

# Romare Bearden

## The Great Migration Mixed Media Collage



*Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Mecklenberg County, School Bell Time*

1978, collage on board

# Meet the Artist

## Romare Bearden

1911-1988

“You don't paint what you see,  
you paint what you feel.”

- Romare Bearden



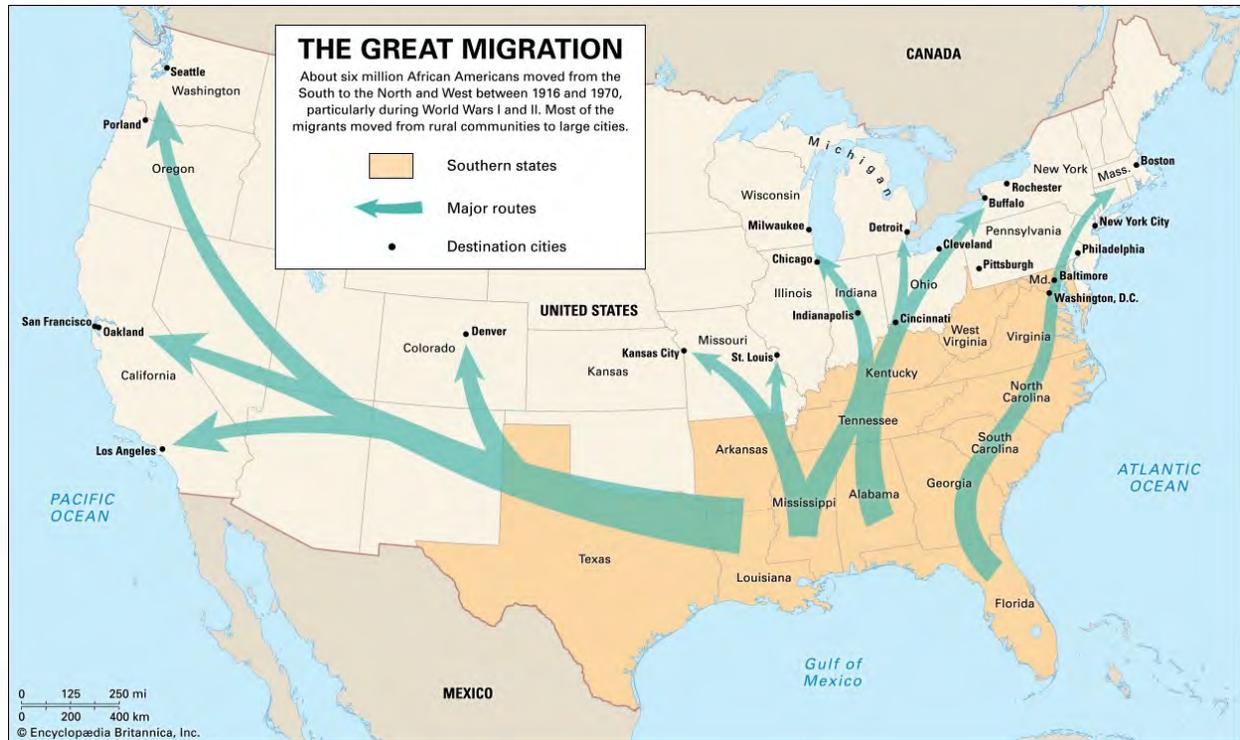
Romare Bearden was born September 2, 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina. His friends called him Romie. Like many African-American families living in the south, the Bearden's moved north and settled in the Harlem section of New York City about 1914. This was known as the Great Migration. The **Great Migration** was the migration (movement) of around 6 million African Americans out of the Southern United States to the Midwest, Northeast and West. The main reasons African Americans left the south were to escape racism and seek jobs in industrial cities.

