

# Romare Bearden A Black Odyssey



## A Dazzling New Exhibition of Bearden Collages and Other Works

In April 1977, at New York's Cordier & Ekstrom gallery, the American modernist Romare Bearden (1911-1988) installed 20 vibrant, richly composed collages under the title "Odysseus." The series was based on characters and episodes in Homer's Greek epic *The Odyssey*—one of the foundational works of Western literature.

Thirty-five years later, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service is making **Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey** available for the very first time outside New York City.

Curated by the esteemed scholar Robert G. O'Meally, this exhibition reunites the 1977 series in all its glory. It also expands the scope of the original exhibition with splendid watercolors and other relevant works from the artist's *œuvre*. Included is a rare grouping of mid-1940's Bearden drawings based on the other Homer epic, the *Iliad*.

Beyond the sheer thrill of seeing these spectacular works themselves, so fresh and alive that the brush strokes and paper-cuts could have been made yesterday, this augmented exhibition increases the resonance and power of the original 20 collages.

This exhibition simultaneously expands our view of the Bearden canon and his influence as an artist, while reinforcing Homer's continuing relevance as a poet. It also proclaims that to be black in America—and indeed to be American in our new global village—is to participate in a culture that knows no boundaries.

FRONT COVER *Poseidon, The Sea God—Enemy of Odysseus* (detail), Thompson Collection, Indianapolis

BACK COVER *Circe*, DC Moore Gallery and the Estate of Nanette Bearden

ALL ART WORKS 1977. Collage of various papers with paint and graphite on fiberboard

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Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
the wanderer, harried for years on end,  
on the proud height of Troy.

—HOMER, *THE ODYSSEY*

## Curatorial Approach

In the unique language of visual art, **Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey** is a startling retelling of Homer's ancient story of Odysseus, the "man of many ways" who faces temptations and battles adversaries to make his way back home to Ithaca.

While this mighty sea-tale of a brilliant but dislocated hero's journey home originates with Homer—Bearden makes it undeniably his own. Throughout his career, the search for home was the artist's most pervasive theme. For decades, he created country- and city-scapes of family love—typically secure but sometimes uneasy images of life at home and travelers making their way back.

In our contemporary world, this Homeric/Beardenian theme of traveling home is part of our own identity. Persistent change, continual violence and disruptions of many kinds have rendered us a global citizenry of wandering exiles seeking a place to call home—or a *feeling* of home—in a strange and shifting world.

