



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Romare Bearden Papers, 1937-1982, in the Archives of American Art

Barbara Aikens

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Romare Bearden papers
Date:	1937-1982
Identifier:	AAA.bearroma
Creator:	Bearden, Romare, 1911-1988
Extent:	2.1 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The papers of Romare Bearden measure 2.1 linear feet and date from 1937 to 1982. The collection includes biographical information, correspondence, writings by and about Bearden, miscellaneous legal and financial material, photographs, drawings, and printed material. Found are numerous letters referring to African-American arts movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including exhibitions, publications, associations, and scattered letters of a more personal nature.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Romare Bearden lent material for microfilming to the Archives of American Art in 1968, donating the correspondence. Bearden also gave additional papers between 1977 and 1983.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming (reel N68-87) including correspondence, a scrapbook, photographs, catalogs, clippings, and writings. Except for the correspondence, loaned materials were returned to the donor and are not described in the collection container inventory.

Related Materials

Within the Archives holdings are two oral history interviews with Romare Bearden. One was conducted in 1968 by Henri Ghent and another in 1980 by Avis Berman.

Available Formats

The papers of **Romare Bearden** in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2005, and total 2,217 images.

Material lent for microfilming is available on 35mm microfilm reel N68-87 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

Processing Information

All accessions were merged and fully processed, arranged, and described in 2003 by Barbara Aikens. A portion of an earlier loan that was microfilmed on reel N/68-87 was merged and processed with the later accessions.

Preferred Citation

Romare Bearden papers, 1937-1982. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

The bulk of the collection has been digitized and is available online via AAA's website. Use of material not digitized requires an appointment.

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Biographical / Historical

Born in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, in 1914, Bearden's family relocated to New York City when Bearden was a toddler. Living in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Bearden was exposed to such luminaries as writer Langston Hughes, painter Aaron Douglas, and musician Duke Ellington. While attending New York University, Bearden became interested in cartooning and became the art editor of the NYU Medley in his senior year. He received his B.S. in mathematics in 1935, initially planning to pursue medical school. Realizing that he had little interest in the other sciences however, Bearden began attending classes at the Art Students League in the evenings, studying under George Grosz.

In the mid-1930s Bearden published numerous political cartoons in journals and newspapers, including the *Afro-American*, but by the end of the decade, he shifted his emphasis to painting. Bearden's first paintings, on large sheets of brown paper, recalled his early memories of the South. After serving in the Army, Bearden began exhibiting more frequently, particularly in Washington, D.C. at the G Street Gallery and in New York with Samuel Kootz.

During a career lasting almost half a century, Bearden produced approximately two thousand works. Although best known for the collages of urban and southern scenes that he first experimented with in the mid-1960s, Bearden also completed paintings, drawings, monotypes, edition prints, public murals, record album jackets, magazine and book illustrations, and costume and set designs for theater and ballet. His work focused on religious subjects, African-American culture, jazz clubs and brothels, and history and literature. Not confining his abilities to the visual arts, Bearden also devoted attention to writing and song writing. Several of his collaborations were published as sheet music, among the most famous of which is "Seabreeze," recorded by Billy Eckstine. In addition, Bearden coauthored three full-length books: *The Painter's Mind: A Study of the Relations of Structure and Space in Painting* (1969) with painter Carl Holty; *Six Black Masters of American Art* (1972); and *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (posthumously, 1993), the latter two with journalist Harry Henderson.

Bearden was also active in the African-American arts movement of the period, serving as art director of the Harlem Cultural Council, a founding member of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, and organizer of exhibitions, such as the Metropolitan Museum's "Harlem on My Mind" (1968). Romare Bearden died in 1988.

Scope and Contents

The papers of Romare Bearden measure 2.1 linear feet and date from 1937 to 1982. The collection includes biographical information, correspondence, writings by and about Bearden, miscellaneous legal and financial material, photographs, drawings, and printed material.

