

IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES

A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

“It Looks like How Jazz Sounds”: Jordan Horton on Romare Bearden’s *The Dove*



Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988), *The Dove*, 1964. Cut-and-pasted printed paper, gouache, pencil, and colored pencil on board, 13 3/8 x 18 3/4 in. (34 x 47.6 cm). Museum of Modern Art, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund

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Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive, personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Jordan Horton, who is a Master's student in the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, shows us how Romare Bearden's collage *The Dove* of 1964 crackles with the syncopated rhythms of jazz and the compression of urban space.

Jordan Horton

My name is Jordan Horton, and I'm going to be talking about *The Dove* by Romare Bearden, which comes from 1964. It's a roughly a 13-by-18-inch cut and pasted print paper gouache pencil and colored pencil on board. To put it plainly, *The Dove* is a collage depicting an apartment building in Harlem and all that inhabit it. There are black and white photo clippings, which contrast against this vibrant brick red background, or backdrop, of the neighborhood, and the wash gray of the sidewalk. And there are figures in it. And the figures aren't really figures, but rather *actions*, such as hands holding cigarettes, or skinny legs walking, or sly eyes peering, and other body parts to suggest the many people who make this space special. And the sharpness of Bearden's cuts, and these very unapologetic proportions—no attempt to make this a full person—that creates the chaos, and a loose and unstable path of logic and neatness. A silent cacophony to the eye. Bearden assures the viewer that this energy created by his arrangement is good and peaceful with one clear-cut dove perched at the top of this building. And the dove tells the viewers that this looks messy to you, but it's home to me. And everything you see is exactly where it belongs. And the people here are alright with that. And to support Bearden's structure, you can see key things such as an outline of a street cat that is on the bottom left corner, which is diagonal to the top of where the bird is perched. And also slightly removed from the noise of the main scene to further frame his 1960s Harlem experience.

[brief electronic musical interlude]

There's a key—an obvious—relationship between music and art and how it relates to reality. And his work grapples with arranging images into a more significant and a definite form with definite relationships. There's footage of Bearden where he's talking about his process, and he says "paintings do have moods. There are some, there are people, there are things going on in them, sometimes just forms and colors." I think that *The Dove* really captures what he's saying there. And he treats his work like he's a composer. He makes your eyes danced around the figures. There's just so much going on in this, in *The Dove*. In a lot of his work, but especially *The Dove*. Your eye just can't stay still. It's looking

to make sense and piece together relations of this. And he does that with figures and shapes and colors in his collage.

And *The Dove*, it captures urban life during a turn for American culture generally, and African American life specifically. When I first saw *The Dove* I was in my junior year of undergrad in a class called Racial Identity and Photography. And this was a unit where we were talking about Harlem Renaissance and the Great Migration. When I first saw *The Dove* in that class, I thought that it looked like how jazz sounds. I knew Bearden had a jazz connection, without knowing anything about Bearden. And it being a depiction of Harlem, and later on, knowing that Bearden had a jazz enthusiasm confirmed that.

While there's a lot going on in this collage, one thing that stood out to me was space. Or lack thereof. In terms of right now, space and how space looks in jazz composition, not only does this tight-knit space that this collage plays out puts a visualization of the broken jazz time style, it also makes me think of the importance of improv in jazz music. I know in a lot of Bearden's techniques, so he started collages not knowing how they would end. He just kind of worked with it. So if I put something in the top left, I'm going to, you know, complement it in the bottom right. So not necessarily a symmetry, but a thoughtful filling out, and just seeing where it goes, rather than know how it's going to end up.

Another thing I think about is how jazz and blues shows how changes in art and musical style reflect and influence changes to society. Blues was really just telling you, I am sad, for whatever reason, you know, like my life is a mess because of racial inequality, and whatever personal issues are going on. And jazz very much took after that. So you can see how this image just shows how life was going.

He was born in 1911. And he moved from North Carolina to New York. So therefore he was about a teen in the middle of the Harlem Renaissance, and not only during the 1920s, but lived in Harlem, or New York broadly, and was a result of the Great Migration between his family and himself. I knew he was a songwriter and he wrote some songs and recorded and went to school with people such as Dizzy Gillespie, and was influenced by abstraction and Cubism and artists such as Diego Rivera. And then later he goes to join the Harlem group The Spiral in the '60s. So just an all-around Renaissance man making Renaissance work.

[brief electronic musical interlude]

I am reading a book by Saidiya Hartman called *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, which came out in 2019. She's talking about the tenement apartment, and who lived there and what it was like. And there's this passage that says "It is ugly and brutalizing and it's where you stay. It doesn't matter if you don't love the place, you love the people residing there. It is as close to home as you'll get. It is a transient resting

place and impossible refuge for those forced out, pushed out, displaced always. They stay but they never settle. The hallway is a space uneasy with expectation and teased with the force of unmet desires. It is the liminal zone between the inside and the outside for the one who stays in the ghetto. The reformer documenting the habits of the poor passes through without noticing it, failing to see what can be created in cramped space. If not an overture, a desecration, or to regard our beautiful flaws and terrible ornaments. This hallway never appears in the lantern slideshow, only the one who resides in the tenement knows it.” And man, that just really connected to this piece, where it looks like chaos to an outsider.

But once again, going back to *The Dove*: this is totally all right. And it’s as peaceful as it’s going to be for the people who live there. And just the connection to how Black people, we’ve always had to work within the space that’s been given to us. And how space restrictions and borders are eternally colonial. And it’s a resistance to live in the most unwanted or the smallest, unlooked-at place—I think *The Dove* captures lovely.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. The Clark sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

This series is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with assistance from Caro Fowler, Samantha Page, and Jessie Sentivan; sound editing and musical interludes composed by John Buteyn; and theme music by lightchaser. To see images and more information about the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies.