

ROMARE BEARDEN & RALPH ELLISON: FROM THE ARCHIVE



August 25, 2025 – April 3, 2026
Collections Study Space

University Art Museum
University at Albany
State University of New York

file
Romare H. Bearden

212 WA 5-5375

357 Canal Street, New York 10013

DEAR DON: HOME OK AT ABOUT MID-
NITE. ALTHO WE HAD TO TAKE A
GREYHOUND BACK BECAUSE THE TRAIL-
WAY DIDNT LEAVE UNTIL 1030 —
THE 9 O'CLOCK BUS RUNS ONLY ON
SUNDAY; SO WE MISSED IT BY ONE
DAY.

EVERYTHING WAS DELIGHTFUL
WE REALLY ENJOYED OURSELVES.
YOU DID EVERYTHING WONDERFULLY,
I MUST COME UP AGAIN.

HOPE YOU MIGHT BE COM-
ING ONTO N.Y. AND SPEND ANOTHER
EVENING WITH US & MAYBE THE COLE.

THANKS VERY MUCH FOR
EVERYTHING. REGARDS TO ALL.
ROMARE

Cover: Romare Bearden, *Evening Meal of the Prophet Peterson*, 1964, gelatin silver print (Photostat) mounted on fiberboard, courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York, © Romare Bearden Foundation

Above: Image of *Letter from Romare Bearden to Donald Mochon*, undated, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

Introduction

Romare Bearden & Ralph Ellison: From the Archive tells the story of the 1968 exhibition *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections* at the University Art Museum (UAM) — formerly The Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany — and its accompanying catalogue essay by Ralph Ellison. This presentation of archival materials includes correspondence between Bearden, Ellison, and UAM founding director, Donald Mochon, and Ellison’s original manuscript — all discovered in the UAM’s archives in 2020. Ellison’s essay has since become an essential work in his literary canon, scholarship on Bearden, and the broader history of twentieth-century African American culture.

From the correspondence, we gain insight into the logistical and human aspects of making an exhibition. Although much of this correspondence is conducted electronically today, the exhibition-making process is very much the same: confirming a checklist of works, lining up writers and photographers for catalogue production, or sending out announcement cards. Most of all, it is about developing a relationship between the institution and the artist, a legacy the museum has maintained in its artist-driven mission since its founding under Mochon’s directorship. Viewers will notice that the initial correspondence between Mochon and Bearden begins very formally but gradually becomes more familiar and friendly, as they use nicknames and offer personal compliments.

An original exhibition at the University Art Museum, *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections* (November 25 – December 22, 1968) featured twenty-eight works by Bearden occupying the entire second floor of the museum. Twenty-one of the works were *Projections*, breakthrough works first exhibited at Cordier & Ekstrom, New York, in October 1964 and then at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C. the following year. For the *Projections*, Bearden created collages on typing paper and then enlarged them to poster-sized silver gelatin prints using a Photostat process, which was employed primarily for commercial use at the time. The varied color and surface textures of the collages became unified in the final prints. Their scale also evoked a cinematic quality, and figures seem at times to project off the page. The other works in the exhibition, produced from 1965 to 1968, included Photostats (sometimes hand-colored) and painted color collages on the same large scale as the *Projections*.

For his *Projections* and paintings, Bearden combined magazine and newspaper images of American consumer culture, contemporary Black life, and African sculpture. His scenes drew on memories of his youth in the South, his family’s journey north as part of the Great Migration, and

life in Harlem. About half of his *Projections* are genre scenes, or scenes of everyday life inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch Old Master painting.

In his essay for the exhibition, Ellison argues that Bearden’s work “confronts and reveals reality.” Through “creative assemblage,” Bearden offers a corrective to the misperceptions of Black life as depicted in media, television, and documentary photography, revealing the vibrant life of Harlem and Black America at large. This essay was significant not only in Bearden’s career, but in Ellison’s as well; Ellison indicates in correspondence that this was his first essay on painting and that the project pushed him in new directions.

The pairing of Bearden and Ellison, two prominent figures in their respective mediums, was a natural one. Both transplants from the South who came to New York during the Great Migration, Bearden and Ellison became friends in the 1930s when they were both part of the 306 Group, an intellectual and artistic salon in the Harlem Renaissance, which met at 306 W. 141st Street. In the 1940s, Ellison often visited Bearden’s 125th Street studio — including during the seven-year period when he was writing *Invisible Man* (1952). That novel tells the story of the education and disillusionment of a young Black man from the South who moves to New York. It instantly established Ellison as one of the leading writers of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, Bearden’s collages were among the artworks in the collection of Ellison and his wife Fanny McConnell Ellison.