Correspondence is with family, friends, artists, galleries, museums, publishers, universities, arts associations, and colleagues, primarily concerning gallery space, exhibitions, sales of artwork, publishing, and arts events. Also found are numerous letters referring to African-American art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including exhibitions, publications, associations, and scattered letters of a more personal nature. Many of the letters are illustrated with Bearden's doodlings and drawings. Although most of the letters are from galleries, museums, publishers, and arts associations, scattered letters from Charles Alston, Jacob Lawrence, Ad Reinhardt, Carl Holty, and Sam Middleton are found. In addition, there are letters from the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, and letters concerning its founding.

Writings by Bearden include lectures, speeches, talks, essays, and prose. Many are handwritten, annotated, and edited in Bearden's hand and several are illustrated with Bearden's doodlings and sketches. Included are a memorial delivered upon artist Carl Holty's death, a tribute to Zell Ingram, autobiographical essays, essays on art, and African-American art, artists, and cultural life. Also found are several handwritten examples of Bearden's prose and poetry. There are also writings by others and one folder of fragments and notes assumed to be by Bearden.

The collection houses two folders of photographs and snapshots of Bearden, family members, other unidentified artists or friends, classes and/or lectures, and works of art. Also found are several undated ink drawings, sketches in pencil and ink, and a hand-drawn and colored map with overlay of Paris. Printed material includes examples of Bearden's commissioned artwork for publications, press releases, exhibition catalogs and announcements, invitations, newspaper and magazine clippings, and miscellaneous printed materials. Although much of the printed material concerns Bearden's work, a fair portion concerns African-American art, artists, and cultural movements.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into seven series based on type of materials. Documents within each of the seven series have been arranged in chronological order, except for the writings which have been further subdivided by creator and are undated. Printed materials have been arranged primarily according to form of material and are in rough chronological order.

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical, 1977, undated (Box 1; 1 folder)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1944-1981, undated (Box 1-2; 0.8 linear feet)
- Series 3: Writings By and About Bearden, circa 1950s-1980s (Box 3; 6 folders)
- Series 4: Legal and Financial Material, 1970-1977 (Box 3; 3 folders)
- Series 5: Photographs, undated (Box 3; 2 folders)
- Series 6: Drawings, undated (Box 3, OV 6; 4 folders)
- Series 7: Printed Material, 1937-1982 (Box 3-5; 1 linear foot)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

African American artists

Painting
Works of art

Types of Materials:

Drawings
Exhibition catalogs
Maps -- Paris (France)
Photographs
Sketches

Names:

Alston, Charles Henry, 1907-1977
Holty, Carl, 1900-1973
Lawrence, Jacob, 1917-2000
Middleton, Samuel M., 1927-
Reinhardt, Ad, 1913-1967

Occupations:

Collagists -- New York (State) -- New York
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical, 1977, undated

1 Folder (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: One folder of miscellaneous biographical information that includes awards, certificates, family history, resumes, and other miscellaneous documents.

Box 1, Folder 1 [Miscellaneous Biographical Information, 1977, undated](#)

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1944-1981

0.8 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2)

Scope and Contents: Letters to and from Bearden with family, friends, artists, galleries, museums, publishers, universities, arts associations, and colleagues primarily concerning gallery space, exhibitions, sales of artwork, publishing, and arts events. Also found are numerous letters referring to African-American art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including exhibitions, publications, and associations, and scattered letters of a more personal nature. Many of the letters are illustrated with Bearden's doodlings and drawings. Although most of the letters are from galleries, museums, publishers, and arts associations, scattered letters from Charles Alston, Ad Reinhardt, Carl Holty, and Sam Middleton are found, as well as a 1946 letter from Samuel Kootz Gallery agreeing to be the sole representative of Bearden for a two year period. There are a few letters from Jacob Lawrence, including a 1971 letter stating that Bearden's exhibition brings "back memories of 33 West 125th Street....which as is so oftentimes true - turn out to be times we treasure greatly". Lawrence is referring to a studio building on West 125th where Bearden also had a studio in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In addition, there are letters from the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, and letters concerning its founding. There is also a 1970 Guggenheim award letter for a fellowship to develop and write "A History of Afro-American Artists".

