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Oral history interview with Romare Bearden, 1968 June 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Romare Bearden on June 29, 1968. The interview was conducted by Henri Ghent for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

HENRI GHENT: This is Henri Ghent interviewing Romare Bearden, painter. Mr. Bearden, where were you born?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, September 2, 1914. However, my mother and father were living in New York and I think they just went to Charlotte and returned shortly after I was born. I grew up mostly in New York and some time in Pittsburgh where I would to go see my grandmother. But I had very little interest in painting or in art, I should say, as a young boy. It was only when I was about to graduate from high school that I began to become interested in art and in drawing cartoons at that time. I was then with my grandmother. The only time that I won any prizes was during this period of my last year in high school and I remember the first was a poster for a clean-up campaign. Another one had to do with a moving picture in Pittsburgh. With both of them my grandmother had me simplify what I had done. When I went to college I thought that I was going to be a doctor and I majored in science and later in mathematics. But when I got out of college -- I graduated from NYU -- I decided that I wanted to study art. But I was still interested in cartoon. And I had met Esens Campbell who you know was a famous cartoonist, and I imagine the first Negro cartoonist to be shown in all the big magazines. He still draws for Esquire. In those day Life, and Judge, College Humor, Collier's, the New Yorker, these were the big markets for the cartoons. And, as a young student in college, I had cartoons in most of these magazines that I've mentioned. And I was often at Elmer's and he was very helpful to me. After I finished college I went to study with George Grosz at the Art Students League. Now you know Grosz was the great German artist who did the famous book Ecce Homo which has recently been republished. He was a marvelous draftsman. And when I started studying with Grosz, unlike the other students who usually were very tight, I would draw all over the paper. And Grosz said, "Now look, I want you to just draw the model's hand, or maybe just the face. Just use the whole paper and draw it here because I want you to really observe." And this is what I did. I spent a couple of years studying with Grosz. And then I did watercolors; I had never painted in oil. When I finished studying with Grosz I drew at home and I got a job as a political cartoonist with the Afro American which was a well-known Negro newspaper published in Baltimore. For two or three years I did political cartoons. Grosz had introduced me to a number of the great draftsmen of the past like Ingres, Holbein, Durer, and with my interest in cartooning I became intimate with Daumier and Forain and some of the other great satirical draftsmen. But then I become more and more interested in painting and gradually gave up my cartooning to concentrate mostly on painting because I felt that if I stayed too long in cartooning, you know, it would hurt my painting. And I got a studio. I ran into Jacob Lawrence on the street one day. He said he had a studio and there was one vacant above him. He was living at 33 West 125th Street. So I went and got this studio, my first studio. It was eight dollars a month including the electricity.

HENRI GHENT: It was cheap enough.

ROMARE BEARDEN: At first I had steam heat but later the landlord sold all the radiators for scrap iron. In those days before the war Japan was buying all the metal they could get. We had to heat with kerosene stoves after that. Besides Jake -- I mean Jacob Lawrence -- Claude McKay had a studio there, you know, the famous poet and writer. And then Bill Attaway stayed there for a while, another writer. In recent years he has done a number of things for Belafonte. I think he wrote one of Belafonte's last things on Negro comedy or humor. Then the late Allan Morrison who was one of the editors of Ebony had a place there. Actually they -- he and George Norfolk -- formulated the idea for Negro Digest which later broadened into Ebony. So it was an interesting building. And there I was. When you're a young student you have a lot of ideas to express. And I was trying to be very precise in my drawing. One day later on, Bill Attaway said to me, "Why don't you draw -- you know, just let yourself go and draw some of the things that you know about!" And I began at that time to do my Southern themes, the people that I'd seen as a young boy when I'd sometimes visit North Carolina where I was born. I did these on brown paper in a gouache tempera medium. I must have done about twenty of these paintings before World War II when I went into the Army. Just about the end of the war a painter came by my studio, William H. Johnson, who was very well-known at that time. Johnson had lived in Europe for many years and he came by with a woman named Caresse Crosby. Caresse was one of the well-known American expatriates of the 20's. And she had a press in Paris at one time, book publishing, with her husband Harry Crosby who was a well-known banker and writer and poet. He later committed suicide. And Caresse had opened a gallery in Washington called the "G" Place Gallery and she was thinking of doing a show of Negro artists. She came by with Johnson and she decided that she wanted to do a one-man show of my work. And that was really my first gallery show, at Caresse Crosby's gallery in 1945 in Washington, D.C. Then I got out of the Army in a couple of months. The war was coming to an end, or was at an end. I met Caresse in New York and we went to the Samuel Kootz Gallery which

Kootz was just then opening. He had been interested in art but I think was doing something else, writing advertising for a motion picture company. But his ambition was to open his own art gallery. His first idea I think was to have some of the leading modern American painters. And then, when Peggy Guggenheim closed her gallery, he turned his attention to the younger painters who were doing more abstract work. So he took me into the gallery. He had William Baziotes (who is dead now), Bob Motherwell. Later he had Hans Hofmann, Byron Browne (who is dead), Carl Holty, Adolph Gottlieb; most of these people who have become very well known started showing either with Kootz or the gallery behind Kootz, the Betty Parsons Gallery where Rothko and Pollock, Stamos, and some of the other painters showed. I had my first New York show at the Samuel Kootz in 1945. He decided he wanted to show me right away. And I had this show built around the Passion of Christ. It was a great success and the work was sold out in a couple of days. I thought that art would be like that for always. Also, the great thing about being in a gallery was meeting the artists because I hadn't had that kind of exposure. And Kootz would have a meeting about every month; all the artists would be there and there would be exchange of ideas which at that time meant a great deal to me. My work became more and more, you might say, non-representational. I had several shows with the Kootz Gallery. Then, at a certain period, I felt that I really didn't know enough about painting, that I hadn't really gone to art school enough. My training with Grosz hadn't given me much training in oil painting. I had read Delacroix's Journal and I noted how Delacroix almost to the end of his life was always going to the Louvre and copying paintings. I felt that I wanted to do the same thing so I took perhaps two years and made a very systematic study of the old masters, starting with Early Renaissance painters like Giotto, Duccio -- I made copies of their work -- right on down to the High Renaissance. Men like Veronese. Usually my procedure would be to get a reproduction of the paintings of these masters and have them enlarged by photostat and copy the painting from the photostat instead of going to the museum. Of course a lot of the paintings were not in New York City. And I did very interesting and good copies of these paintings. It taught me a lot about painting. The copy that gave me the most difficulty was a Rembrandt, Pilate Washing His Hands, because, while it looks so easy, it looks so simple on the surface, you find it's so intricately involved. Because, if a painter has certain rhythms going and these things are all done right, say five or six rhythms that interwind right, these things kind of expand even more. Even without the painter's intention, it becomes even more intricate. I don't know if I'm making that clear.

HENRI GHENT: Yes.

ROMARE BEARDEN: You know what I mean. This was the case with Rembrandt, this marvelous Pilate. You always could find something new in it. I did the best that I could and I finally had to surrender without really completing this Rembrandt. It was at this time really too difficult for me. But after two years of this painting . . . . And I would get sometimes big sheets of paper and varnish them and just practice painting with a brush -- then I felt I had some feeling for painting. I had been in the Army, as I've mentioned, and I still had the GI Bill of Rights which I hadn't used. And I decided to go to Paris. Some of my friends had gone. A very close friend who had been in the Army, Samuel Allen, who is a poet. So I went to Paris. Sam Kootz gave me a number of letters to Picasso, Braque, Brancusi, Helion, and a number of other painters in Paris. Well, this was one of the great times of my life. Paris was just like a thing of dreams to me. It was about three months before I could get to the Louvre and I only got there by accident. I happened to be in that vicinity one day. This was the place that I mainly wanted to see but there was always something to do. I found that if you don't know exactly what you want to do, Paris was a bad place to go to discover yourself. Because you could easily get lost.

