



*The Return of Odysseus
(Homage to Pintoricchio and Benin)*

1977

Romare Bearden

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
Crown Family Educator Resource Center

ART
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Romare Bearden (American, 1914–1988)

The Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pintoricchio and Benin), 1977

Collage on masonite

1,118 x 1,422 mm

Mary and Leigh Block Fund, 1977.127

In 1963, Romare Bearden mobilized a group of New York black artists in response to the upheaval of the civil rights movement. He and co-founder Hale Woodruff called the group Spiral; the founders' stated goal was to "examine the plight of the Black American artist in America." As a method of working collaboratively, Bearden suggested using a technique he had just begun to investigate—the groundbreaking **modernist** method of **collage**. Invented around 1912, collage involves sticking bits of paper, material, or other items to a flat backing. This art form extended the accepted boundaries of art by combining painted surfaces with real or painted materials. Artists of the 1920s and 30s, such as the **Dadaists** and **Surrealists**, used collage for its potential to create illogical, often absurd, juxtapositions.

For the remainder of his career, collage would become Bearden's favored technique, and the *Return of Odysseus* is a distinguished example. His unique contribution was the combination of this quintessentially 20th-century technique 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 centuries of the slave trade, 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."¹

Bearden was born in North Carolina, but spent most of his childhood in New York City's Harlem. His mother's earlier job as editor of the *Chicago Defender* put the family in contact with the poets and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, Fats Waller, and Duke Ellington. Bearden earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from New York University in 1935, then went on to study art with the German artist George Grosz (1893–1959) at New York's famed Art Students' League. It was through this later education that Bearden gained an introduction to art history and the academic tradition of painting. In keeping with the **Social Realist** sensibility so prevalent during the Great Depression (1929–1939), 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—combinations of popular American imagery with European **Cubist** techniques that seemed to pulsate with the rhythms of jazz. Meanwhile, Bearden's style continued to evolve, often against mainstream tendencies. 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 began to feel increasingly alienated by the art world and became uncertain about his direction. A trip to Paris in 1951 to study modernist masters failed to inspire him. Soon,

he renounced art altogether and took up song writing. By the mid-fifties, however, he began his slow return to painting by immersing himself in the history of art. He literally copied masterworks, beginning with the Italian Renaissance and moving to the works of modern artists, such as Matisse and Picasso. This unearthing of the past gave him a more comprehensive understanding of the process of painting. In the 1950s and 60s he also began to investigate collage.

Return of Odysseus is a brilliant example of Bearden's love of the formal and symbolic qualities of collage. This art form not only allowed him to juxtapose classical forms and emphasize the flat picture surface, but it also symbolized the coming together of traditions and communities. In the title of this collage, *Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pintoricchio and Benin)*, Bearden pays respect not only to ancient Greek civilization, but also to the rich artistic heritage of Europe and Africa. These associations symbolize the continuity of cultural ties and the timelessness of the hero's challenge.

In this collage, part of a larger series devoted to Homer's *The Odyssey* (9th century B.C.), we see Bearden's love of Greek myth and ritual. Bearden must have admired Odysseus's bold strength and cunning, as well as the Greek king's loyalty to his family and the Kingdom of Ithaca. He may have seen the hero as a strong moral **paragon** for the African American community, which had endured its own adversities and setbacks. To celebrate the connections between Homer's characters and African American history and culture, Bearden made the figures black. Their features even bear resemblance to the classic faces on African masks and bronze plaques of the kingdom of Benin. In this way, Bearden's *Odyssey* series links ancient and modern cultures in a grand tradition of courage, fidelity, and truth.

The *Return of Odysseus* is the climax of Homer's *Odyssey*, a tale of hardship and heroism. Following the victorious Trojan War, numerous perils and hazards delayed the return of King Odysseus to his home and family in Ithaca. During the 20 years of her husband's absence, suitors overran the home of his wife, Queen Penelope. To ward them off, the Queen tells them she is weaving a shroud for her elderly father-in-law, Laertes, and promises to marry one of them only when the garment is completed. Each night, however, she unravels most of what she has woven on her loom during the day. Finally, the suitors discover her scheme and force her to complete the shroud. Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope, sees that his mother must soon yield to one of the suitors and goes off in search of news of his father. The gods shine favorably on the family and reunite father and son. Together they devise a plan to rid the suitors from the palace. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus convinces Penelope that her husband is on his way home and that she must call a contest for the suitors that only he can master. Penelope promises to give herself to the suitor who is strong enough to string Odysseus's bow and shoot his arrow through 12 ax-rings. Each of the suitors, and even Telemachus, try and fail at the task. Then, the disguised Odysseus enters the room and asks if he may try as well. He easily strings and shoots his bow, sending the arrow cleanly through all 12 ax-rings! Afterward, Telemachus and Odysseus dispense with

the suitors. After proving his identity to Penelope, the three family members celebrate this precious homecoming.

