In 1963, Romare Bearden mobilized a group of New York black artists in response to the upheaval of the civil rights movement. He and cofounder Hale Woodruff called the group Spiral; their stated goal was "to examine the plight of the Black American artist in America." [See pages 22-23] As a method of working collaboratively, Bearden suggested using a technique he had just begun investigating—the groundbreaking modernist method of collage. Invented around 1912, collage—sticking bits of paper, material, or other items to a flat backing—extended the accepted boundaries of art by combining painted surfaces with real or painted materials. Later, Dadaists and Surrealists used collage because of the possibility for creating illogical, often absurd, juxtapositions.

For the remainder of his career, collage would become Bearden's favored technique, and The Return of Odysseus, 1977, is a distinguished example. [See slide 17] His unique contribution was the combination of this quintessentially twentieth-century language with depictions of the ageless rituals of black life. Collage seemed ideally suited to render a group of people who, like the method itself, were torn apart and fragmented during the diaspora, then reassembled in new and different ways. Author Ralph Ellison* (1914-1994) declared that Bearden's innovative use of collage conveys 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."

Also, in adapting the European tradition of collage to African American themes, Bearden was fulfilling his lifelong goal of creating a universal art—an art that was contemporary yet grounded in history, without losing sight of what he called "the particulars of the life I know best." He elaborated: "In my work, if anything I seek connections so that my paintings can't be only what they appear to represent. People in a baptism in a Virginia stream are linked to John the Baptist, to ancient purification rites, and to their African heritage. I feel this continuation of ritual gives a dimension to the works so that [they] are something other than mere designs."

Bearden was uniquely positioned to fulfill his goal—to create an art that, in his words, "belongs to all mankind." Exposure to the arts came early. His childhood was spent in New York City's Harlem (see map page 23) where his parents were among the Harlem Renaissance elite, and their apartment was often filled with such leaders of the renaissance as scholar W.E.B. DuBois*, poet Langston Hughes*, and artist Aaron Douglas [see pages xx-yy]. Jazz musicians Duke Ellington (1899-1974) and Fats Waller (1904-1943) also paid calls. After graduating from New York University with a mathematics degree in 1935, Bearden studied at New York's Art Students League with émigré German artist George Grosz (1893-1959). Grosz introduced Bearden to other socially committed European artists throughout his-
tory, such as the Spaniard Francisco Goya (1746-1828) and the Frenchman Honoré Daumier (1808-1879). In keeping with the Social Realist sensibility so prevalent during the Great Depression years, Bearden’s first works of the late 1930s and early 1940s depicted scenes from southern black life, painted on brown paper.

In the mid-1940s, as one of the few African Americans represented in a downtown New York art gallery, Bearden soon met a number of leading artists, among them American painter Stuart Davis (1896-1964). A lifelong lover of jazz, Bearden was inspired by Davis’s pioneering works—a combination of popular American imagery with European Cubist technique that seemed to pulsate with the rhythms of jazz. Meanwhile, Bearden’s style continued to evolve, and often against the mainstream. During the height of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Bearden created small semi-abstract paintings based on literature, the Bible, and Greek myth, but he became increasingly uncertain about his direction. A trip to Paris to study modernist masters in 1951 failed to inspire him. Soon, he renounced art altogether and took up songwriting. He began his slow return to painting by immersing himself in the history of art—literally copying its masterworks, from the Italian Renaissance through the breakthrough of modernism. When he again began to paint his own works in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were large and nonobjective. He also began to investigate collage.

What triggered Bearden to a synthesis of all of his studies, subjects, and styles—as well as of his childhood memories, his community, his identity as a black man—was the civil rights turbulence of the mid-1960s, specifically the eruption in Harlem, his own backyard. In his first collages, enlarged black-and-white photomontages, the figure reappears in his art, never to disappear again. The collages feature scenes from Bearden’s life as he remembered it, in Harlem or on visits to his grandparents in the South. Entitled Projections, the series as a whole captures African American rituals—baptisms, planting, listening to jazz, funeral farewells. In their assemblage of disjointed images, there is an energy and distortion that seems to reflect the turmoil of the world at large. Exhibited in a one-man show at New York’s Cordier & Eckstrome gallery in 1964, the works were a great critical and commercial success.

Soon Bearden’s collages grew more complex, as he added pieces of fabric, colored paper, and generous amounts of paint. In Black Manhattan, 1969, he juxtaposed large flat areas of color with elements of collage. [See figure 18] We see the hectic pattern of the fire-escape’s cagelike grid, coupled with images of people watching and waiting, looking out windows, or sitting on stoops. The work evocatively renders the rhythms of African American life in the city, its frantic pace opposed to periods of endless waiting.
Like a kaleidoscope, Bearden assimilates myriad sources to create his unique, universal vision of the world. The depiction of black street life recalls seventeenth-century Dutch genre scenes. The angularity and distortions of collaged images suggest forms of African sculpture. And the improvisational, disjunctive nature of collage itself suggests the intuitive, off-beat rhythms of jazz.

Bearden began to simplify his compositions during the 1970s, which we can see in *The Return of Odysseus.* “Art celebrates a victory,” the artist once declared. “I look for all those elements in which life expresses that victory.” Celebrated here, with all black figures, is the climax of *The Odyssey*, the epic poem by the ancient Greek author Homer (active 9th century, B.C.E.), who has been called Europe’s first poet. Wily and shrewd, generous and noble, Odysseus, king of the Greek Island of Ithaca, is *The Odyssey’s* legendary hero and one of Western literature’s greatest protagonists. He is also an inspiring role model for African Americans because he often had to hide his prowess, appearing old or inept, if circumstances forced him.