HENRI GHENT: Sidetracked.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Right. Because the land is so pleasant you could get sidetracked in Paris. But there I became very close to Brancusi and often visited him. That was another very meaningful period to me, those couple of years in Paris. And I didn't paint at all. I thought that I would like to but I was so absorbed in seeing and walking in Paris from one end of the city to the other that I could never get around to doing any painting. Then I came back. And the transition from there into my studio in Harlem on 125th Street took me a long time to get used to, to readjust. I decided that I'd live there after my GI Bill of Rights was used up. I thought, oh, I'll become a songwriter because I had a lot of friends who were writing songs. Somebody had left an old piano in this studio and I decided I'd learn this and I'd be a songwriter and make a lot of money and go back to Paris. Actually somehow I did write a number of songs. I got into ASCAP -- I still get quarterly statements from ASCAP -- and wrote one or two songs that kind of became hits. And I had a friend named Heinrich Blucher, the husband of Hannah Arendt, you know, both of them are famous philosophers. One day, Heinrich said, "Would you come over to my house, Romare, I want to talk with you. You know, you're not painting. You're just wasting your time trying to be a songwriter and, if you keep on at this, you'll just go to pot and you'll never paint again." And I said, "You know, you're kind of right." I gradually got back to painting again. And when I did I found I had very definite ideas about color. I began to just put color down in big marks and I found that using the color in this mosaic-like way destroyed the form, you know, opened up the form. So my color work became then increasingly non-representational as I allowed this color to give itself free rein. And I felt by using these tracks of color up and down and across the canvas, that I learned a great deal about the color's action. I had known Stuart Davis and Stuart, in a talk to me one time, said always remember about color that in a painting it has a position and a place, and it makes space. And thinking of color this way, not as a separate entity but color also as a form, as

space, and not as decoration, taught me a great deal about space and color. Then I began to expand these paintings. I hadn't showed in some time. And then a woman became interested in my painting who had a gallery called the Barone Gallery. I had a one-man show there about 1955, my first show in New York since I went to Paris. I stayed with this gallery a couple of years and then I think she moved or went out of business. I kept expanding my ideas until I got with the gallery where I am presently, the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery. I had a show there in 1960 and since 1960 I've had about four shows at Cordier-Ekstrom, the last being in October 1967. My last work has been kind of a reversion, you might way, back to my earliest work of the Negro subject matter: Negro genre, or Negro life, of whatever you might call it, that I first started with. So that is a kind of short summary of my painting career.

HENRI GHENT: Let's backtrack a bit. Would you like to tell me a little about your ethnic and spiritual background?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, in Pittsburgh I had the first consciousness of my spiritual background. The grandparents who had come from the South, that is my mother's father and mother, were of course Baptists. As Martin Luther King said, "If you weren't a Baptist you had escaped from the true religion." So my first recollections were of Shiloh Baptist church. And of course I had to go to Sunday School or the other services, and my grandmother sometimes went on a Wednesday night, I think, the BYPU. And it was the church all around me, the Baptist church and Reverend Russell and, you know, you just can't forget these things. Now my mother and father were Episcopalians here in New York. They went to a church called St. Philip's Church in Harlem and later to St. Martin's Church. But, after a certain age, I would say 18 or 19, when I started college and I didn't have to go to church anymore, I just never went. I never had any interest.

HENRI GHENT: Would you say that remains until this day?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. My wife is Episcopalian and she goes to church every Sunday and a few times I've gone with her. But I'm not myself you'd call a churchgoing man, although I still have membership in St. Martin's.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me, do you have any recollection of sounds, tactile feelings, visual associations from your childhood?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, one of the things that I remember as a visual association that still remains with me somehow, and I certainly must have seen other things, was from Charlotte. I had gone . . . I must have been ten, nine or ten years old, and I was in Charlotte. And my great-grandfather had a garden in front of his house and there were flowers. And I was struck by this one flower because it was so beautiful to me; it seemed to me it was an unusual, beautiful flower. They told me it was a tiger lily. I would look at this lily every day when I was down there. And one day the lily was gone. And I couldn't understand it. There was nothing but a green stem, and this beautiful flower was gone. My grandfather had cut it to give to my great-grandmother to wear to church. And I still remember how I was so disheartened at seeing that flower gone. He told me, well, when you come back next summer it'll be here again. But I couldn't get that in my mind, you know, That that flower was gone would be there again. He said, you know, it's good earth here; it'll be here again. He said, you know, it will be. But I think that the things that make an artist paint, early recollections of things, or a sunset . . . . Malraux said that few artists are impelled to paint because of these early sensations. It's seeing finally the work of other artists that makes you want to paint rather than things from nature.

HENRI GHENT: What sort of reading habits did you have as a child?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I liked adventure stories. Tom Sawyer, the Merriwell stories, baseball, sports. I remember other things that I read but I don't know if they made much impression on me, like Don Quixote. I must read that again. Or Herman Melville's Moby Dick. I'd skip a lot of it because I wanted to get to the adventure part. Or Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. Although it didn't mean too much. It was supposed to be for children but I preferred other things.

HENRI GHENT: Your early artistic leanings -- can you pinpoint when they sort of evidenced themselves?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, as I explained earlier, when I was in the last year of high school I got interested in cartoons.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me some more about your school experiences.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, specifically as it relates to art it wasn't much until actually I had finished school and was in the Art Students League studying with George Grosz. After about six months he made me the monitor of the class so that I didn't have to pay any tuition. And I couldn't wait to get there. I studied from seven till ten at night drawing from the models. Everyday I was learning something. It was such a great time for me. And when I look at some of the students now goofing off! I hated to see ten o'clock come. And I never will forget this. I made a book of all notes from the class, little drawings and things that Grosz said. I loaned it to somebody; I don't

know what happened to it. One of the terrible things that I lost. It would mean so much to have it now.

HENRI GHENT: Did you particularly like school as a child?

ROMARE BEARDEN: No.

HENRI GHENT: Were you considered a good student?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I was considered a good student if I found a teacher who interested me. But I found that most teachers were dull, and not interested in their students. For instance, in mathematics, in the study of trigonometry most teachers, at least in that day, would just put certain angles on the board and you'd have to learn those formulas: O over H, A over H, and O over A. And you're lost when they say that. You say what the hell does it mean, unless you've got someone to give you the background of why this was important and really to relate mathematics to what was happening, you know, in the life around you. And when I had a teacher who did this I found a great interest in mathematics. Or anything. I was very poor in languages. I just didn't have the ear for it. I couldn't get any of them. I studied Latin, Greek, Spanish, and French and I was poor in all of them.

HENRI GHENT: You've told me that you were subjected to religious training as a child. Do you believe that your religious training had any influence on you as a person and as an artist today?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I think so, especially the early religious experiences, I would say, rather than training, of seeing the baptisms. Because, as I said, I went to a Baptist church and sometimes in the summer they would have the baptisms in the river or little streams. And going South again and seeing this in Virginia or North Carolina, these baptisms as they did in the 20's, of maybe a mass baptism, 40 or 50 people at once. And I've tried to interpret some of this in my painting. This type of thing, of visual and emotional experiences and its effect on people, still interests me. Another thing that interests me is the message of some of the ministers and the way they say it. There was a tradition the way they did these things. And there was a famous minister of Norfolk, Virginia, I believe. I went with my grandparents one day to hear him. Each year he gave a famous sermon I think around the Valley -- "Passing Through the Valley of Dry bones." And he was so famous that a section of the church was set aside for white people. It was roped off and they came and sat in that section that day. I believe that these set sermons have been published. Reverend Jasper. And they were sensational thunderous sermons, you know. And his sentences and that whole thing if you could hear this, you know, it was tremendous. James Weldon Johnson in his God's Trombones, I think, tried to get the flavor of the Negro minister. So these are the types of things that I would say remain with me rather than any Christian doctrine.