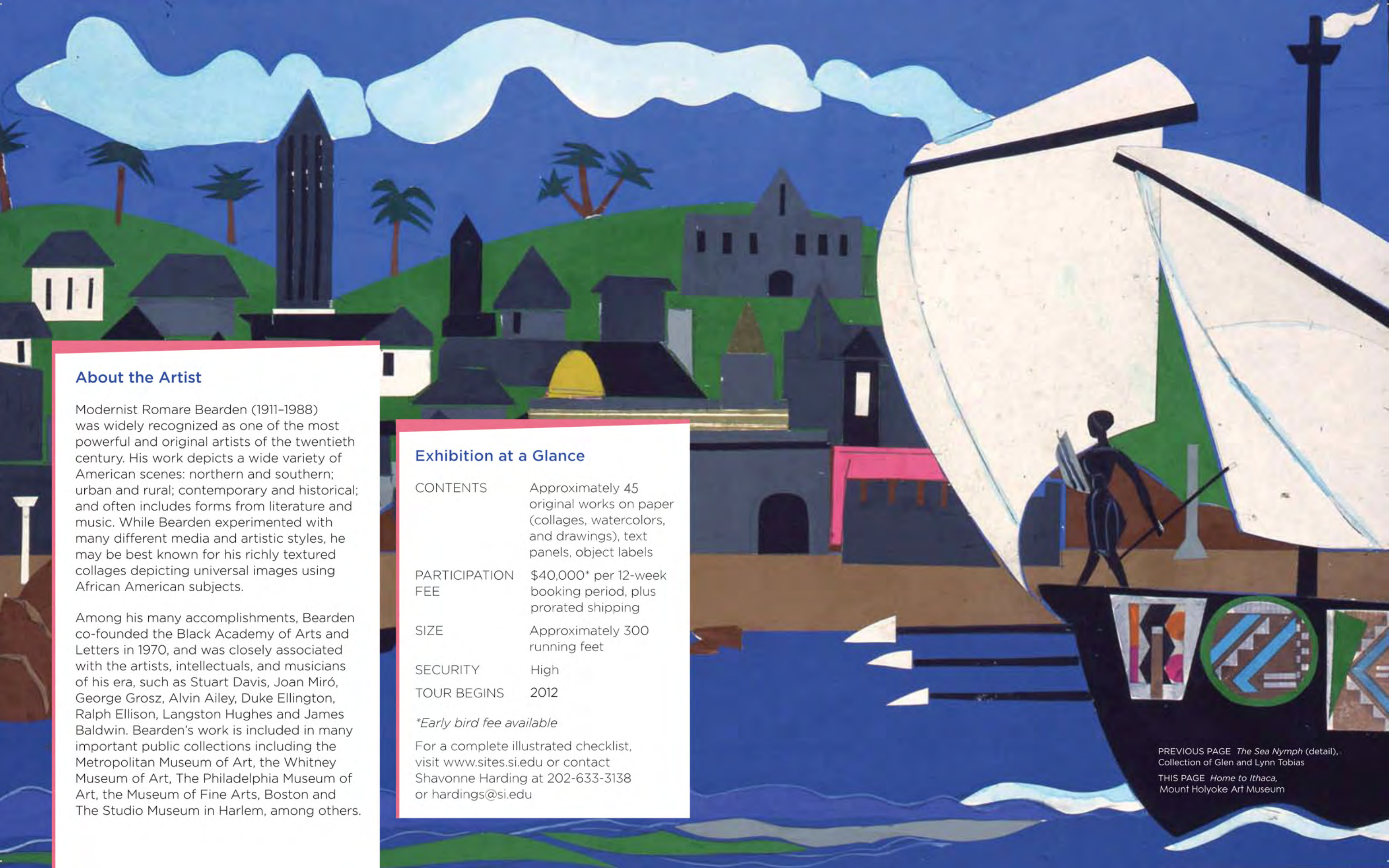
To stress the true universality of Homer's epic, and to make it more relevant to the lives of blacks as well as to his own experience as a modern black artist, Bearden makes all of his Homeric figures black: gods, mortals, heroes and villains. This choice asserts the central meaning of the story: a father and husband trying to get home, a son missing his father, a hero tempted to give up his quest, a wife's tested patience. These themes, Bearden assures us, apply to black people as well as to anyone else.

While both Homer's poem and Bearden's richly layered variations upon it are highly alluring and entertaining—both are also deeply instructive. Together, they invite us to think about who we are, and what our responsibilities are to each other. They make us wonder how we can all be voyagers together on our own course toward home.

The SITES exhibit **Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey** enables museum visitors across the nation to ponder these ideas while viewing a collection of rare, captivating and exquisitely beautiful collages and watercolors by a true twentieth century modern master.



ABOVE *Circe Turns a Companion of Odysseus into a Swine*, DC Moore Gallery and the Romare Bearden Estate and Foundation  
LEFT *The Fall of Troy*, Private Collection



## About the Artist

Modernist Romare Bearden (1911–1988) was widely recognized as one of the most powerful and original artists of the twentieth century. His work depicts a wide variety of American scenes: northern and southern; urban and rural; contemporary and historical; and often includes forms from literature and music. While Bearden experimented with many different media and artistic styles, he may be best known for his richly textured collages depicting universal images using African American subjects.

Among his many accomplishments, Bearden co-founded the Black Academy of Arts and Letters in 1970, and was closely associated with the artists, intellectuals, and musicians of his era, such as Stuart Davis, Joan Miró, George Grosz, Alvin Ailey, Duke Ellington, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes and James Baldwin. Bearden's work is included in many important public collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of Art, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and The Studio Museum in Harlem, among others.