Bearden grew up in New York City and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Bearden graduated from New York University and became a social worker. For many years he could only work on his art during his free time. Bearden read all the time. His life, like his studio, was crammed with books—poetry, philosophy, politics, works about myth, religion, art, and ancient literature. He also wrote books and articles, especially about African-American art and life. In 1943 Bearden studied at Columbia University in New York City. Bearden's early artworks were paintings done in a realistic style.

Bearden was one of the most important African American artists of the 20th century. He is best known for his **collages**, which he created largely from painted paper, magazine clippings, and bits of fabric, photographs, foil, posters, and art reproductions were among his materials. These were his “paints.” Bearden arranged them on paper or board and then glued them down. The subjects Bearden Painted consisted of African-American life and traditions, stories from religion, history, literature, and myth, blues singers and jazz musicians, and landscapes. Bearden loved music, especially jazz and blues. He described jazz as “finger-snapping, head-shaking enjoyment.”

Most of his works were done in a style influenced by Cubism. Based largely on his boyhood memories of life in the rural South and in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, Bearden's works capture aspects of American black culture.

Through examining a variety of Bearden collages, we're going to consider the scenery that Bearden might have seen leaving rural North Carolina and how that scenery would have changed after moving into a busy city like New York during the **Great Migration**. After viewing the artworks on the next 2 pages, consider how these 2 places might be different?



First, examine these images from **Rural** North Carolina, where he was born and later visited repeatedly.

