

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

The Block and the Village

Romare Bearden and the Art of Reassembled Memory

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Contribution Track • ERA V–VII • Charlotte, North Carolina

Who He Is

Romare Howard Bearden was born September 2, 1911, in Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. His family left the South in the great wave of the Great Migration, settling first in Pittsburgh and then in Harlem, by around 1914 or 1915, when Bearden was still a small child. Popular accounts of the Bearden family's departure sometimes describe it as flight from a specific act of racial violence; this research pass could not confirm that version against a primary source, and treats the more general, well-documented pattern — Jim Crow conditions and the pull of Northern industrial work driving Black families out of the Carolinas by the hundreds of thousands in this period — as the honest framing rather than a single dramatic incident.

Bearden grew up in Harlem during its Renaissance, in a household his mother Bessye Bearden — a journalist and civic organizer — filled with visiting writers, musicians, and artists. He graduated from New York University in 1935 with a mathematics degree, studied briefly under German artist George Grosz at the Art Students League, and served in the Army during World War II before returning to New York to build a life as a working artist, songwriter, and, for years, a full-time caseworker for the New York City Department of Social Services — art was not yet a living.

Childhood Summers in Mecklenburg County

Though he left North Carolina as a small child, Bearden returned in memory for the rest of his life. He spent recurring childhood summers with relatives in Mecklenburg County, and those visits — the textures of rural Black Southern life, the porches, the trains, the fields, the church — became a well documented wellspring for his mature work decades later, resurfacing especially in the Southern-themed collages of his "Prevalence of Ritual" and Mecklenburg County series of the 1960s and 1970s.

"Memory is the DNA of Bearden's art." — Ruth Fine, National Gallery of Art curator, on the role of remembered Southern experience in Bearden's collage work

The Block, Reassembled

Bearden worked across painting, printmaking, and collaboration with musicians before arriving, in the 1960s, at the collage-and-photomontage technique that made him one of the most significant American artists of the twentieth century. Cutting and reassembling fragments of photographs, magazine pages, and painted paper into dense, rhythmic compositions of Black urban and rural life, Bearden built pictures that art historians have repeatedly compared to jazz composition — fragments of borrowed material recombined into something entirely new, structured by repetition and improvisation rather than a single unbroken image. His best-known works, including *The Block* (1971), a six-panel collage of a Harlem street, and his "Prevalence of Ritual" series, are held by major museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art.

Bearden was also a founder, in 1963, of the Spiral group — a collective of Black artists including Norman Lewis and Charles Alston who met in his studio to debate how, and whether, art should respond to the civil rights movement unfolding around them. He helped found the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1968 and, with historian Harry Henderson, co-authored *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, published posthumously in 1993.

NC Local Lens

Romare Bearden's North Carolina connection is genuine and foundational — but it is a Charlotte and Mecklenburg County connection, not a Fayetteville or Cumberland County one, and this entry states that distinction plainly rather than blurring two different parts of the state. Mecklenburg County sits roughly ninety miles from Cumberland County; no source consulted places Bearden in Fayetteville itself. Charlotte has since claimed him fully: the state of North Carolina awarded him its Governor's Award (the North Carolina Award) in 1976, and the city dedicated Romare Bearden Park, a downtown greenspace near the Bank of America Stadium, in 2013. This entry documents the real Charlotte tie without overstating it into a Cumberland County claim that the sources do not support.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Family's departure from Charlotte: some popular retellings attribute it to a specific violent incident; this research pass found only the general Great Migration / Jim Crow framing confirmed, and flags the more dramatic version as unverified.

Exact departure date: sources vary between approximately 1914 and 1915; Bearden was an infant or toddler either way.

Do not conflate with Fayetteville/Cumberland County: Bearden's NC roots are in Charlotte/Mecklenburg County only. No documented Cumberland County connection exists for him.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Romare Bearden," National Gallery of Art, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1195.html>.
2. Mary Schmidt Campbell et al., *Romare Bearden: American Modernist* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2011).
3. "About Romare Bearden," Romare Bearden Foundation, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://beardenfoundation.org/about-romare-bearden/>.
4. Ruth Fine, *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2003).
5. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).
6. "Romare Bearden Park," City of Charlotte, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.charlottenc.gov/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.