HENRI GHENT: You were obviously impressed by this form of ritual?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, I was impressed by the baptism. By those things, yes I was, because I looked at it as a continuity of what had happened earlier in many societies. Now that I look back I see that I had that interest in them.

HENRI GHENT: As a man and an artist have you any desire to escape from reality or tensions? Are you plagued by these two things?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I think the way to escape from reality is to get to the heart of it. Confronting it, moving toward the core, is the only way.

HENRI GHENT: As opposed to running away from it?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, is the thing. Like a hurricane, you know, destroying everything around it -- if you get to the eye of it there's a certain calm. And I think that this is something that the artist . . . . Proust said you never know from what direction talent may come, or you never know from what direction an artist may approach his subject. So I think this would be the way for me to move into that type of confrontation with reality. But this poses so many questions. What is reality? It has different meanings for different people.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Are you plagued by tensions?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I think I am if I don't paint.

HENRI GHENT: To whom or what do you attribute your drive to communicate?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I don't know just how I could answer that. To whom I would attribute it I don't know, but I say any artist has this desire for a vision of the world and you have something, There's some painting someplace that's not in a museum and it's your idea as a painter to put that one thing that is missing there.

HENRI GHENT: If you had one particular aspect of communication to relate through your work, which would it be?

ROMARE BEARDEN: One particular aspect of communication to relate through my work? I wouldn't know because painting is the act of discovery and you're constantly enlarging your horizon or finding yourself every time you paint. I wouldn't want to say something now that I may change tomorrow, as I find something new. I don't think that a painter at this time is in a set tradition like the Renaissance where the aim was to perfect yourself in the particular tradition you were working in -- Mannerism, Baroque, High Renaissance -- that lasted one or two hundred years. The emphasis now is so on the individual and we're all in such a state of flux, constantly changing, that it's hard to say any one particular thing that motivates me.

HENRI GHENT: Is there any one person who helped to bring about your self-realization?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I'd say there were several. Just in art alone there was Grosz who meant a great deal to me. And, as I said, there were these meetings of artists at the Kootz Gallery. I was particularly friendly with Carl Holty and Bill Baziotes and their friendship meant a great deal to me. When I first began to paint, as I mentioned, there was Eason Campbell and then there was Charles Alston who had been the early teacher of Robert Blackburn and Jacob Lawrence and was very helpful and encouraging when I first decided that I'd like to paint. There were a number . . . these are names that first come to my mind but all of them were very helpful.

HENRI GHENT: Now when you say "helpful," do you mean personally, artistically, or what? Give me a for instance.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, helpful in the sense of talking out my ideas to them. Alston showed me a lot of things about painting when I first began. Grosz introduced me to the requirements of good drawing. Holty into the ideas of abstract painting. Baziotes into certain ideas of feeling through painting. All of them in some way or other opened my eyes to things that I had never realized before.

HENRI GHENT: When and how did a personal identity apart from your family begin? When did you really begin to personally identify with your work?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I think that after the war I began to arrive at some kind of personal identification, about 1945. And I hope that this identification has expanded throughout the years. As I said before, this is self-searching. I think that as about 1945 I had arrived at something that I could say -- well, this has continuity to it, say ten or fifteen paintings had a resemblance to each other. You know, some type of a personal style had emerged at this time.

HENRI GHENT: Have you any impressions and experiences with boys and girls of your own age that you might like to recall?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, when I was with Kootz there were the meetings with the artists. And later, after 1945, a group of artists formed The Spiral. This was the time of the first march on Washington and we thought it might be interesting as a group of Negro artists maybe to hire a bus -- a great number of people, as you know, were converging on Washington -- and go down to represent the Negro artists. Then a number of the people who came to the first meetings when we were discussing this idea felt what we had was so important that we should continue. And finally we got our own studio and meeting place on Christopher Street. And these meetings and discussing the identity of the Negro, what a Negro artist is, or if there is such a thing, all of these pro and con discussions, meant a great deal to me especially in the formulation of my present ideas and way of painting.

HENRI GHENT: Let's talk about some of your friends and associates in the art world, early heroes and perhaps some of the painters that you most admire today.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, you see, my early heroes in the very beginning were all illustrators like Norman Rockwell, when I first became interested in painting. And I admired Daumier. And I liked the painter Pieter Brueghel so much when I was in art school that the fellows used to call me Pete for a nickname. I still have this affinity. You ask me who my heroes were and from what I learned something. They were the Dutch painters, Vermeer, Ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch in particular. And from them and the drawings of Rembrandt I tried to incorporate the strength of the rectangle, of the breaking down of the picture in these rectangular relationships and moving out from there that gave certain solidity to the painting. This was a great influence. But early heroes -- Zurbaran. As for painters I kind of favor the classic type of painter -- Poussin, the Dutchman that I mentioned, Mondrian, Picasso, Paul Klee. I am partial to all these painters. And the Sienese painter, Duccio. I like the structural things -- the people who have concentrated on that.

HENRI GHENT: Who are some of your friends in the art world? And associates?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, any member. Norman Lewis is a close friend. I mentioned Carl Holty. There would be so many. The people that I see all the time that I'm close to: Alston, Hale Woodruff. These are the names that come to mind but I certainly know a great number of people in the art world.

HENRI GHENT: Do you have any feelings about bending or breaking conventions?

ROMARE BEARDEN: No. I don't set out to do that just for the sake of doing it. What I feel is what I mentioned to you: self-discovery will lead to something where you would have to break a convention, I certainly would. In the last works that I did, these Projections, so-called, collages, that I made small and had them blown up photographically was kind of a breaking. Using the photographic image in painting which I have done is a kind of breaking of convention. But it was particularly what I wanted to do. You asked me about my heroes. One of them is an artist whose art work doesn't influence me so much as his life and some of the things that he attempted to do -- Courbet. I think there were painters in the last century who were greater than Courbet -- although he was certainly a great painter. But the realism, this type of approach, his objectivity, interests me, too, in what I attempt to do.

HENRI GHENT: Let's talk about the Projections you mentioned. How were they received? I mean critically and from the standpoint of public reaction? Tell me something about them.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, the first exhibition I had of the Projections was in October 1964 at Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery. And I think that they were critically well-received. My idea in doing the Projections was . . . . I mentioned Spiral, this group of Negro artists -- we were talking one day about the possibility of a group of the artists working jointly on a picture and I was thinking of a possible way that this could be done. I thought that if we had photographs maybe we could each paste some down. And I mentioned this to several artists, one who was a landscape painter. I cut out some trees and I cut out some figures, and I said, maybe you could make a landscape and I could paste some of the figures on it and let's see what we can do. I worked on one or two alone just to try to get the idea myself to show the other artists. But they didn't seem to be too interested in it and I continued. I was talking to a painter and he suggested that I have these enlarged photostatically. He said he had a letter from a photostatic company saying they do large enlargements of art works. And I might take my things there and see what could be done. And I did. I did four or five. When Mr. Ekstrom came to my studio to talk about the possibility of a show in 1964, he asked me, "What are these things that are wrapped up?" I said, "It's something that wouldn't interest you." But I told him of this experiment I was doing and he said, "Oh, this is the very thing that I want for your next show." This was in late spring or early summer. He was going to Europe and he said when he came back he hoped that I'd have twenty or so done, enough for a show. He would open the Gallery with a show of these. He called them "Projections," because they were large heads and they seemed to project themselves right out to the viewer.