This famous tale of loyalty and strength also describes the trials and biases that the hero faced during his travels. After successfully navigating his way past the deadly Cyclops, the piercing song of the Sirens, and the clutches of Circe, Odysseus arrived at the palace only to be mocked by the suitors. After noting his beggar's clothing, they call him "riff raff" and tell him, "I promise you no end of trouble if you string that bow—you'll meet no kindness in our part of the world."² However, Odysseus overcomes these judgments, successfully completes the challenge, and proves himself to Penelope.

We know from his title that Bearden took the subject matter and composition of this collage directly from an early Renaissance **fresco** by the Italian painter Pintoricchio (or Pinuricchio, meaning 'little painter'), also called Bernardino di Betto (1454–1513). This fresco is dated around 1508 and is now located in London's National Gallery. Bearden may have seen this painting in a reproduction or at the museum during his trip to Europe in the early 1950s. Either way, he carefully studied and reworked the fresco's composition, setting, and figural details.

On the left side of both works Penelope and her maid work at the loom. Above Penelope's head hang Odysseus's famous bow and arrows. In the middle of the scene, Telemachus strides into the room; gestures suggest he is announcing something to his mother. The man with bird, probably a falcon, is a suitor. Look at how his pose conveys his confident, cocky attitude! The man with a turban may be a soothsayer named Theoclymenus whom Telemachus encountered on his journey home. The man in the doorway with a sword, cape, and hat is the disguised Odysseus. Bearden, as had Pintoricchio in his fresco, represented two more stories of Odysseus in the background of his collage—on the left, the island of the sorceress Circe, and on the right, Odysseus's ship escaping the song of the Sirens.

Bearden liked to study and copy works of other artists. In fact, he wrote to his artist friend Walter Quirt: "Does not one of the mainsprings of the art impulse come from an artist's admiration of the works of other artists?"³ Bearden pays homage to the work of Pintoricchio in this collage, yet changes certain aspects of the earlier piece. Not only has Bearden altered the color of the characters' skin to emphasize the symbolic nature of his collage, but he has also played with the space and positions of the figures to reflect his love of rhythm and two-dimensional space.

Bearden took the busy, detailed scene of Pintoricchio's fresco and simplified it into clean, geometric segments of color. The juxtaposition of these differently colored and sized pieces of paper creates a music-like **syncopation**. (Don't forget Bearden's love of jazz!) The placement of his figures, some sitting and some standing, intensifies this rhythm. The minimal color palette of blue, green, and brown, unifies the rhythm and creates a sober effect.

The collage also looks a bit like a stage, full of actors in fancy costumes who tell a story through dramatic gestures. Bearden gives us the impression that the background is flat, as if it has been painted on a wall behind the actors. This is very different from Pintoricchio's background, which seems to go on forever. The Renaissance artist tried to create a feeling of depth, both in the interior room and in the view through the window. For this reason, he included squares and rectangles on the floor, in the loom, and around the borders of the room, to help create the illusion of a geometrical interior. This method of creating **perspective**, a tool used by artists to make a two-dimensional space look three-dimensional, required the artist's training in optics and mathematical principles of geometry early in his career. Even Pintoricchio's placement of his figures one in front of the other, and his use of varying degrees of light and dark colors, help the viewer judge the space of the picture. The Renaissance painting demonstrates that Pintoricchio understood how the eye sees into the distance. We perceive objects farther away as smaller, less clear, and less bright than objects closer to us.

During his schooling at the New York Art Student's League, Bearden also studied traditional methods of creating perspective. Yet, like modernist painters, he chose to stress the two-dimensional reality of his artwork. He did this by placing broad, flat strips of uniform color next to one another, interrupted only by thin lines of white. Because of the lack of shading around the figures, they appear flat, as if they are hovering in space. Only the size of the figures tells us which one is in the foreground, or closer to us. For example, Telemachus and Queen Penelope appear larger than Odysseus and the suitor. Unlike the Renaissance artist, Bearden does not try to create the **illusion** of space. Instead, his scene reflects the method and materials he used, as well as the **synthetic** nature of art. In this way, he is very much tied to the modernist ideas and practices of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

Bearden's *Return of Odysseus* makes yet another reference to an earlier artistic tradition—the cultural heritage of the Benin Kingdom of West Africa. Most of the art from this kingdom was produced over centuries for the royal court, ruled by the oba, who is believed to be descended from the gods. Since the 16th century, highly trained professional artists have lived and worked in guilds housed within the Benin palace complex. Brass plaques are some of the most well-known artistic features of these palaces. Because brass resists rust, it is associated with the permanence and continuity of kingship. The Art Institute owns a Benin plaque fragment depicting a warrior chief wearing full ceremonial regalia (figure 2). He brandishes a ceremonial sword, as a gesture of his loyalty to the oba.