The exhibition traveled to Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts the following year. In 1971, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented a retrospective exhibition of Bearden’s work, marking only the second solo exhibition for a Black artist at that institution (following Jacob Lawrence’s in 1944). Many of the works had been included in the Albany exhibition. Thanks to the exhibition catalogue, the importance of the 1968 exhibition did not end there. History has proven the importance of Ellison’s catalogue essay, as it is now essential reading on both Bearden’s and Ellison’s bibliographies. The text has been widely reproduced, for example, in the NAACP’s *The Crisis* (1970) and the literary journal *The Massachusetts Review* (1977), and it is frequently quoted and cited in the scholarship on Bearden. Ellison included the work in his collection of essays *Going to the Territory* (1986), and it is reproduced in *The Romare Bearden Reader* (2019).

Objects

1. Letter from Donald Mochon to Romare Bearden, August 2, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this typed letter, the museum's founding director, Donald Mochon, informs Romare Bearden that Ralph Ellison has agreed to write the foreword for the catalogue accompanying Bearden's upcoming exhibition. Mochon also outlines logistical details regarding materials needed for the catalogue and shipping arrangements and conveys his best wishes for the success of the exhibition.

2. Letter from Donald Mochon to Romare Bearden, October 15, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this typed letter, Donald Mochon expresses his interest in meeting with Romare Bearden during his visit to New York to discuss details related to the upcoming exhibition. He emphasizes the urgency of receiving materials required to produce the exhibition catalogue, outlines shipping arrangements, and confirms the date of the opening reception.

3. Draft exhibition checklist handwritten by Romare Bearden and Donald Mochon, undated, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this two-page handwritten draft checklist, Romare Bearden and Donald Mochon itemized the titles and dimensions of artworks intended for inclusion in the exhibition. The initial titles on the list were written by Bearden's hand. Added titles and dimensions — essential information to prepare the work for shipping from New York to Albany and to begin designing the layout of the exhibition — are in Mochon's handwriting. Ralph Ellison's address appears on the bottom of the second page.

4. Letter from Romare Bearden to Donald Mochon, undated, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this facsimile of a handwritten letter, Romare Bearden informs Donald Mochon about a *TIME* magazine cover that featured his artwork and an accompanying column written about him inside the issue. The *TIME* magazine issue is on view here (object #9). Additionally, Bearden asks Mochon to send a check to pay photographer Kenneth Fineberg. The photographs of Bearden's work in the exhibition catalogue are all credited to Fineberg.

Bearden also mentions the opening of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, dedicated to Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated earlier that year on April 4. *In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King* (October 31 through November 2, 1968) featured artwork donated by sixty artists to be sold to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization King helped found. Other artists included Alexander Calder, Jacob Lawrence, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Rauschenberg, and Mark Rothko.

5. Ralph Ellison's typed manuscript for the introductory essay in the exhibition catalogue *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*, undated, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

This undated typed manuscript by Ralph Ellison features handwritten edits, strike-throughs, stapled additions, and other revisions, reflecting the development of his introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*.

Ellison describes Bearden's work as a dual exploration that synthesizes questions of the craft of painting with the plastic or visual possibilities of expressing the Black experience in America. The manuscript appears to be the final edit that Ellison submitted to Mochon, as it is word-for-word the version that appears in print. It tellingly reveals Ellison's process. In the manuscript, Ellison stapled paragraphs (presumably from earlier drafts) below new ones, and caret marks point to final yet crucial amendments to the text. For example, the insertion of "creative" and "re-created" in his paragraph on Bearden's assemblage process reinforces Ellison's larger point: despite remixing found images, Bearden's collage does not simply "tell it like it is," but creates a new world and reveals truths concealed by stereotype and "moribund images of reality."

The quotation underscored at the top of the first page, unattributed in both the manuscript and the catalogue, was attributed to French novelist and art historian André Malraux (1901–1976) in later reprintings.

6. Exhibition catalogue for *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

This twenty-four-page exhibition catalogue includes: a biographical note on Romare Bearden, an introductory essay by Ralph Ellison, an exhibition checklist, nine image reproductions, acknowledgments from Donald Mochon and Associate Director Nancy H. Liddle, the names of gallery staff, and image credits.