HENRI GHENT: I've seen some of the Projections and was tremendously impressed, not only for the artistic originality but the stark reality of the Projections. Were other Negroes impressed?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, some were and some weren't. There's a lady whose husband is a physician and he had long been interested in my work. She came to the exhibit and she walked out; the work was disturbing to her.

HENRI GHENT: How so?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, she never stated just what was wrong. Another person did say that it showed the circumstances in which people were living, in which I showed people to be living, were a bit too stark; showed people in their worst or poorer circumstances. Art to her meant people living a little more elevated or what she considered more beautiful in costume or in manner. Because she had predicated, as most people do, the idea of beauty from the Greek ideal or the Hollywood ideal of the pretty girl. So that my work for people who think like that would be rather stark. And an interviewer for a magazine felt that it was a show of head-hunters.

HB: Of head-hunters?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. Of head-hunters. Well, it was frightening to her. Here were Negroes with big heads and something within her reacted to this, you know. They were frightening; they were after her. I told her head-hunters are in the Solomon Islands and these are the people that you must deal with, that live in Harlem. You have to look at them a little longer.

HENRI GHENT: Well, tell me about some of the positive reactions from people.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, one of the most positive reactions was a review of the show. The show opened in 1964, as I told you, in New York at the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery. And in October the following year I had a show of the same works at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. And a review by Frank Getlein in a Washington newspaper was a very long and very fine and I thought a very substantive review. And there was a very good article on the work by a young Negro writer, Charles Childs, in the October 1964 art News. And also one by Dore Ashton in Quadrum 17. Each of these three reviewers, each in his own way, saw qualities in it or brought something to it that I had not thought of myself.

HENRI GHENT: And you had a show last year, wasn't it?

ROMARE BEARDEN: In October, 1967.

HENRI GHENT: That was a phenomenal success, wasn't it?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, that was very successful.

HENRI GHENT: Of the same medium?

ROMARE BEARDEN: No, I found that the Projections . . . . I did small collages, say, about the size of a piece of typewriter paper, out of certain magazine photographs and colored material that I put together, and these were photostated and enlarged about to four by five feet and the photostats were then mounted onto masonite. Then they were taken to a framer. Going through all these steps is a very expensive process and, since they were considered as prints, they couldn't sell for too much, you know; it was a print. And the expense of making one of these was several hundred dollars just to have it blown up, mounted, and framed. So in the last show I did the same but, instead of doing the collage about the size of a sheet of typewriter paper, I did them large, four by five feet and colored and put them on a board myself. So that what was shown was the original. There were not prints made from it. It was original work.

HENRI GHENT: They also sold very well, too, didn't they?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, the show was sold out.

HENRI GHENT: Can you recall any of the collectors?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I know Senator Javits has one. Roy Neuberger. Howard University. And several other people I just can't recall now.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me, do you make a living now exclusively as an artist?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: How long has it been so?

ROMARE BEARDEN: About two years.

HENRI GHENT: Have you found it necessary to supplement your income by working at other jobs?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Before I did, yes. I worked as an expert with the City on the gypsies. And sometimes I might do a book about that because this is also a very interesting culture. It was easy and I did have time to paint.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me some more about your work with the gypsies.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, what is interesting about the gypsies is that they came from India originally. I didn't know -- did you know that?

HENRI GHENT: No.

ROMARE BEARDEN: The gypsies came from India. And from their language they've been traced almost to the exact place in the Himalayas where they came from. They're a wandering tribe in the Himalayas. And around the ninth or tenth century they left India. A number of them went to Persia, and a number of them embraced Zoroastrianism. I think around the eleventh century the first gypsies began to come to the European continent, into Greece and moving up into what is now Russia, Poland, and Bulgaria. These were the places where you have the largest enclaves of gypsies. In Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre Dame, you know, a gypsy girl figures as one of the principal characters. So in the time that he was writing about, the 1400's, the gypsies had come to the Western part of Europe. And they were called gypsies because people thought they were from Egypt, you see. And with their boldness a lot of them had said, yes, we came from there, we're emissaries from the Pharaoh. And in some cases they were received as royal ambassadors. They've maintained their own particular culture down through the years. They had their own so-called kings, chiefs, trials, of their own. And in the present day, they conduct trials that ordinarily would go to a court -- such as divorce. This the gypsies handle among themselves. Marriage ceremonies, things leading to monetary disputes between two people, are settled in a gypsy court. Usually they have a trusted person or two or three and they will hire a hall and, say, there's a dispute about a money matter . . . . I'll tell you about one trial that I attended once. It involved a young girl and a young fellow. They were married by gypsy custom which the fathers arranged. And the bride as a child had been badly burned. A kerosene stove or something had fallen on her. So her skin -- with the long dresses that they wear it wasn't noticeable -- but from her bust, let's say, down to her kneecaps her body had been very severely burned. On the wedding night the bridegroom wondered what he was touching -- cellophane or what -- and he called his mother and father and said, look, I don't want this; this is no bride. They bundled up the girl in the

morning and took her back to her mother and father to whom they had paid ten thousand dollars for this beautiful girl. And the mother and father of the bride took her back in the house but they refused to give the money -- ten thousand dollars -- back to this man. They just said, "You married her, there she is, what's wrong with her? Here's the girl, take her." No, they didn't know that she was burned. This is the type of thing that might come up. Another case was a fellow who had had tuberculosis and had been in a sanatorium. He called on a gypsy friend who refused to eat with him. Now when gypsies call on each other, you bring out food and drink, and to refuse to allow a man to eat and drink is the height of insult. The judge, very interestingly, consulted the hospital and found that this man did have tuberculosis, that it was arrested, and that if he had used any of the utensils it wouldn't have hurt any of the family. So he passed the word that if he visits he must be received. So the gypsies constitute culture right within ours. There's certain work that they do and certain things that they don't do. They don't want to go to school. They want to live entirely with their own customs and by themselves. I think the gypsies are going to disappear because the economic basis of gypsy life with the encroachment of many things of modern civilization is disappearing. They were coppersmiths and now we have stainless steel. They used to fix the fenders of cars. Now you need electric jack hammers to do it because the fenders don't come off the cars as they used to. Or their fortunetelling -- people don't believe in it any more. You see, there's no way for them to make a living as they used to. No, eventually they will disappear.

HENRI GHENT: Do you think in the process they will abandon their culture?

ROMARE BEARDEN: They'll abandon . . . usually they marry or stay within their tribes. The Russian gypsies will stay by themselves. The Russian gypsy man will do a certain kind of work that a Spanish gypsy wouldn't do. It's funny that the sociologists have never touched gypsy life or their customs and, before it all disappears, it certainly would make an interesting study. Somebody like Oscar Lewis who did things about the Mexican family should investigate the gypsies.

HENRI GHENT: Your own association with the gypsies here in New York has been in which capacity -- sociological?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. I was working for the Department of Social Services and that was my job -- gypsies.

HENRI GHENT: Being as elusive as they would appear to be, have you formed any kind of working relationships or friendships with these people?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, yes. I am going back in a few weeks to see some of my friends among the gypsies. A lot of them are good friends.

HENRI GHENT: You've mentioned that you lived and worked for a time in Paris. Have you done other travels as well?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, our last trip was to the Caribbean last year. I went with my wife and Gippo to, oh, about fourteen different islands in the Caribbean. When I left for the Islands, I hadn't thought that I would do any painting. But I did get a little sketchbook and did some little watercolors and sketches while I was down there. I think it would be a fascinating place to live and I certainly would like to live on one of the Islands three or four months of the year. I enjoyed it so much down there.

HENRI GHENT: Any particular one of the Islands?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, I found Martinique extremely interesting. A few miles out of Fort-de-France, the Capital of Martinique, you find things very much as they were when Gauguin was there. You know, before Gauguin went to Tahiti he stayed for some time in Martinique and did paintings there. Martinique is mountainous. And although they're not large, there are about ninety-six rivers in Martinique. Did you ever know that?

HENRI GHENT: Ninety-six?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. They just come pouring out of the hills. And up in the hills there's a marvelous rainforest, something like in the Amazon or certain parts of Africa with marvelous woods, mahogany. And there's always this haze, or kind of a drizzle. It's just magnificent. I would just like to stay there for a while.

HENRI GHENT: Is it a humid drizzle or just . . . ?

ROMARE BEARDEN: It is humid. I imagine it could be very humid. But in other places up where you get out of the rainforest it is quite cool and nice. I found the weather very pleasant in Martinique. I hate to use the word "colorful" but some of the fishing villages . . . . It's too bad that the French government hasn't done more for Martinique and Guadaloupe because conditions are very primitive. Especially in the back country Martinique is very primitive -- as are many of the West Indies Islands. And I think it's going to be the next hotbed of social unrest, if it is not there already, because the disparity between the affluent and the poor is a tremendous gap;

it's tremendous.

HENRI GHENT: Do you think this tropical surrounding would be particularly inspirational from an artistic viewpoint?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Definitely. Each place that you are in, I think, effects you in some way or another. And an island like Grenada would seem to b a perfect setting for Shakespeare's The Tempest -- it's hard to differentiate what is sea and what is sky; they all seem to be blended together out of sea and air, this marvelous island. Certainly if I lived there for any length of time, I know it would affect the way I work.

HENRI GHENT: You mentioned that you were accompanied on this trip to the Caribbean by your wife and -- was it Gippo?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I have a cat -- Gippo the cat. And we didn't know what to do with Gippo so we just took him.

HENRI GHENT: How old is Gippo?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Gippo will be six in August. When we got back Gippo was the official mascot of the ship. People loved Gippo and he loved the ship and he didn't want to leave because they fed him nearly a pound of calves liver every day. He just loved it.

HENRI GHENT: Describe him.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, Gippo is I think a very handsome cat. He's perfectly symmetrically striped with gray and tan markings. We found him in the woods and he has a little wildcat in him and it took a long time, about six or eight months, when he was a young kitten, to get him trained. But now he's happy. The studio he feels is his. It's hard to keep a cat like that for any length of time in a cage at a veterinarian's. So we took him and it worked out quite all right. We couldn't take him to some of the islands, like Barbados, for instance, because of . . . .

HENRI GHENT: The quarantine laws.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, the quarantine laws.

HENRI GHENT: In researching some material on you I noticed that there was a cat in very many of the informal photographs. Was that Gippo?

ROMARE BEARDEN: That was Gippo, yes.

HENRI GHENT: He's quite a star in his own right then, isn't he?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I keep telling my wife that she should have trained Gippo and used him for ads for cat food and those things because he's a natural ham. And he's such a handsome cat that he'd have been a perfect model.

HENRI GHENT: He loves to be photographed then?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, he loves that attention.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me . . . let's talk a bit about Mrs. Bearden. What is her maiden name.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Nanette Rohan (R-o-h-a-n).

HENRI GHENT: Is she a New Yorker?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Nanette was born on Staten Island. Her mother and father came from the Caribbean -- the island of St. Martin. And St. Martin is not a large island -- but half of it is French and half of it is Dutch. Her mother came from the Dutch part of the Island and her father from the French.

HENRI GHENT: Well, I know that Mrs. Bearden is extremely attractive. Tell me more about her. What does she do? Is she artistically inclined?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. She doesn't paint; she is more interested in fashion design, you know, clothing, designing dresses. Actually she has taken some courses in this in a fashion training institute. She makes a number of her own clothes. And I think if she had persisted she might have gone into this field, which is a rather difficult field to break into from what I understand, that of dress design.

HENRI GHENT: How long have you been married?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Fifteen years.

HENRI GHENT: And you have no children?

ROMARE BEARDEN: No.

HENRI GHENT: Is she -- or has she been rather an inspiration to you in your career?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. And also she has a good eye for painting. When I begin to make things too complicated, she'll know often the right things to tell me. She has an extremely good eye and fine taste. I rely on her judgment a great deal in these things. And she's very objective -- not like a lot of artists' wives who talk about "we." She can be very objective.

HENRI GHENT: I would think that she was terribly excited about the tremendous success of your last show.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, she was.

HENRI GHENT: And the many things that followed?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Right.

HENRI GHENT: You've traveled extensively in this country, too, haven't you?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. In the Army, going from camps, getting around the various parts of the United States I saw the East Coast, the Midwest, and something of the Far West.

HENRI GHENT: Have you been back to the South recently?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, my last trip South was in April of this year, 1968. I was at Spellman College. That's one of the five colleges of Atlanta University. Atlanta University is mostly a graduate school: Spellman, which is a school for women; Morehouse, where Martin Luther King went to school is often referred to as the Negro Princeton; and Morris Brown, and Clark; the five colleges of Atlanta University.

HENRI GHENT: What were you doing in Atlanta?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, they have a Fine Arts building and quite an art program. I was looking at the students' work and giving a series of lectures on "Structure and Space."

HENRI GHENT: Do you enjoy teaching and lecturing?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I have never taught. I have lectured at Hampton in February. I'm doing a book on Negro artists, and I lectured on nineteenth century Negro artists at Hampton. I enjoyed that very much. And I enjoyed being on the campus in Atlanta very much.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me, what are your political affiliations, if any?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I have none.

HENRI GHENT: You abstain completely from politics?

ROMARE BEARDEN: No. I mean I've voted or registered as a Democrat. But I may have missed a few of the last elections -- I don't have a great interest in that.

HENRI GHENT: How do you feel about the upcoming election?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I was extremely interested until Senator Kennedy was shot. And -- you know, if it's the same old tired fire horses that they are going to offer, I would be uninterested again. Not in the election but in the candidates.

HENRI GHENT: I take it that you felt he did indeed have something very meaningful to offer?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, I think that he had . . . King was shot and now Kennedy. You know, a lot of the Negro people felt that he was one of their last hopes. And I think that he had caught something of the resonance and flavor of the Negro poor.

HENRI GHENT: Speaking of the so-called Negro problem in America, have you ever encountered racial prejudice as a black artist?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Now you mean a particular prejudice or you mean prejudice in the world of art? How do you mean that?

HENRI GHENT: Prejudice in the world of art.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, my feeling is -- I wouldn't say I think -- my feeling is that it is there, but not, say, a direct prejudice or a sign saying don't come into this gallery, or don't do this, or we don't take Negroes in. Because Negro artists are in many of the galleries; but I think the prejudice may be an oblique one. Let me explain what I mean: The Negro artist is usually not what you might say "on the scene." He's not moving where a number of the better-known white artists are. I was in the Archives on Thursday and there I saw a photograph on the wall of Rauschenberg and a number of artists around him at what must have been an exhibition at a museum; and there were no Negroes in this group. You know, you ask a white artists or a critic, "Who are the Negro artists? Do you know any Negro artists?" He might know a friend, but the fact of a Negro "making the scene" or his compatriot, he doesn't think so. It just may not be in his consciousness. Just like I was talking to a critic, Irving Sandler, on a radio program once. He had been to the meetings of this Club on Eighth Street. And he said, "Now that I think of it, too, I wonder why someone didn't invite some -- you might have had a different point of view." You follow what I mean?