This warrior's ritual gesture and his implied military power refer to omnipresent themes in Benin art: the power and wealth of the oba, and the vitality and prosperity of his people. Bearden said of this culture's artworks, "I do want my language to be strict and classical, in the manner of the great Benin heads, for example."⁴ Bearden included the regal character of these Benin artworks in his collage of the timeless Greek poem. The faces of the figures portray the classic grandeur of the Benin

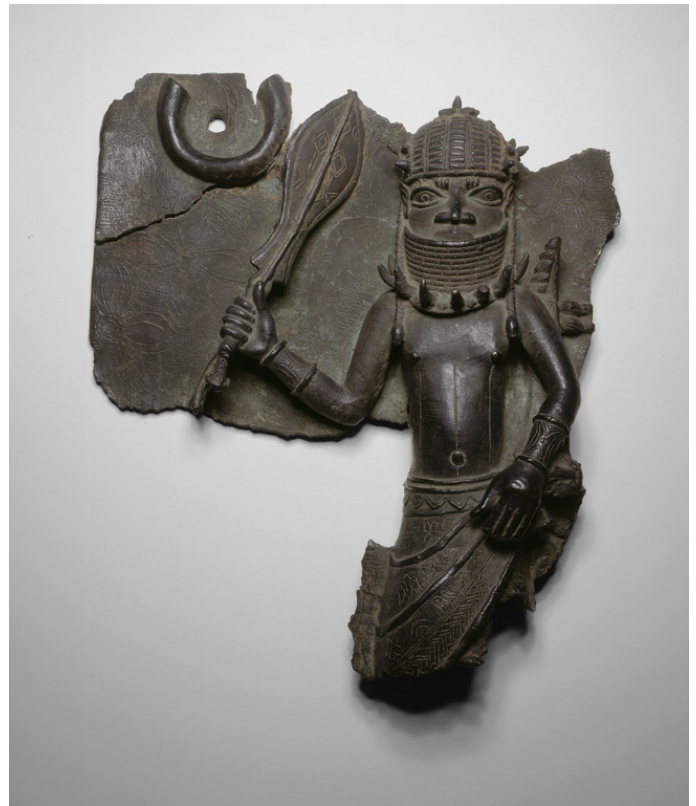


Figure 2. *Plaque of Warrior Chief*, 16th/18th century. Nigeria, Court of Benin. Bronze. Samuel P. Avery Fund, 1933.782.

objects, a quality enhanced by Bearden's placement of the heads in **profile**.

The history of the Benin Kingdom also has a connection with the story of Odysseus about which Bearden may have known. In 1897, a British official attempted to visit the oba during a time of important state ceremonies in the kingdom, despite the oba's request to postpone the visit. Without the oba's authorization, a group of chiefs ambushed the British party en route to Benin, killing most of its members. A British retaliatory force of 1,500 men then attacked the kingdom, destroyed the palace, forced the oba into exile, and confiscated thousands of artworks. Many of these objects were sold to raise money to pay for the British expedition and were eventually dispersed to museums and private collections throughout the world. In 1914, the son of the exiled oba returned to power and was crowned Oba Eweka II. He rebuilt the royal palace, reinstated the traditional governing structure, and revitalized the arts. In many ways, his story is similar to Odysseus's return to power. Benin remains a kingdom today, ruled by an oba descended from the original royal family.

Romare Bearden's *Return of Odysseus* is a celebration of rebirth. Combining diverse artistic traditions and a timeless tale of heroic courage in his collage, this 20th-century artist unites the experiences and challenges of African, European, and American people.

Notes

1. *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*. (exhibition catalogue) Art Gallery, State University of New York, Albany, 1968.
2. Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 21, lines 342–4.
3. Kinshasha Holman Conwill, *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden 1940-1987* (New York, 1991), p. 67.
4. M. Bunch Washington, *The Art of Romare Bearden* (New York, 1969), p. 14.