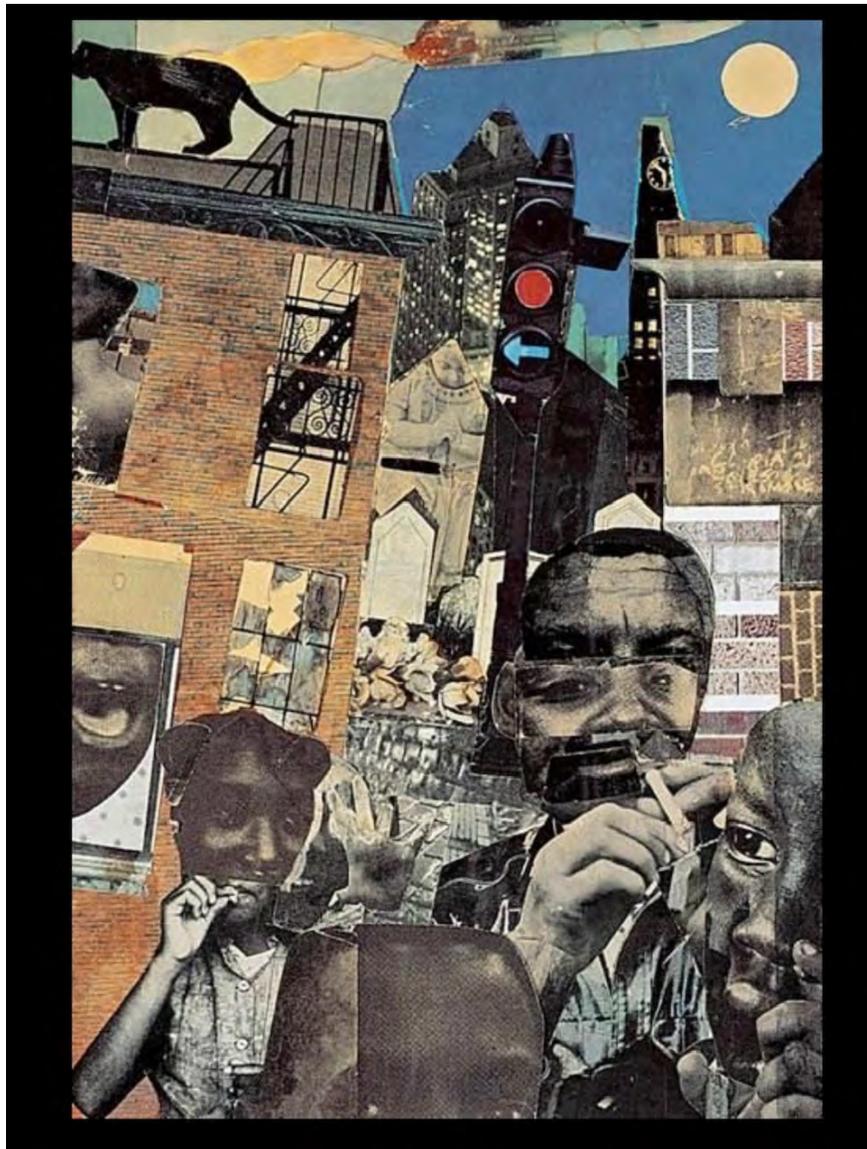




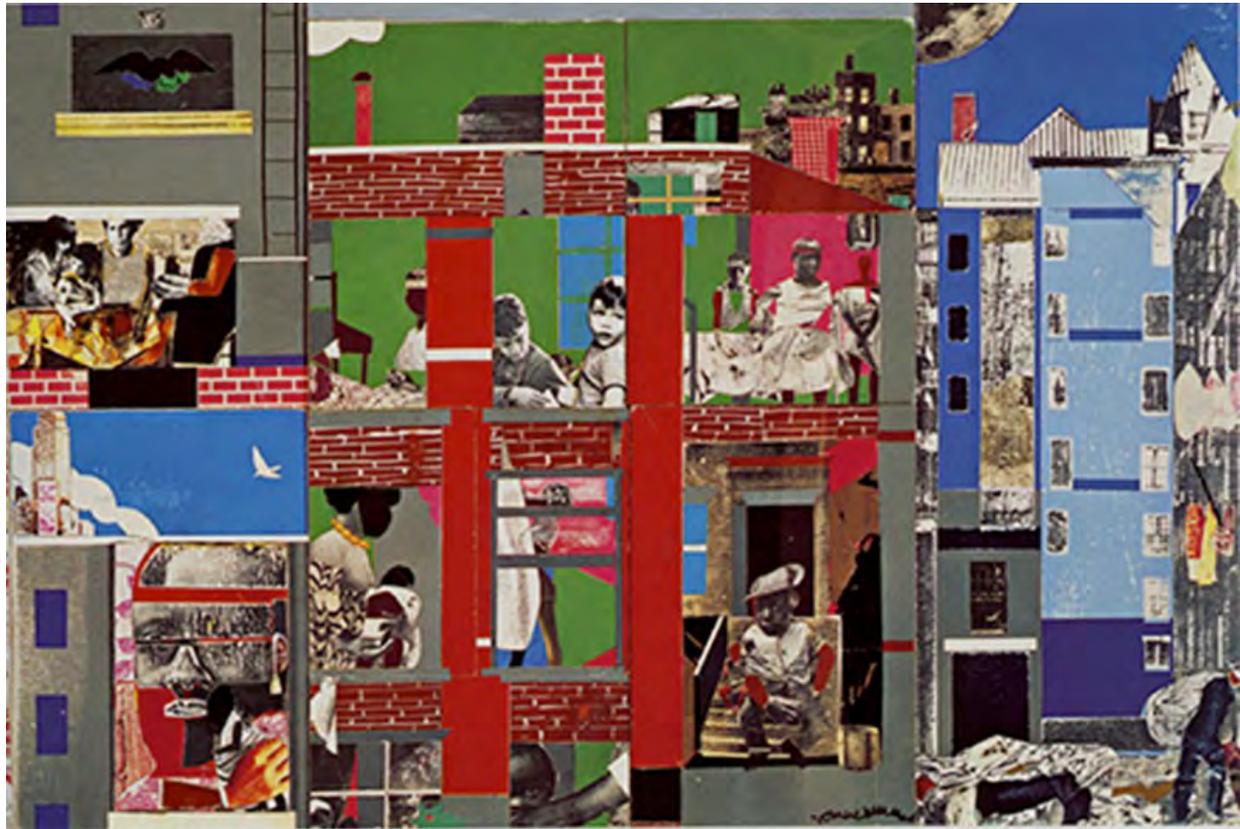
Now let's have a look at some **Urban** images.