HENRI GHENT: Sure.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Also, the art critics . . . I read a number of art books on the history of American painting and it's very seldom that Negro artists are mentioned. For instance, in my opinion, Henry O. Tanner is one of the four or five great American painters. And you never see his name mentioned. In Barbara Rose's latest book on painting from 1900 to the present, nowhere is Tanner mentioned. And he's a better painter than Glackens or Prendergast; especially his late paintings, the ones he did in the late 10's and 30's, the small thing. Mert Simpson has a number of them. Only Rouault is comparable. Well, this question that you raised about prejudice, maybe we can simplify that rather than leave it. I mentioned Barbara Rose's book. I don't think she did it out of any feeling that, well, I'm prejudiced and I'm not going to mention any. It's just not in the consciousness of a lot of people who are writing these things.

HENRI GHENT: Why do you think this is so?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I couldn't give a definite answer. But I think that Negroes themselves have to encourage . . . should have the same interest in artists that they might have in Negro basketball and baseball players, or now in politics and other things. This has to be pushed the same way. Just as I made the statement about Tanner. Maybe that would call someone's attention to him and they would really look into what this man accomplished. El Greco remained forgotten for three or four hundred years until around the turn of this century when he was rediscovered as one of the great masters of Baroque painting. So it's the same. Nor is the Negro ever equated in many of the paintings that I've mentioned in abstract expressionism. In this magazine which I received in the Archives it said "Finally America arrives in the abstract expressionist painting." But no one, when you stop to think, has ever equated abstract expressionism as a movement with jazz music. It's based on improvisation. The rhythms, the personal involvement, all of this is part of the jazz experience. And many of the abstract expressionists would often play jazz music while they were painting, or at least were very interested in that art form. But here is an avenue I imagine that Negro critics themselves as they get into it are going to have to explore and open up these new dimensions to people.

HENRI GHENT: As is common with a great many artists, you have gone from one particular style to another, and more recently I believe you have concentrated on subject matter that is more or less directed to the Negro experience. How do you account for that?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, what I arrived at after a time was the space. And after I got a certain space that hasn't changed so much. But, a lot of the life that I knew in certain rural Negro surroundings is passing. And I set down some of my impressions of that life. It's in a certain sense historical and has certain affinities with many classical things that have happened before. For instance, I used to know a lady in Maryland where my grandfather had a church. And this lady made watermelon cake. And I don't know where she had gotten these baking pans from, her mother or what, or whether she made them. I was too young to think about that at the time. But anyway, she made this kind of red cake, the inside of the cake like a watermelon. And she'd cut out chocolate seeds and put them in this red batter. And over that would be a white batter, and over that striped green and white of the watermelon -- this was iced. If you'd stand five or six feet away you'd swear that you were looking at a watermelon. And on weekends the wealthy people in Lutherville would order these watermelon cakes. And sometimes when I'd be visiting in Lutherville I would deliver the cakes for this lady. And her husband was a famous blind guitar player, a folk singer like blind Lemon Jeffries, and he used to play in Baltimore before they moved out to this place. Sometimes he'd go along with me just for a walk and hold on to me or to the wagon and he'd be walking down the country roads. He knew everybody's business, and when people saw him coming they would kind of run because he always had a dream. He'd say, "Oh, Mrs. Jones, I dreamt last night I saw you just

laying in that coffin just as plain." Nobody wanted to hear him. So there he was and he'd be strumming on his guitar. It was kind of out of a Greek play. Leading the bind soothsayer, you know, the little boy leads him in and he makes a dire prediction for the city. And this had some of this element in it. If you equate a lot of the things that happened in Negro life you see there's a continuity with many of the great classical things that have happened before. And this is what I tried to find in my work, this connotation of many of the things that have happened to me with the great classical things of the past.

HENRI GHENT: You once said -- if I quote you correctly -- that you had not to go out and seek the Negro experience in order to paint the way you do because all you had to do was look out of your studio window on 125th Street in Harlem and there it was.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, I was talking specifically about the people talking about Happenings and Surrealism. I said I didn't need to worry about Happenings or trying to make these things up. I'd just look out the window and every five minutes there'd be some Happening going on.

HENRI GHENT: Do you think that the Negro should now direct his efforts to the black community? That is, by exhibiting exclusively in black communities, colleges, universities, et cetera?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I don't think that this should be exclusively done but, since so little of it has been done before, I think that a great deal of effort should be made in this direction to make the communities, to use a cliche, more art conscious, or more aware of the Negro artist. And I think that in time this will make for a better artist because the artist can learn some of the feelings of the community about his work. To make an artist you need many hands and all working together can make for something very meaningful. The Negro artists of the nineteenth century were not, you might say, Negro artists at all. They were people who were Negroes and artists and most of them lived abroad and their work was directed not to Negroes primarily, or with the Negro in mind, but it was directed, like that of other American artists, to the patrons of art. This is what I mentioned earlier about Courbet. He thought about these things: to whom his work would be directed, and something about the social responsibilities of artists. This was a consideration of his and I think in a way that this is why I revere Courbet. And certainly I think this is part of the thing that the Negro artist has to do. And with that I don't think that the Negro community then should be exposed just to Negro artists, but that they begin to be involved in all of art, that they will see Egyptian art, that they will be acquainted then with African sculpture, and involved in a number of artistic experiences.

HENRI GHENT: Speaking of Negro or black artists living and working abroad, if you had the opportunity personally, would you prefer to live in Europe, Africa or any country other than this one?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, as I said before, I would like to live in the Caribbean -- whether it would be on a full-time basis or not, I don't know. Because, after all, I am American, I guess. I was born in this country, I take aspirin if I have a headache, I ride the subway, I wear these clothes; and all this conditioning means something. And I'm more familiar with this milieu. And living abroad -- now to a nineteenth-century artist like Tanner it was a very different thing. Tanner went to art school in Philadelphia. He had a great deal of trouble at the Philadelphia Academy. And I know in the 20's when I first began to be interested in art a number of art schools would not take Negro students. Some of the art schools that did take Negro students would not allow them into the life drawing classes. So you can understand why a number of Negro artists would prefer going to Europe where they could escape these kinds of silly prejudices and also have the opportunity for furthering their art. Tanner, for instance, studied with Benjamin Constant who in his day was like the Picasso of today, you know, was well-known. Gerome was very interested in his work. He was right in the midst of, you might say, "the scene" or what was happening at that time. Now Paris is not the art scene as it was in the 1890's when Tanner went there. It was a place where all American artists had to go. The scene has shifted to New York City at the present time. Now how long this will remain, or what the meaning of that is, it is a fact. So the art schools that once refused to take Negroes do now. At Spelman College they were telling me that they had to accelerate their art program because a number of the students were going to Georgia State College where they have a very large art complex. So they're in competition. Where once Negro students just went to Atlanta University, now they can go to the other colleges, so that the Negro college has to offer something equally as good to attract the students. You follow what I mean?

HENRI GHENT: Yes, surely.