GLOSSARY

Abstract Expressionism: Term used to describe a modern art movement that developed in New York during the late 1940s. Abstract Expressionist painters shared a common philosophical outlook more than a unified style, and embraced non-traditional and non-representational approaches to art-making that stressed spontaneity and freedom of expression.

Benin: Kingdom in the rain forest of West Africa that is ruled by the oba, who is believed to be descended from the gods.

collage: Derived from the French verb *coller*, to gum. A work of art made by sticking pieces of paper, material, or other items onto a flat backing, often in combination with painted passages. This technique, which was used extensively by **Cubists** such as Georges Braque (1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), extended the boundaries of art by combining painted surfaces with other materials.

Cubism: Art movement (c. 1908–1920) led by the Spaniard Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and the Frenchman Georges Braque (1882–1963) that rejected traditional techniques such as perspective and modeling (the use of light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance) and theories that art must imitate nature. Instead, Cubist artists used shapes, planes, colors, and eventually collage to depict fragmented objects, revealing the many sides of an object simultaneously.

Dada: Derived from the French word meaning “hobby-horse” to emphasize the anti-rational, anti-aesthetic, and, ultimately, anti-art stance of a group of artists working from approximately 1915 to 1923. European and American artists and writers used such arbitrary forms as nonsense poems, readymade objects, and **collage** to protest traditional values that they felt led to the chaos of World War I (1914–1918).

epic: Poetic work, usually centered upon a hero, in which a series of great achievements or events is narrated in elevated style.

fresco: Technique of painting on wet plaster with ground colors mixed with water, developed by the ancient Romans; Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling is a good example of this process. A similar process, called *fresco secco*, or dry fresco, involves painting on dry plaster; the ancient Egyptians were the first to paint in this method.

Harlem Renaissance: The creative outburst during the 1920s of literature, music, dance, and art centered in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem, which spread to other cities as well, including Chicago’s Bronzeville. Also known as the New Negro Movement after Alain Locke’s watershed book *The New Negro* (1925), which urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own expressions.

illusion: Something that deceives by producing a false impression, e.g. seeing deep space in a painting on a flat canvas.

Italian Renaissance: From the French word meaning “rebirth.” This period saw a great revival of antiquity in the literature, art, and architecture of the late 13th to 16th centuries. This renewed interest in the world of ancient Greece and Rome began in Italy and spread to other parts of Europe.

Odysseus: The hero of Homer’s *The Odyssey* (9th century B.C.); this King of Ithaca faces many challenges before he is able to return home from the victorious Trojan War.

paragon: A model, standard, or ideal.

perspective: Technique of depicting volumes and spatial relationships on a flat surface.

Pintoricchio or Pinturicchio: The nickname of Bernardino di Betto, an Italian Renaissance painter who lived from 1454 to 1513; his work was an inspiration to Romare Bearden.

profile: The outline of something, such as a human head, viewed from one side.

Social Realism: A broad term to describe diverse styles of representational painting (or literature) whose subject has social or political content. Prevalent in the United States during the Great Depression and in Russia after the Communist Revolution of 1917.

Surrealism: Group of writers and artists led by French poet André Breton (1896–1966) in Paris, beginning in 1924, who embraced the act of spontaneous creation. To unleash their creativity, some Surrealists used as their model Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud’s (1956–1939) theory of psychoanalysis, probing the world of dreams, fantasies, and the subconscious in their art. Many Surrealists produced fantastic, meticulously rendered organic forms, while others combined ordinary objects in strange and startling ways.

syncopation: In music, the shifting of the normal accent, usually by stressing the normally unaccented beats.

synthetic: The quality of being made up of elements of separate materials.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

•Your Picture Tells a Story

Many good stories and artworks answer these questions: A. Who is the story about? B. What action is unfolding? C. Where is the story taking place? Have your students create an illustration of another exciting episode of Odysseus's travels. Make sure your students' drawings communicate the "who, what, and where" of the episode.

•Collage as Community

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.

•Act It Out!

Have students act out Bearden's *The Return of Odysseus*. Or, have them read aloud a story from Homer's *Odyssey* to accompany the poster of Bearden's collage. Have students create their own script by adapting Homer's text. Don't forget to include scenery and costumes!

•The Jazz Age

Romare Bearden grew up during the Jazz Age (1920s). Research the musicians of this time period, such as Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. Listen to their music and have students write a story about what they think life was like back then. You can supplement this activity by looking at photographs of Harlem and New York City in the 1920s and 1930s.