They were inspired by life in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a steel industry town where he spent summers and one high school year, and was inspired to draw for the first time. Other images depict Harlem, New York City, center of black culture, where he moved as a toddler.

Do you notice a shift in the color palette as compared to the rural images?







Look carefully at the close-up from *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* on the following page.



What is going on in this work of art? What is the first thing that catches your eye, and why? Bearden used many different **COLLAGE** materials in his works, including cuttings from newspapers, magazines, sample catalogues, painted papers, colored paper, foil, wallpaper, wrapping paper, and art reproductions.

What materials did he use in these collages? Describe the settings. The people are probably on a farm. How can you tell that they are in the country and not the city? Imagine what the man is thinking. What do you think happened? What do you think will happen next? How would you describe the mood of this collage (quiet, still, thoughtful, expectant)? Would you like to visit this place? Why or why not? If you could ask the artist one question about this work, what would it be?

Before we create our own collage, let's closely examine this collage. In *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, Bearden reflects on his childhood memories of Mecklenburg County. A focus or elevation of the everyday becomes a frequent motif in many of his works .

The background is a wall from a shingled wooden shack or barn, reminiscent of buildings Bearden would have seen in Mecklenburg County.

Windowscapes seem like pictures within pictures.

Perhaps wrapping paper or wallpaper

Hands are made from various magazine sources. Abrupt changes in color, size, and texture capture your attention, making the hands a focal point of the collage.

For the seated figure's face, Bearden used as many as fifteen different magazine cuttings. Because they came from many different sources, the scale, color, and points of view shift.

Many cuttings are from magazines or catalogues of wood samples. No two pieces seem exactly alike.

Hand-painted paper

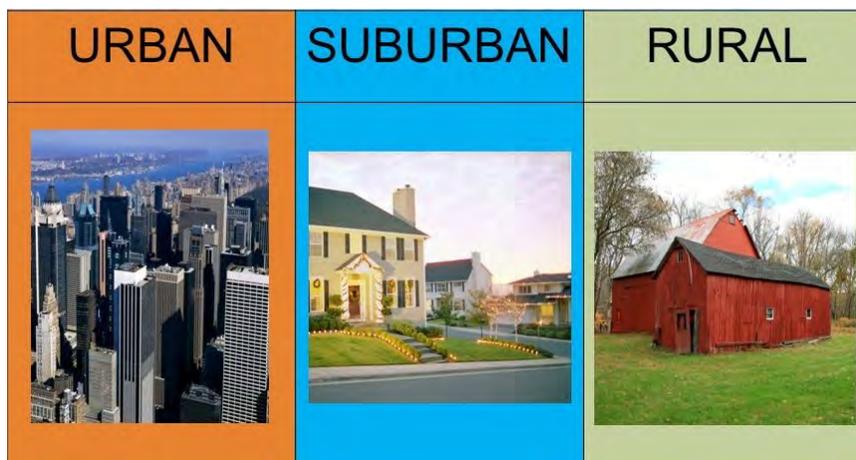


## TYPES OF COMMUNITIES

Now that you have considered the differences of these 2 places that Bearden depicted, consider the community where you live and begin to think of some of the natural and man-made habitats that make up your home town.