ROMARE BEARDEN: So it's the same thing with the Negro artist. Many of them seem more comfortable overseas. They had a show there about two or three years ago, "Twelve American Negro Artists Living in Europe." I'm sure there are many more but these twelve put on a very fine show. A friend of mine, Merton Simpson, tells me that he works with a great deal more facility in Paris than he does in New York City. It may be just something personal rather than a prejudicial thing. So I think that, so far, what I have done here is in response to the environment that I know best and I think at least for a time that I have to stay here, and if I did leave I'd always be echoing back to what I knew here.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. Your roots are here.

ROMARE BEARDEN: That's right.

HENRI GHENT: Do you have any hobbies or do any work which some people might call a hobby?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, painting to men like President Eisenhower or Churchill was a hobby and a very relaxing one. But it is not so to a very serious artist. Because your painting is constantly saying no to you. And this, you might say, dialogue between you and your art has to each day be renewed which often makes it taxing for the artist. I know a lot of artists just hate in a certain way to go to paint. So in that sense you can't call painting for a serious artist a hobby. It's a calling. And beyond that if you are a serious painter you don't have time. You read and you go to the theatre and do a few things that are relaxing, but to have anything as a hobby -- well, like playing chess -- Marcel Duchamp gave up painting to be a chess player -- it would demand that type of attention. If I went into woodworking or anything I would give it that same degree of attention and I wouldn't be painting. You know, this happened to me when I was writing songs. So I don't bother with any hobby.

HENRI GHENT: You don't have time for it.

ROMARE BEARDEN: No. Because I would give it the same time to do it well as I do painting.

HENRI GHENT: In addition to being an artist, you are also a writer; you're writing a book, maybe two, no?

ROMARE BEARDEN: That is true. And after I've finished those that will be the end, if you can call that a hobby. But I've written a book with Carl Holty called The Painter's Mind. Carl Holty I mentioned before as being in the Kootz Gallery with me, or when I was with that gallery. He is a kind of an exegesis of Structure and Space in painting.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ROMARE BEARDEN: And then after that I think Carl and I will do a second book, a continuation of this exploring the artist's vision. And I'm working on the notes now for a book on the history of the black artists in the United States.

HENRI GHENT: What period will that encompass?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, from the first artists whose work we have a record of -- Joshua Johnston on to the contemporary scene.

HENRI GHENT: I see. Will this be commercially available?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, I hope so when I finish it. In a certain sense I'm trying to write the history of the black artists in this country in a way that will be understandable to people without a long analysis as I do in The Painter's Mind. A more popular book so I can acquaint people with the history of the Negro artists in this country.

HENRI GHENT: I see. There's a good possibility that this book will be used in schools and colleges, et cetera?

ROMARE BEARDEN: That's what I hope.

HENRI GHENT: So it'll be educational?

ROMARE BEARDEN: That's right, educational, entertaining, and I hope with some artistic merit.

HENRI GHENT: How much time do you devote to your work?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Painting?

HENRI GHENT: Yes. Do you have a schedule?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. I paint on a kind of regular schedule. I usually don't paint in my studio, not for the last few years; I go to the place of a friend of mine in Long Island City. I go Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And usually in my own studio I work a bit on the weekends. And I've left Tuesday and Thursday for writing, research and the like for the books.

HENRI GHENT: I see. I gather than you're happiest when you're painting? Not that you're unhappy when you're writing, but you prefer to paint?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, I prefer to paint because I don't know that much about writing. And a lot of the technical things that are no problem to me in painting are problems to me in writing. For instance, I know that

yellow and blue make green. But the grammar, and those things -- you say, well, you knew all the rules and you can forget them and have your own style. But I'm not that conversant as a writer. I just stumble on and hope the editor will assist me.

HENRI GHENT: Your colleague -- Carl Holty -- how extensive has his participation been in this literary venture?

ROMARE BEARDEN: The Painter's Mind? Well, Carl has a very brilliant mind and he's a little bit older than I am. And it was I who persuaded Carl to try to get down some of his ideas -- that was how the book started. And so this collaboration developed and he was a great assistance to me.

HENRI GHENT: Let's talk about form or content of central interest to you in your work.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Well, in beginning a work now I first put down several rectangles of color some of which, as in a Rembrandt drawing, are in the same ratio as the canvas or the rectangle that I'm working on. You understand what I mean?

HENRI GHENT: Yes, of course.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Now, if I'm doing a collage, after I put down these rectangles I might paste a photograph, say, anything just to get me started, maybe a head, at certain -- a few -- places in the canvas that I've started. The type of photograph doesn't matter at all because this is going to be a hand or a little landscape that I put down just to get me started. As Delacroix said, a painting or drawing is developed by first putting down something and then the superimposition of ever more definite statements. That's how I start this thing: rectangles, pasting on this, and the superimposition of ever more definite statements. Now when I put this paper or the photograph on I try to move up and across the canvas, always moving up and across. If I tear anything I tear it up and across. What I'm trying to do then is establish a vertical and a horizontal control of the canvas. I don't like to get into too many slanting movements. When I do I regard this as a tilted rectangle and I try to find something that compensates right away for a slant or a tilt or a diagonal movement on the canvas. I like the language of what I'm trying to do to be as classical as possible but I don't want complete reductionism like a Malevich or white on white where you end up with an empty canvas. I am interested in flat painting and the things I told you that I studied -- the Dutch, the early Sienese, or Byzantine painters; the great exponents of flat painting. Moreover, I try to incorporate some of the techniques of documentary film or the camera eye into the art of painting. A lot of people have said to me that me use of overlapping planes and this flat space is similar to Cubism. which is true. But however in the actual process of my composition I find myself as much involved with the methods of Dutchmen like de Hooch and Vermeer that I've mentioned as I do with any of the Cubists. What I like most about Cubism is this emphasis on the essentials of painting. And what I don't like about Cubism is I feel that a lot of it overcrowds the space. That is what sent me back to the Dutchmen, to the emphasis on this rectangle where I can stress these great vacant areas of the plane against the things that are busy -- as in some of Picasso's collage drawings; or, of course, the work I told you I like so much, the cubism and the neo-plastic work of Mondrian. Of course, in a lot of the things that I have done in my crowded urban street scenes with a lot of people in them and a multiplicity of images, I have tried to find other ways to get this plasticity that I want with my liking for the flat painting and the classical manner. Now also involved is the interplay between the photograph and the actual painting and I constantly find myself adjusting my color to the gray of the photograph so that there won't be too much disparity in color between them. However, I found that even in spite of the fact that I have to restrict my color, that just using a few colors can give me quite a range. For instance, in the Pompeian paintings they just used a red, a gray, and a black, and a few other colors; yet you feel the full range of color in those great paintings. In other words, what I try to do is relate all my colors to gray and then put in in a few places a few dissonant accents. I also have found that too bright a color -- like in Art Nouveau and the rest -- after a while these color harmonies that seemed so interesting at first begin to wear, and what stands up the longest almost are paintings where you feel the absence of color. Like the Chinese paintings, done with just washes of gray or a very little touch of color. Or the paintings of Zurbaran in gray, you know, where you don't tire of a color harmony. And I also find that I'm constantly adjusting my color to things that I paint; bright sections of color and also the photographs that I will use, all this must be related so you feel that a harmony has been arrived at. Now I think that some of the things that underlie my process is the fact that a photographic image when it's taken out of its original content and put in a different space than you saw it in the magazine can have another meaning entirely. Just then a work of art is not life itself. There's a certain artificiality about it and by cultivating the artificiality, or, in other words, by cultivating what is art, you make what you're doing seem more real. And so while my initial thing has been one of shock -- as we've mentioned -- to a lot of people, I think that other people upon reflection have found a great deal of artistic merit in the work, and often a great deal of social meaning other than what I actually attempted to put into the work itself.

