

# Book Review: An American Odyssey; the Life and Work of Romare Bearden by Mary Schmidt Campbell

John Herbert Roper Sr.

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**Campbell, Mary Schmidt, *An American Odyssey; the Life and Work of Romare Bearden*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiii+ 443 pages. Hardcover, \$34.95.**

Romare Bearden—Fred Howard Romare Bearden (1911-1988)—deserves this very fine biography. The many and spectacular color images alone are worth the cost of the book.

Had Bearden done nothing but the huge *Projections* (1964) collage of black urban life, he would deserve a full biography. It is a loving but no-nonsense tribute to the people of Harlem and the nation. However, as biographer Mary Schmidt Campbell amply demonstrates, he did much more and filled a busy life on a very public stage on which he played multiple roles, including behind the scenes of that stage. Though not always overtly in politics, in the garden variety sense of Aristotle's term, Bearden was always a public figure of moral and aesthetic authority. Besides his leadership and talent, Bearden was very much what the late Gore Vidal had in mind when he spoke of the "celebrity class."

As a meticulous biographer, Campbell herself plays many public roles, not only as president of Spelman College but also as an art museum curator. In fact, she is a participant observer more than most art historians can be, and she refers often and effectively not only to installations she sees and critiques but also to her own interviews with Bearden. Her classical allusion to Homer's *Odyssey* is deliberate and apt: as a veteran of American and other race wars, Bearden was to Harlem as Odysseus was to Ithaca, and his long and complicated fights and flights were climaxed by a brave but problematical return to his starting point. If art itself is his Penelope, then art too is loyal and dedicated to him even and especially as he travels other worlds before coming back to serve her in Harlem in political as well as aesthetic sense. Besides living a fascinating life, Bearden was at the scenes of important political and cultural events in Harlem. Indeed, a subtheme of this biography is the creative tension between his intent to be an

artist who paints for the sake of painting and an artist who paints to make a cogent political point.

With a studio above the Apollo Theatre, Bearden lived and worked with people who were great in all phases of high art, but he also literally went downstairs to see nothing less than black proletariat performance done interactively with working class Harlemites. He knew and worked with W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and Ralph Ellison; but he knew and worked with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, boxer Jack Johnson, parading followers of Marcus Garvey, musicians Cab Callaway, Duke Ellington, and even McKinney’s Cotton Pickers and the Savoy Sultans, as well. As Campbell puts it, “he established a deliberate dialectic between the respectable and the low down, creating images that defied easy categorization” (p. 57).

Painting constantly and sketching cartoons, he worked from early childhood to his ninth decade. He also wrote essays, and in these he passes through many phases of black cultural life, including a period as self-conscious Race Man, then as modernist painter of Western culture with classical allusions, then as one exiled from the USA (again like Odysseus) heroically if confusingly fighting strange wars far from home, and then again in Harlem as one determined to chronicle all parts of black life, emphasizing what Campbell calls the “dialectic” between working class folk and intellectuals. While reminiscent of how his associate Langston Hughes had a dialectic on the Harlem bar stools between laborer Jesse B. Simple and an “I-voice” of high art, but the artist is not so much choosing sides as deliberately combining and recombining the diverging and even conflicting elements of Harlem life.

John Herbert Roper Sr.  
Richardson Professor of American History Emeritus  
Emory & Henry College  
Emory, Virginia