•Fighting for Freedom

Illinois Learning Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 18
Bearden was deeply affected by the mid-1960s civil rights movement in this country. Have students research this turbulent period in American history. Who were the leaders? What was the movement's mission and how successful was it in achieving its goals? Have students pretend to be journalists and ask them to interview an African-American person in their community about their experiences during this volatile time. Have students use their research on this time period to prepare their interview questions.

•The Art of Weaving

In the collage, Penelope is seen weaving a shroud for her father-in-law. Research the art of weaving and the tools that are used in this process with your students. Try weaving with paper or string. You can even make your own loom with wood, chopsticks, or popsicle sticks. If there is available time and resources, visit a weaving center in your neighborhood. Together, compare this story to others involving women weaving or spinning, such as the tale of Arachne, Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty, or the Lady of Shallot.

•Strike a Pose!

Artists communicate stories through poses and hand gestures. Look at the figures in Bearden's *The Return of Odysseus*. The artist has silhouetted, or emphasized, their hands and exaggerated their poses to help us understand what they are saying or thinking. Have students pick a figure in the collage and strike his or her pose. Then have them say out loud what the students think the figures are thinking. Have students make up different poses and make classmates guess what emotion they are showing. If there is time, try to tell a whole story without words—just with hand and facial gestures!

•A Painting's Travels

Bearden used an earlier painting, *Return of Ulysses* (the Greek name for Odysseus), by Pintoricchio (1454–1513) as a model for his collage. Pintoricchio painted his scene of Odysseus on the wall of a palace in Siena, Italy. Now the painting is located in London, England. Have students find and plot these two cities on a world map. Next, measure the distance this painting has traveled from its original home. Now, ask them to find Chicago on the world map. Measure the distance between London and Chicago to discover how far Bearden's collage is from its inspiration.

•Map Odysseus's Adventures!

Tell students that Homer's story is set in Greece and islands in the Mediterranean Sea. Ask: By just reading the story of Odysseus, can you tell what kind of landscape Greece has? Is there water nearby? Is it hilly? How can you tell? Have them look at a map to check where Greece is located. If there is time, have them research its topography, or the features of the land.

Now, read a few other tales from the *Odyssey*. Have students create a map of Odysseus's travels. (His encounters with Circe and Scylla are two good tales to use.) Tell them to use their imagination and what they know about Greece to illustrate their map. Ask them to pay careful attention to how Homer describes the places Odysseus visits.

•Shape It!

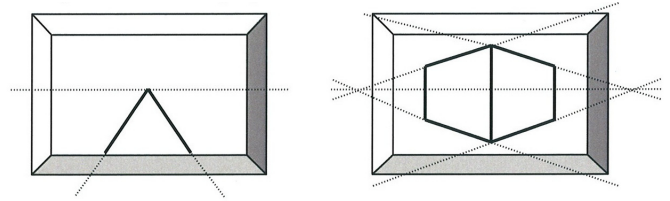
A collage is made of pieces of paper cut into shapes and fitted together to form a picture. Together, look carefully at Bearden's collage. Ask students: What kinds of shapes do you see? Did Bearden use certain shapes in particular places? (Look at the squares, for instance.) Why are these shapes placed where they are? Look at the collage and ask students to reproduce it just by drawing the shapes they see.

•A Hero's Challenge

Odysseus overcomes many trials during his return trip home after the Trojan Wars. Romare Bearden and other African Americans living in the South during the early 20th century also had to overcome many challenges so that they could enjoy the equality they deserved. Ask students to write a story about a challenge they have overcome. Remind them to include a description of how they felt during the hardest times of the challenge and what they felt when they had succeeded at overcoming it. Have them illustrate the high point, or climax, of their story in a collage or drawing.

•Making Space

Trying to recreate the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat picture surface is very difficult. One way to give the impression of depth is to use "perspective". This is a mathematical tool that imitates how our eye sees into the distance. Show students Pintoricchio's fresco and the diagram below. Explain to the students that the artist chooses a point in the distance on the horizon, called the vanishing point. All lines in the picture converge on this point. Have students draw a similar diagram on their own. Now, have them draw a diagram with two points on the horizon. Sometimes artists use this more sophisticated method of perspective.



In Pintoricchio's *Return of Ulysses*, the artist used squares on the floor to help lead our eyes into the distance. Ask: Can you see any other ways he creates the illusion of distance? Have them think carefully about how our eyes recognize distance. Things are generally smaller, less clear, and less bright when they are far away from us.

The Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pintoricchio and Benin), 1977, by Romare Bearden

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Edited by Jane Clarke and Patricia Smith

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