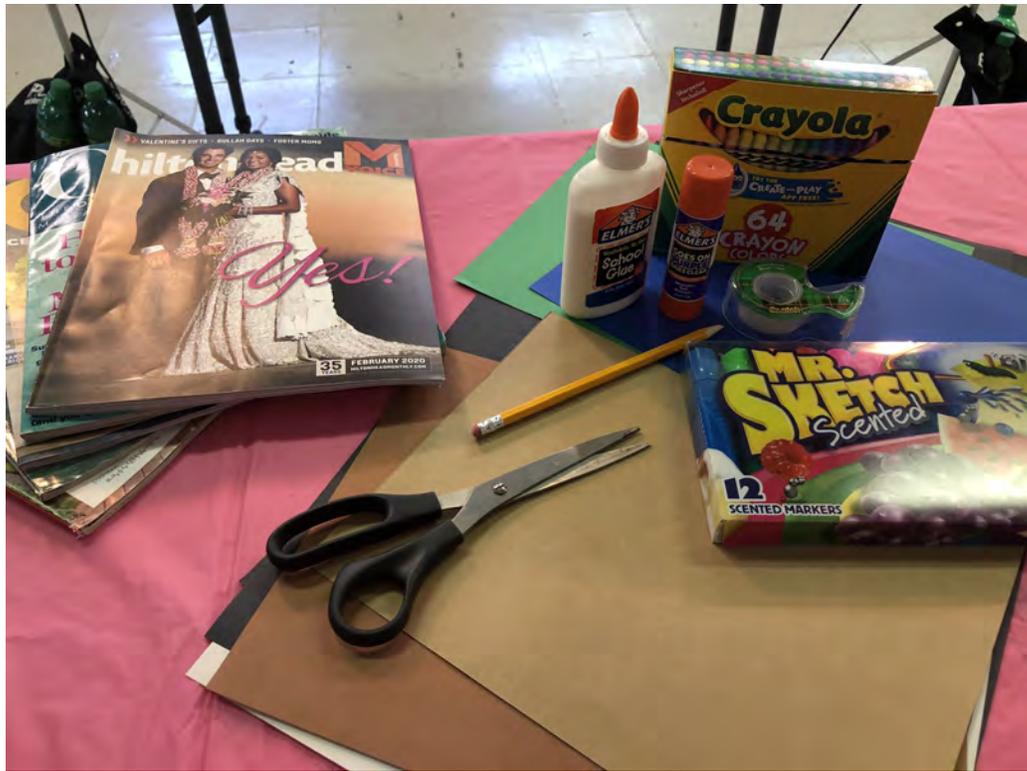
For example, a city or **urban** community is busy with cars and buildings, and people and there aren't very many trees since there are sidewalks and cement. A **suburban** community is a place where people live just outside of a *city* or town. There are lots of houses in *suburban* areas, but not as many other buildings as *urban* areas. In contrast, a **rural** community is green, with hills, and trees and farm land and the houses are generally spread out.

Do any of these places sounds like where you live? This lesson is about creating YOUR environment as you visualize your home and community.



# Let's Get Started!

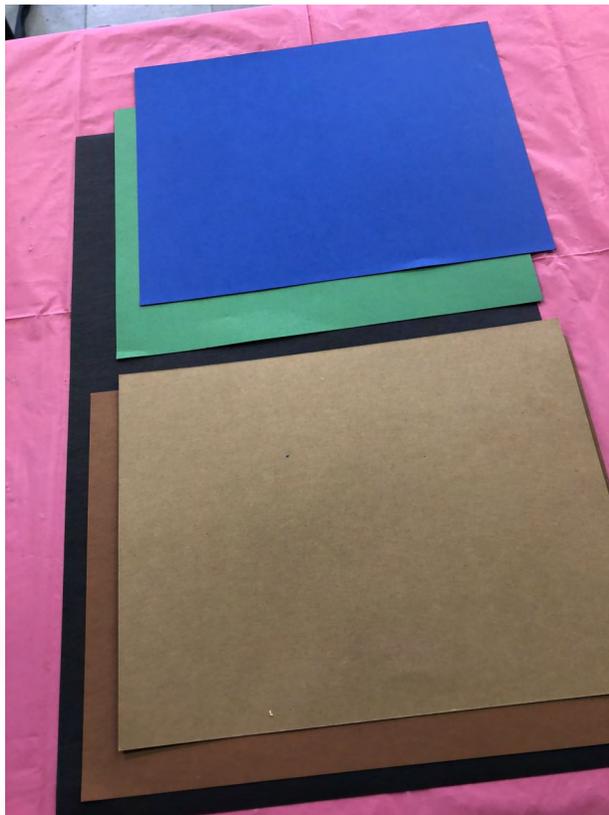
**Materials:** magazines, construction paper (green, blue, neutral colors), scissors, tape, glue, oil pastels, markers or crayons (optional).