The cover image is Bearden's *Circe Preparing a Banquet for Ulysses* (1968), a mixed media painting and collage, measuring 44 x 56 inches.

7. Exhibition invitation for Romare Bearden: *Paintings and Projections*, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

This facsimile reproduces the bi-fold invitation for the 1968 exhibition *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*. The cover features a reproduction of Romare Bearden's painting *The Prevalence of Ritual — Tidings*. The interior extends an invitation to view Bearden's recent work on Monday, November 25, 1968, from 7:30 to 10:00 pm.

8. Letter from Romare Bearden to Donald Mochon, undated, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this facsimile of a handwritten letter, Romare Bearden conveys to Donald Mochon that he and his gallerist, Arne Ekstrom, are pleased with the exhibition catalogue, poster, and Ralph Ellison's introductory essay. He requests additional posters and catalogues for himself and Ellison. Bearden shares that he plans to visit the exhibition with his wife's relatives. His wife, Nanette Bearden (née Rohan; 1949–1996), was a fashion model, modern dancer, and founder of the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theatre (1977).

9. *TIME Magazine, Special Issue, New York: The Breakdown of a City, November 1, 1968*, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

This issue's cover features a photo collage by Romare Bearden, prominently displaying an image of then-Mayor John Lindsay surrounded by toppling New York City skyscrapers and faces of the people of New York.

An indication of Bearden's recognition beyond the artworld, he was commissioned to create covers for *Fortune* and *TIME* magazine in 1968, and for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1969. Bearden mentions the *TIME* magazine cover in his November 1, 1968 correspondence with Donald Mochon (object #4). "NEW YORK: The Breakdown of a City" was the cover story of embattled mayor John Lindsay. The publisher's introduction in the magazine indicates Bearden conceived of the idea of city buildings teetering around the mayor during a meeting with the editors on the twenty-fifth floor of the TIME and LIFE Building overlooking the city.

Nearly all the photos in the cover image came from the TIME-LIFE Picture Collection, that is, Bearden created a magazine cover composed of

magazine images. In the upper register, children gaze at the viewer with somber eyes. The period from 1967 to 1968 was a time of particularly intense debates about the state of public-school education in New York City.

10. Letter from Donald Mochon to Ralph Ellison, November 14, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this typed letter, Donald Mochon expresses his gratitude to Ralph Ellison for the introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue, noting that he gains new insights each time he reads it. He also extends an invitation to Ellison and his wife, Fanny Ellison (née McConnell; 1911–2005), to attend the exhibition's opening reception. Mochon then outlines details regarding an honorarium, travel logistics, and accommodations.

Fanny Ellison was active in theater, politics, and the civil rights movement. She helped her husband edit *Invisible Man*, and her income supported them while he wrote it.

11. Western Union telegram from Ralph Ellison to Donald Mochon, November 21, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this telegram, Ralph Ellison expresses that he and his wife regret being unable to attend the exhibition's opening reception and extend their best wishes to Donald Mochon and artist Romare Bearden.

12. Letter from Romare Bearden to Donald Mochon, undated, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this facsimile of a handwritten letter, Romare Bearden shares with Donald Mochon that he arrived home safely after a visit to Albany. He expresses delight with the visit, shows interest in future visits, and invites Donald Mochon to visit him in New York.

13. Letter from Donald Mochon to Ralph Ellison, December 13, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this typed letter, Donald Mochon expresses thanks to Ralph Ellison for the introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue. He notes that Ellison's essay in conjunction with Bearden's work made for a memorable exhibition. He also includes details regarding the payment process.

14. Letter from Ralph Ellison to Donald Mochon, December 17, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this typed letter, Ralph Ellison opens up to Donald Mochon, expressing the fear he felt when asked to write the introductory essay. He notes that he had never written about painting before and felt concerned that he could be perceived as an intruder within the art world. He also expresses awe that the essay was well received by both Mochon and Bearden, and regrets being unable to attend the exhibition's opening reception.

15. Letter from Donald Mochon to Romare Bearden, December 20, 1968, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

In this typed letter, Donald Mochon affectionately addresses Bearden as "Romy," reflecting the close rapport the two have built. Mochon informs Bearden that he has been in contact with Williams College and that the exhibition will travel there. Mochon closes with an expression of thanks and best wishes to Bearden and his wife Nanette.

