jazz masters including Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong drew from their experiences and experimentation with several genres such as African hymns and folk music, ragtime music, and the blues to create a wonderful new genre of music and culture with jazz improvisation being a main element of it.
- At the start of Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, the main character who first acknowledges his invisibility based on others refusal to see him, listens to Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" on a phonograph.
- Bearden was inspired by the way in which jazz was textured and interactive. His work is described as being similar to jazz improvisation due the way his collages include interplay between each texture and his characters. His collage *Train Whistle Blues, No.1*, 1964, is a good example of this.
- Ellison's writing has a certain fluidity and movement to it that shows an influence of jazz music.



Prevalence of Ritual/Conjur Woman No.1, 1964



Jazz II Deluxe, 1980

Additional Research

View the illustrated essay by Sydney Pennington '23:

<https://www.albany.edu/museum/ellison/>

View the University Art Museum's Collections database:

<https://www.universityartmuseum.org>

View the University Art Museum's website:

<https://www.albany.edu/museum/>

Sources

Biography.com Editors. “Romare Bearden.” April 1, 2014; updated June 5, 2020. <https://www.biography.com/artist/romare-bearden>

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Image Sources (in order of appearance)

Image of Ellison <https://www.biography.com/writer/ralph-ellison>

Image of Bearden <https://beardenfoundation.org/>

UAM founding director Donald Mochon (image courtesy University at Albany / University Art Museum) courtesy of the the Times Union <https://www.timesunion.com/living/article/UAlbany-art-museum-marks-its-50th-year-12296850.php#photo-14382031>

Ralph Ellison at the National Book Awards ceremony in 1958 courtesy of the Alfred Eisenstaedt/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/19/books/review/the-selected-letters-of-ralph-ellison.html>

Tuskegee Campus, 1916 courtesy of Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuskegee_University

Ralph Ellison in his study courtesy of the Library of the Congress <https://slate.com/culture/2013/06/ralph-ellisons-invisible-man-follow-up-why-did-he-never-publish-it.html>

Ralph Ellison photographed by Gordon Lewis, via Library of Congress with permission of The Gordon Parks Foundation, and the Ellison Trust. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/19/books/review/the-selected-letters-of-ralph-ellison.html>

Image Sources (in order of appearance)

Romare Bearden, *Spring Way*, 1964, collage on paperboard, image courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/spring-way-37393>

Romare Bearden, *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, 1967, collage of various papers with charcoal, graphite and paint on paper mounted to canvas, image courtesy of National Gallery of Art
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.119052.html>

Romare Bearden, *Empress of the Blues*, 1974, acrylic and pencil on paper and printed paper on paperboard, courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/empress-blues-35358>

Romare Bearden, *Train Whistle Blues No.1*, 1964, gelatin silver print(photostat), image courtesy of MOMA, New York
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/198285?artist_id=412&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

Romare Bearden, *Prevalence of Ritual/Conjur Woman No.1*, 1964, Gelatin silver print (photostat) image courtesy of MOMA, New York
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/196974?artist_id=412&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

Romare Bearden, *Jazz II Deluxe*, 1980, screenprint, image courtesy of MOMA, New York
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