## Procedures

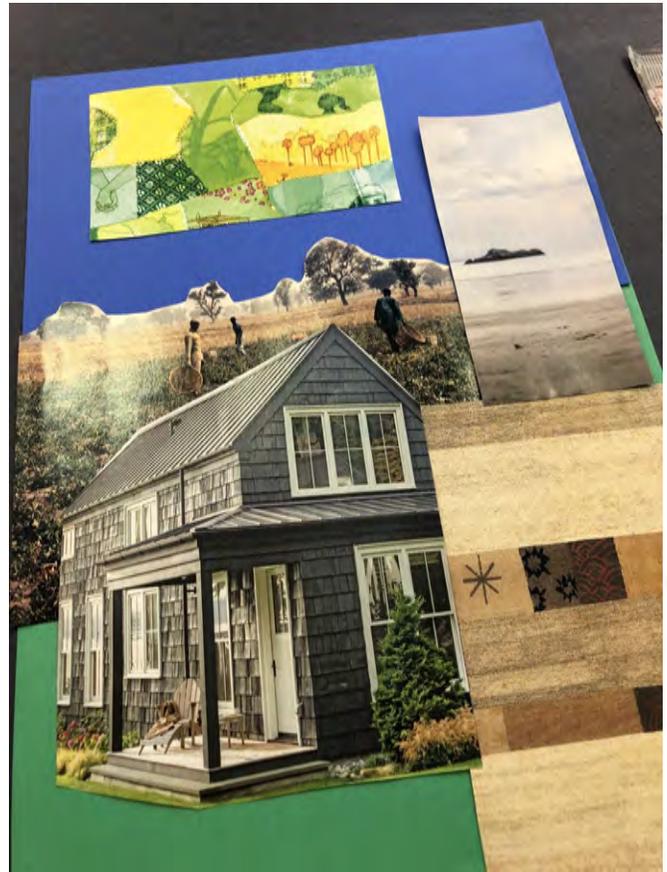
**Brainstorming:** Students will consider what kinds of buildings they might find in a city. How are big cities different than where we live? In our area of SC, for the most part stores are together in one part of town and houses are in the neighborhoods, but in cities, those things can be right next to each other. Have students list many different kinds of buildings that could be on a city block, such as apartments, restaurants, stores (of all kinds), banks, police and fire stations, libraries, museums, schools, pet stores, hair style places, churches, etc. Remind them that Bearden started out making his "Block" a fairly literal representation of his Harlem neighborhood, but as he worked on it, he wanted to make it represent something broader than that.

1. First, students will cut out construction paper shapes to begin building their own landscapes or cityscapes.



## Procedures, cont.

2. Next, students will use more paper shapes and magazine cut-outs to begin to represent the types of buildings they would find in the setting. Are they close together or far apart? What about the size? Do you see a lot of green space in your environment?



## Procedures, cont.

3. Continue to add details and objects that will help to tell your story and set the scenery. How can you use images to explain or show where you live, such as an ocean, green hills, trees, etc... These are objects found in nature.



## Procedures, cont.

Glue all of these together into a creative composition creating a unique and personal location collage that shares where you are, where you've been or perhaps, where you're going.



## Procedures, cont.

4. Next you will be using Bearden's technique to add figures to your story. Let's recall how he made 1 face from many different faces in *Tomorrow I May be Far Away*. Cut out facial features such as eyes, noses, mouths, and clothing and collage these together to create an image of either yourself or the people in your town.





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*Artist with Model and Painting by Romare Bearden*

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