

Romare Bearden: A Closer Look

Explore *The Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pinturicchio and Benin)* by artist Romare Bearden. Engage in slow looking, learn about Bearden and his work, and get new ideas for your own art making. Students can view the work [online](#) or as a classroom poster.



Romare Howard Bearden (American, 1911—1988)
The Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pinturicchio and Benin), 1977
Collage comprised of cut-and-pasted papers, with graphite and touches of brush and black and gray wash, on wood panel
Mary and Leigh Block Fund
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QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- Play “I Spy” with a neighbor. What objects can you find throughout the artwork? What colors and shapes do you see? What else do you see?
- Strike a pose like one of the figures. What does it look like this person is doing? What do you notice about what they are wearing?
- Based on clues you find in the artwork, when and where do you think this takes place?
- What is the mood? How does it show?
- Describe to a partner how you think this work was made. What materials might have been used? What makes you think so? If you are viewing this work online, use the zoom feature to look closely.
- What story do you think is being told by this work of art? What is the setting? Who are the characters? What is happening? What do you see that makes you think these things? Does the artwork remind you of a story you know or something you have seen before?
- Read the information about the artist and his work on the back of this resource. When you’re done, look at the artwork again. Have your thoughts about it changed? How?

CREATIVE RESPONSE

With this artwork, Romare Bearden took an ancient tale and made it his own. Think of a story that you know well. What connections can you find between this story and your own life? Imagine one scene. Where does it take place? Who are the characters? What happens? How would you adapt or change the story to build connections to your own life and time? Tear or cut pieces of colored paper, magazine pictures, or other materials, and create a collage of your adapted scene. Share and discuss it with your friends, family, or classmates.

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Romare Bearden, 1987



LEARN ABOUT THE ARTIST

The Return of Odysseus (Homage to Pinturicchio and Benin) is one in a series of collages by Romare Bearden retelling *The Odyssey*, an ancient Greek epic poem about a hero's journey home. Using collage—the process of layering and pasting pieces of cut or torn paper, photographs, or fabric to create an image—Bearden transformed the tale, celebrating the connections between *The Odyssey's* characters and African American history and culture.

Bearden's life and work span three important movements in the history of African American people. Born in 1911 in Charlotte, North Carolina, his family was among the more than six million African Americans who left the South during the Great Migration with the hope of building a better life in other areas of the country. The family settled in New York, where Bearden had the opportunity to develop his art practice during the Harlem Renaissance, a creative movement of the 1920s and '30s that saw a surge in African American literature, music, dance, and art. In the early 1960s, Bearden became a founding member of a group called Spiral, which considered the role of Black artists active in the Civil Rights movement and the art world.

In *The Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus spends ten years traveling and battling to return home after fighting in the Trojan War. Bearden's image is based on the scene in which Odysseus finally returns and enters his own home, only to find that he has been presumed dead and that men have been trying to take his wife, Penelope, seen seated at her loom, as theirs. Disguised as a pauper, seen here in the doorway, Odysseus convinces Penelope that she should hold a contest to see which of the suitors can manage her husband's bow. Through this competition and clever actions by Odysseus and Penelope, the couple outsmarts the suitors and reunites.

Bearden based this work on a fresco painting by Italian Renaissance artist Pinturicchio titled *Penelope and the Suitors*, using collage to include elements inspired by the masks and sculptures of highly skilled Beninese artists. Benin is an African nation that gained independence from French rule in 1960, not long before Bearden made this collage. Through this artwork, Bearden created a global story from the Greek epic to emphasize the common struggles and joys of all humans. "It's universal," Bearden said. "So if a child in Benin or in Louisiana . . . sees my paintings of Odysseus, he can understand the myth better." By making the faces of the characters Black instead of white, as in the original fresco, Bearden also connected the struggles and triumphs of the people of Benin and African Americans.

EXPLORE MORE ARTWORKS

Learn more about the work of Romare Bearden and thousands of other artists by searching the museum's collections page by name, title, or keyword at www.artic.edu/collection. Below are suggestions of artists and artistic movements that relate to Bearden. What connections and differences do you find?

Contemporary Art: [Bisa Butler](#) cites Romare Bearden as an influence on her work. The Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age: [Archibald Motley](#), [Jacob Lawrence](#), [Augusta Savage](#), [James VanDerZee](#), [Richmond Barthé](#), [Henry Ossawa Tanner](#), and [Hale Woodruff](#). Collage: [Ralph Arnold](#), [Joseph Cornell](#). Modernism: [Pablo Picasso](#) and [Henri Matisse](#). Benin Bronzes: [Head \(Uhunmwun Elao\)](#), [Plaque](#), and [Tusk](#).

Extension Activity: Read or learn more about the epic poem *The Odyssey* and view Pinturicchio's original fresco *Penelope and the Suitors*, in the collection of the National Gallery, online. What connections can you find between these sources and Bearden's work?