Box 1, Folder 2	Correspondence, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Correspondence, 1944-1950
Box 1, Folder 4	Correspondence, 1957-1960
Box 1, Folder 5	Correspondence, 1961-1966
Box 1, Folder 6	Correspondence, 1967
Box 1, Folder 7	Correspondence, 1967
Box 1, Folder 8	Correspondence, 1968 January-May
Box 1, Folder 9	Correspondence, 1968 June-July
Box 1, Folder 10	Correspondence, 1968 August
Box 1, Folder 11	Correspondence, 1968 September
Box 1, Folder 12	Correspondence, 1968 October-December
Box 1, Folder 13	Correspondence, 1969
Box 1, Folder 14	Correspondence, 1970 January-May
Box 1, Folder 15	Correspondence, 1970 June-December
Box 1, Folder 16	Correspondence, 1971

Box 1, Folder 17	Correspondence, 1972 January-February
Box 1, Folder 18	Correspondence, 1972 March-April
Box 1, Folder 19	Correspondence, 1972 April-May
Box 1, Folder 20	Correspondence, 1972 June-August
Box 1, Folder 21	Correspondence, 1972 September
Box 2, Folder 1	Correspondence, 1972 October
Box 2, Folder 2	Correspondence, 1972 November-December
Box 2, Folder 3	Correspondence, 1973 January-March
Box 2, Folder 4	Correspondence, 1973 April-May
Box 2, Folder 5	Correspondence, 1973 June-September
Box 2, Folder 6	Correspondence, 1973 October-December
Box 2, Folder 7	Correspondence, 1974 January-February
Box 2, Folder 8	Correspondence, 1974 March-April
Box 2, Folder 9	Correspondence, 1974 May-June
Box 2, Folder 10	Correspondence, 1974 July-December
Box 2, Folder 11	Correspondence, 1975 January-March
Box 2, Folder 12	Correspondence, 1975
Box 2, Folder 13	Correspondence, 1976
Box 2, Folder 14	Correspondence, 1977 January-March
Box 2, Folder 15	Correspondence, 1977 April-August
Box 2, Folder 16	Correspondence, 1977 September-December
Box 2, Folder 17	Correspondence, 1977 September-December

Box 2, Folder 18

Correspondence, 1979-1981

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Series 3: Writings By and About Bearden, circa 1950s-1980s

6 Folders (Box 3)

Scope and Contents: This series houses writings, primarily in draft or manuscript version, by Bearden, such as lectures, speeches, talks, essays, and prose. Many are handwritten, annotated, and edited in Bearden's hand and several are illustrated with Bearden's doodlings and sketches. Included are a memorial delivered upon artist Carl Holty's death, a tribute to Zell Ingram, autobiographical essays, essays on art, and African-American art, artists, and cultural life. Also found are several handwritten examples of Bearden's prose and poetry. One folder of writings by others includes an interview transcript edited by Bearden, a student paper, numerous essays about Bearden and his work, and one proposal for a film based on Bearden's life. One folder of fragments and notes assumed to be by Bearden is also found and one folder of unidentified writings.

Box 3, Folder 1	Writings By Bearden, circa 1950s-1980s
Box 3, Folder 2	Writings By Bearden, circa 1950s-1980s
Box 3, Folder 3	Writings By Bearden, Prose and Poetry, circa 1950s-1980s
Box 3, Folder 4	Miscellaneous Notes, circa 1950s-1980s
Box 3, Folder 5	Writings About Bearden By Others, circa 1950s-1980s
Box 3, Folder 6	Unidentified Writings, undated

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Series 4: Legal and Financial Material, 1970-1977

3 Folders (Box 3)

Scope and Contents: Scattered legal and financial material, including a 1977 agreement with Warner Brothers Records, Inc. for artwork for a Charlie Parker album cover. Also found are miscellaneous financial receipts, invoices, and statements for sales and purchases of artwork, as well as loan and exhibition documentation. Scattered household receipts are also arranged in this series.