HENRI GHENT: In addition to your own activities as a professional artist, I know that you have been also active as Director and Co-Director of several important shows here in New York and in other cities around the country. At the outset I would like to cite the recent show of, I believe it was called "The Evolution of Afro-American Art."

ROMARE BEARDEN: The "Evolution of Afro-American Artists 1800-1950."

HENRI GHENT: That was sponsored by City College?

ROMARE BEARDEN: It was sponsored . . . could you call it a tripartite sponsorship -- by the City University of New York, the Urban League of Greater New York, and the Harlem Cultural council.

HENRI GHENT: I see. And you are the Art Director for the Harlem Cultural Council, are you not?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes, I may be now. I was; I may be. I think if things that come that have to be done of a nature like this involving the Harlem Cultural Council, they usually call upon me. The first such show that Jim Love, a young interested person from Brooklyn, and I organized for the Harlem Cultural Council was a show called "Contemporary Art of the American Negro" in the summer of 1966.

HENRI GHENT: That was in Harlem, wasn't it?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. On 125th Street in the basement of a furniture store which we made over into a very acceptable gallery -- Riker's Furniture Store.

HENRI GHENT: That went over pretty well, I understand?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, yes. It was the first big show of Negro artists in Harlem since the 1930's. And then the show that you mentioned was done the following year in October 1967 in the great hall of City College. This was a far more elaborate undertaking because it involved finding the work of a number of nineteenth-century artists' art starting with Joshua Johnston, Robert Duncanson, the sculpture of Edmonia Lewis, Edward Bannister, Henry Tanner, on to Richard Mayhew and Merton Simpson. We had, maybe, over two hundred works of art in the show. The great hall . . . when I first saw it, I was just thunderstruck with what could be done. But we had the services of a young Negro designer, James Mayo, from Washington, D.C.

HENRI GHENT: Didn't he design the show of Persian Art or something to that effect?

ROMARE BEARDEN: The Turkish show that was touring. And he designed some Persian work it is true, but it was for a permanent exhibit in Dumbarton Oaks.

HENRI GHENT: It was a beautiful design for the CCNY show.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, he's marvelous. And he designed . . . because we had to set up these stanchions -- the stanchions were in various pastel colors to break the monotony because the great hall is as big as a good football field.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, I know.

ROMARE BEARDEN: And this had to be lighted. He knew all the dimensions of the work that was going to the show and he made a scale model of the exhibit area and scaled the pictures to the size and put them around the way they should be. So when the work arrived you could hang it just like clockwork.

HENRI GHENT: It was a very beautiful show.

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, it was a tremendous show. And during the run approximately a quarter of a million people came to the show. And most of the school children of the City of New York were bussed in. Everyone asked when will this show travel? It was too bad that arrangements for traveling the show could not be made. We had a beautiful catalogue which is a collector's item now, listing at least one photographic reproduction of every artist in the exhibit, biographical information on every artist in the exhibit. And we had to make several printings and there are just a few of these catalogues left, I think, now at city University for institutions. The rest are all gone.

HENRI GHENT: I remember being especially impressed with some of the sculpture of Edmonia Lewis. And she I believe was a nineteenth-century artist, right?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Yes. Edmonia Lewis was of mixed Indian and Negro ancestry. She was educated at Oberlin and as a young girl went to Rome where she lived the rest of her life. She was friendly with people who you might call the jet set of her day. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were her friends. One of her patrons was Prime Minister Disraeli of England. She did several commissions for Harvard University of Longfellow. She did a number of the leading personages of the time, like Seward, who was in Lincoln's cabinet; Ralph Waldo Emerson. She worked in this neo-classic style and was a very skillful and brilliant exponent of that style even though I think it is said you can't bathe in the same water twice and it was difficult to breathe life again into something of the Greeks of two or three thousand years ago, and the Early Renaissance. But she did

it. She was very skillful as far as craftsmanship was concerned. And her life was very interesting.

HENRI GHENT: She was born in New York State, wasn't she?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Upper New York State. Living that kind of life and suddenly finding herself in the most sophisticated circles in Rome makes it very interesting. And working in the skillful manner that she did, you know, in the Western manner instead of . . . there's no Indian influence in her work, like totems or the type of things that they did.

HENRI GHENT: Was Duncanson in that show?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Duncanson was a Cincinnati artist and we had several of his canvases. We wanted to get a very famous one of his -- Flood Waters, or Blue Ho Little Miami River I think is the full title, which, I think, is one of the great American landscapes. But the Cincinnati Museum said that this picture had been out on loan so much and so often requested that they felt that the people coming to the Museum should have the privilege of seeing it so they didn't want to loan that painting.

HENRI GHENT: Tanner, of course, was represented?

ROMARE BEARDEN: Oh, we had ten or twelve paintings of Tanner. Very fortunate because it was just before the large Tanner show here, and so, through the Grand Central Gallery, we were able to get quite a few of the Tanner's. Then after the nineteenth century we moved on to some of the painters in that period when there were so few Negro painters -- from 1900 almost to the 20's: Albert Smith, probably the first American Negro Expressionist painter; a man named Braxton -- William Braxton. And then on into the 1920's: Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, Hale Woodruff, Ellis Wilson. I think we had a very large mural of Aaron Douglas's brought in for the show along with easel paintings of his. We had three or four of his paintings. He was beautifully represented. After that into the painters of the Depression years, like Charlie White, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis. Then to the painters that emerged up until the 50's: Richard Mayhew, Merton Simpson. I'm not mentioning all the names. I think in all it was a very worthwhile show. It opened a lot of people's eyes because they didn't realize the contribution that the Negro had made and how long he had been involved in art in this country. I've mentioned that I am writing a book. It is on this aspect that I'm basing the book, telling more in detail about the lives of these nineteenth-century artists, why it was necessary for them to go to Europe, who their patrons were, the difficulties that they had and some of the things that were less difficult for them, peculiarly enough, than many of the artist have at the present time. Like a man like E. M. Bannister who came from Nova Scotia, lived in Boston for a while, then moved to Providence. He was really involved in the life of Providence art circles and was one of the founders of the Providence Art Club, which still exists to this day. Now you don't hear much of Providence in art but at one time in the last century, in the 1880's and 1890's, it was a great force in American Art. I mean the artists from Providence and the things that were going on there were important. And Bannister was a part of all this. I want to bring out all these facts. Each epoch had its various problems. Artists like Bannister, Duncanson, and Tanner, as I said before, happened to be Negroes but they were involved in the art of their time. Then when you get to Douglas and Woodruff you see them trying to depict Negro life, Douglas using Harriet Tubman for instance as a theme for a mural, Woodruff using as a theme the famous Amistad Mutiny. This the artists of the nineteenth century didn't do. So they were coming to a consciousness of another identity or of identifying with their own history. And in the 1930's the Negro artist and his problems at that time with, let's say, the social revolution. Or the artists of the 50's into the more abstract thing, into the involvement of America with the full art of the West. And I want to point out some of these problems in the book which I hope I can do in an interesting way.

HENRI GHENT: What about your future plans?

ROMARE BEARDEN: I'm continuing painting. I have no one-man shows but several group shows planned for the fall. I also intend to go to a few of the colleges to talk in a symposium on some of the same problems that we have discussed in this tape -- at the School of Visual Arts in New York -- in the fall. And, as I said before, I hope by that time to be well along in the book about Negro artists. And I may in my next show, which will not be next season but probably the season after, have some oils again, without collages. And I would want to work these out rather carefully. So I think in the next couple of years I should be pretty busy. That's it.

END OF INTERVIEW

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