Mochon refers to S. Lane Faison Jr. (1907–2006), an influential art history professor and director of the Williams College Museum of Art. Mochon mentions that Faison had met Bearden at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia. In March and April 1968, Bearden was an artist-in-residence at Spelman, and the college held an untitled exhibition in conjunction with his residency. Mochon also refers to Nancy Hyatt Liddle (1931–2004), then the Associate Director of the Art Gallery at the University at Albany, and later the Director (1977–1992).

16. Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 1986, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

This is a facsimile of the cover of Ralph Ellison's *Going to the Territory*, a collection of seventeen essays dedicated to his wife Fanny. "The Art of Romare Bearden," the introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue, appears on page 227 of this volume.

Although Ellison disclosed that he had been quite nervous about writing about Bearden's work (see object #14), the essay became an essential part of the bibliographies on both Ellison and Bearden.

17. Robert G. O'Meally, editor, *The Romare Bearden Reader*, 2019, University Art Museum Archive, University at Albany, State University of New York

This is a facsimile of the cover of *The Romare Bearden Reader*, a collection of essays by many different writers reflecting on Bearden's life and work. Ellison's "The Art of Romare Bearden," the introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue, appears on page 196 of this book, followed by his 1988 eulogy to Bearden. The essay is often quoted in the scholarship on Bearden's work and is thus a key contribution to the reader.

A selection of Bearden's own writing is also reproduced in this volume, including "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings," written in 1968, the same year as the exhibition, and published in *Leonardo* (January 1969). In that essay he discusses the role that Dutch Old Master painting plays in his compositions, among other influences.

Introduction by Robert R. Shane, Associate Curator

Object entries by Darcie Abbatiello, Registrar/Collections Manager, and Robert R. Shane, Associate Curator

Biographies

Romare Bearden (b. 1911, Charlotte, North Carolina; d. 1988, New York, New York). Bearden was a mathematics major at New York University and graduated in 1935. In 1936 he enrolled for a year at the Art Students League, where he studied under German painter and printmaker George Grosz. He also studied art history at the Sorbonne, Paris (1950–1951). In the 1960s, he began to work extensively with collage, for which he is well-known today. Bearden was the subject of numerous solo exhibitions and retrospectives in his lifetime and held posthumously at institutions that include: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2003; traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York; and High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia); Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, New York (1991; traveled to Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois; Wight Gallery, University of California Los Angeles; High Museum of Art; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.); Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan (1986); Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York (1971); Cororan Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1965); and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts (1961). Bearden coauthored three books: with Carl Holty, *The Painter's Mind* (1969) and, with Harry Henderson, *Six Black Masters of American Art for Young Readers* (1972) and *History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (1993, posthumously published). Bearden was awarded the National Medal of Arts (1987) and the Mayor's Award of Honor for Art & Culture, New York City (1984).

Ralph Ellison (b. 1913, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; d. 1994, New York, New York). Ellison was trained as a musician at the Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1933–1936. In 1937, he moved to New York, met author Richard Wright, and began writing reviews, short stories, and articles. His novel *Invisible Man* (1952) won the National Book Award and the Russwurm Award. He authored two essay collections: *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). Ellison was a fellow of the American Academy in Rome (1955–1957). He was appointed to the American Academy of Art and Letters in 1964. He taught at various institutions including: Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; the University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; and Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey; and he was the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University (1970–1980). Ellison was a charter member of the National Council on the Arts and Humanities, a member of the Carnegie Commission on public television, and a trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Joseph Donald Mochon (b. 1916; d. 1976). Mochon studied architecture at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, where he received a Bachelor of Architecture in 1936 and a Master of Architecture in 1938. He later became a professor in RPI's School of Architecture. Mochon was named the first director of The Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany. During his tenure (1966–1976), he was instrumental in bringing a number of high-profile exhibitions from the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere to Albany.

Romare Bearden & Ralph Ellison: From the Archive

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Collections Study Space

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In 2018, with support provided by the Henry Luce Foundation American Art Program, the University Art Museum (UAM) opened the Collections Study Space, a multi-purpose space designed to safely house over 3,000 objects reflecting over 50 years of modern and contemporary art, and simultaneously make them accessible to students, faculty, other researchers and scholars, and the community. The works in the University at Albany Fine Art Collections can also be viewed in the online database at: universityartmuseum.org.

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