Box 3, Folder 7 [Legal Agreements, 1975, undated](#)

Box 3, Folder 8 [Miscellaneous Financial, Art-Related, 1970-1977](#)

Box 3, Folder 9 [Miscellaneous Financial, Non Art-Related, 1974-1975](#)

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Series 5: Photographs, undated

2 Folders (Box 3)

Scope and Contents: Two folders containing scattered photographs and snapshots of Bearden, family members, other unidentified artists or friends, classes and/or lectures, and works of art.

Box 3, Folder 10 [Photographs of Bearden, Family, Other Artists, undated](#)

Box 3, Folder 11 [Photographs of Works of Art, undated](#)

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Series 6: Drawings, undated

4 Folders (Box 3, 6)

Scope and Contents: Undated ink drawings, sketches in pencil and ink, and a hand-drawn and colored map with overlay of Paris.

Box 3, Folder 12	Ink Drawings, undated
Box 3, Folder 13	Pencil and Ink Sketches, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 6
Box 3, Folder 14	Hand-drawn Map of Paris with Overlay, undated
Box OV 6	Oversized Sketch, undated Notes: Oversized material digitized with Box 3, Folder 13

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Series 7: Printed Material, 1937-1982

1 Linear foot (Box 3-5)

Scope and Contents:	Printed material includes printed examples of Bearden's commissioned artwork for publications, press releases, exhibition catalogs and announcements, invitations, newspaper and magazine clippings, and miscellaneous printed materials, such as magazines and bulletins. Also found is one folder of printed material concerning the 1973 Annual Conference of Artists and another folder housing materials concerning other artists. Although much of the printed material concerns Bearden's work, a fair portion concerns African-American art, artists, and cultural movements.
Available Formats:	The bulk of this series has been digitized. Items not digitized include magazines and some magazine clippings, some news clippings, most of the miscellaneous printed material, and some printed material about other artists.

Box 3, Folder 15	Examples of Artwork for Publications, circa 1970s
Box 3, Folder 16	Press Releases, 1971-1979, undated
Box 3, Folder 17	Catalogs, 1948-1971
Box 4, Folder 1	Catalogs (mostly Bearden), 1972-1975
Box 4, Folder 2	Catalogs (mostly Bearden), 1975
Box 4, Folder 3	Catalogs (mostly Bearden), 1976-1978
Box 4, Folder 4	Catalogs (mostly Bearden), 1980-1982
Box 4, Folder 5	Announcements, 1964-1982, undated
Box 4, Folder 6	Invitations, 1972-1975, undated
Box 4, Folder 7	Newspaper Clippings, 1937-1969
Box 4, Folder 8	Newspaper Clippings, 1937-1969
Box 5, Folder 1	Newspaper Clippings, 1970-1982, undated
Box 5, Folder 2	Newspaper Clippings, 1970-1982, undated
Box 5, Folder 3	Newspaper Clippings, 1970-1982, undated
Box 5, Folder 4	Newspaper Clippings, 1970-1982, undated
Box 5, Folder 5	Newspaper Clippings, 1970-1982, undated
Box 5, Folder 6	Newspaper Clippings, 1970-1982, undated

Box 5, Folder 7	Magazine Clippings, 1933-1980, undated
Box 5, Folder 8	Magazines, 1967-1969
Box 5, Folder 9	Miscellaneous Printed Material, undated
Box 5, Folder 10	Miscellaneous Printed Material, undated
Box 5, Folder 11	Miscellaneous Printed Material, undated
Box 5, Folder 12	Miscellaneous Printed Material, undated
Box 5, Folder 13	National Conference of Artists, 1972-1973
Box 5, Folder 14	Information on Other Artists, undated

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