



# Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey

*Robert O'Meally*

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Romare Bearden (1911-1988) had a true Renaissance sensibility. He was a fine artist who also successfully turned his hand to printmaking, writing, costume and set design, as well as composing jazz music. In addition, he helped to found the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York's Cinque Gallery and the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, and was once even offered an opportunity to play professional baseball for the Philadelphia Athletics. But it is for his rich and textured collages that Bearden is best known today. In 1977, Bearden created a sequence of 20 collages based on episodes from Homer's *Odyssey*. It may come as a surprise to even his most avid followers that this devoted chronicler of African American culture and the Harlem Renaissance would gravitate to such a canonical text. But in the essay accompanying *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*, scholar Robert G. O'Meally argues for their thematic consistency and suggests that, in the figures of Odysseus, Penelope, Poseidon, Nausicca and others, Bearden found themes sympathetic to the African American experience. These motifs of wandering, mourning and the questing for home--considering Bearden's scores of interiors and exteriors, country and city life and depictions of family love--emerge as the central themes of all his art. *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*, the first in-depth consideration of these collages since they were originally exhibited 30 years ago, will prove a surprise to Bearden fans and newcomers alike.

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