Homer’s *Odyssey* is a story of courage, morality, and fidelity. During the twenty years of her husband’s absence, suitors overrun Queen Penelope’s home. To ward them off, she devises various schemes, including telling them she is weaving a shroud for her elderly father-in-law, promising to choose to marry one of them when the garment is completed. But each night, she unravels what she has woven on her loom during the day. Meanwhile, determining
to become a man, Telemachus, son of Odysseus and Penelope, sets off to find his father. Just as the suitors discover Penelope's scheme, father and son sail home. Odysseus kills off all the suitors, reunites with Penelope, and rules his country of Ithaca once again.

Depicted in Bearden's collage is the long-awaited return of Odysseus. Penelope sits on the left, reaching her arms to greet the central figure, her loyal son Telemachus, who has heroically fetched his father home. Barely visible, disguised as a beggar, Odysseus enters the doorway in the upper right with his right arm raised. A little girl knits by Penelope's side while a cat plays with the yarn. Rising up between Penelope and her suitors, the figures on the right, is her protective loom. Hanging unstrung next to a quiver of arrows, is Odysseus's bow. To prove that the ragged stranger is indeed Odysseus, the suitors require that he string the bow, said to be made of such powerful wood that only Odysseus is strong enough to bend and string it. The sails of Odysseus's ship are visible through the window, as is, on the left, the mound representing the island of the sorceress Circe, who held Odysseus and his men captive as they made their way home.

To simplify the composition, Bearden uses fewer and larger collage elements, with an emphasis on the flatness of the space and a single blue-green color scheme. As if in a Greek frieze, the formal, stylized figures are arranged largely in the foreground of the work, with architecture functioning as a backdrop. The simplicity of the scene, coupled with the balance of design and color, impart a sense of epic grandeur, befitting its heroic theme.

Again, Bearden gives the Art Institute's collage a universality by drawing his inspiration from world literature and art. As suggested by its parenthetical title—(Homage to Pintoricchio and Benin)—one of the collage's sources is the fifteenth-century Italian artist Bernardino di Betto (1454-1513), nicknamed Pintoricchio, or "little painter." He was a splendid storyteller, known for his sumptuous fresco cycles, which commemorated the pageantry of the Italian Renaissance. Here, Bearden has based his composition almost exactly on Pintoricchio last surviving fresco, the Italian artist's version of the climax of Homer's epic entitled The Return of Ulysses (c. 1508-1509; National Gallery, London). [See figure 19] (Ulysses is the Roman name for Odysseus.) Bearden places his characters, window, loom, and boat in almost identical positions. Also, both painters rely on anecdotal detail, often whimsical, to make their works as true-to-life as possible. Bobbins dangle from Penelope's loom; a cat plays with a ball of yarn; a dove perches on the windowsill. Birds happened to be one of Bearden's favorite motifs; he called them "journeying things."

Bearden's other inspiration is the eight-hundred-year-old African Kingdom of Benin. Located in present-day Nigeria, Benin has been one of the most
powerful nations in Africa since the fifteenth century and is renowned for its sculpture and ceramics. As Bearden once proclaimed: "I do want my language to be strict and classical in the manner of the great Benin bronzes." The Art Institute's collage is part of an entire Odysseus series that Bearden completed in 1977.

By the time of The Return of Odysseus, Bearden had achieved considerable success. In 1966, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters; two years later, Time magazine based a cover on one of his works. During the 1970s and 1980s, awards and honorary degrees continued, and a number of museums organized major retrospectives of his work, including New York's Museum of Modern Art (1971) and The Detroit Institute of Art (1986). Museums across the nation acquired his art, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Cleveland Art Museum, Ohio; the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C; and in New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

At the time of Bearden's death in 1988, he was considered the nation's leading African American artist. His richly poetic narratives of the rituals of black life are now part of the pantheon of world art, providing inspiration for the next generation of African American artists. The most accomplished black playwright in American history, August Wilson* (b. 1945) can cite specific paintings of Bearden's that inspired him. Wilson's play The Piano Lesson, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987, bears the same title as a 1973 collage by Bearden. "In Bearden," declares Wilson, "I found my artistic mentor and sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvases."

Figure 19.
Bernardino di Betto (Pintoricchio).
The Return of Ulysses, c. 1508-1509.
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Slide Seventeen: Romare Bearden

1. As an artform, collage can be regarded as a metaphor for community: bits of paper, material, and other items are brought together to create one work of art while still retaining their individual identities. In the same way, people come together and create a community, bringing with them their own experiences, ideas, and talents. Ask the class to produce a collage with the theme of community. The entire project must be a joint effort, from the collection of materials to the design of the work of art. Upon completion, discuss with students the challenges and benefits of working collaboratively.

2. Bearden said: “In my work, if anything I seek connections so that my paintings can’t be only what they appear to represent.” Why might the artist have selected the subject of Odysseus’s return for a collage? What might the story represent to Bearden? to African Americans?

3. Have students discuss Bearden’s ability as a visual storyteller: How did he depict the narrative of Odysseus’s return? Compare his storytelling techniques with those of Renaissance artist Giovanni di Paolo in his Ulysses panel in the Art Institute’s collection.

4. Bearden and many other artists introduced in this manual were deeply affected by the civil rights movement of the mid-1960s in this country. Have students research this turbulent period in American history. Who were the leaders? How was the common man involved? What was the movement’s mission and how successful was it in achieving its goals? What works of art in this manual are expressions of these goals?