## Exhibition at a Glance

CONTENTS	Approximately 45 original works on paper (collages, watercolors, and drawings), text panels, object labels
PARTICIPATION FEE	\$40,000* per 12-week booking period, plus prorated shipping
SIZE	Approximately 300 running feet
SECURITY	High
TOUR BEGINS	2012

*\*Early bird fee available*

For a complete illustrated checklist, visit [www.sites.si.edu](http://www.sites.si.edu) or contact Shavonne Harding at 202-633-3138 or [hardings@si.edu](mailto:hardings@si.edu)

PREVIOUS PAGE *The Sea Nymph* (detail),  
Collection of Glen and Lynn Tobias

THIS PAGE *Home to Ithaca*,  
Mount Holyoke Art Museum

We are all, as moderns, travelers through  
uncertain seas, struggling to maintain our families  
and ourselves, searching for a pathway home.

—ROBERT G. O'MEALLY



## Registrarial Requirements

**Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey** has been designated **High Security** and will be offered only to those institutions able to meet the Smithsonian's requirements. Key requirements are listed below. **For a complete list of requirements, contact Shavonne Harding, 202-633-3138 or [hardings@si.edu](mailto:hardings@si.edu).**

- Space: Exhibitors must have a limited access gallery with a minimum area of approximately 300 running feet. The largest object in the exhibition is 44"H x 56"W x 3"D uncrated and weighs close to 50 lbs.
- Environment: Exhibition space, staging, and storage areas must be maintained between 68°-70° Fahrenheit. Relative humidity must be 45-55%. Empty crates and packing materials must be stored in a secure, pest-, humidity-, and temperature-controlled dry area.
- Light: Light must be limited to five foot candles. No direct sunlight may reach the objects.
- Staffing: The exhibition must be checked twice daily by trained professional staff. Special notice must be given to those objects not glazed.
- Security: Professional guards must be present throughout the exhibition time, including unpacking, installation, de-installation, and packing. During public hours, a guard must always be in sight of the exhibition's unglazed framed objects. Security must be maintained during hours when the exhibition is closed.
- Delivery: Facility must have a loading dock accessible to 53-foot trailer rigs. Forklifts and pallet jacks are required to move the crates.
- Installation: SITES will provide one registrar to supervise installation and takedown. No object crates are to be opened until the arrival of SITES registrar. Exhibitor provides one collection manager or registrar, and a team of at least two skilled preparators for handling the exhibition crates, installation and takedown of objects.

## A Complete Package

The exhibition itself is only a portion of what SITES delivers. As a host of **Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey**, you will also receive:

- Complete curatorial and registration information
- Complete shipping, handling, and installation instructions
- Wall-to-wall fine-arts insurance coverage under the Smithsonian's policy
- Public relations support, including sample press release, images, logos; digital graphic templates of promotional materials; and advice on promoting the exhibition and hosting special events
- Companion book, *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* by curator Robert G. O'Meally
- Educational and programming resources, educator resources, speakers list, bibliography
- Exhibition website and ability to link to and from the SITES website

## Project Partners

### Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service

SITES has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, DC, for more than 50 years. SITES connects Americans to their cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science, and history, which are shown wherever people live, work, and play. [www.sites.si.edu](http://www.sites.si.edu)

### Curator Dr. Robert G. O'Meally

Dr. O'Meally is the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he founded The Center for Jazz Studies. He is the author of *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*; *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday*; and *The Jazz Singers*; and editor of *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. His new book is *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*—the catalogue essay for an exhibition of the artist's collages based on Homer. His articles on literature, music, and visual art have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Callaloo*, and *The American Scholar*. For his co-production of a Smithsonian record set called *The Jazz Singers*, he was nominated for a Grammy Award.

### DC Moore Gallery

Located in New York City, DC Moore Gallery specializes in American twentieth century and contemporary art. The gallery represents the Romare Bearden Estate and Foundation. It also represents the estates of Charles Burchfield, Gwen Knight, Jacob Lawrence, and Janet Sobel, along with a lively mix of more than twenty contemporary artists.

## SITES CONTACTS

For further information, including a complete checklist and additional host requirements, please contact:

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