

# ROMARE BEARDEN



The title of this collage could refer to several of its details. In the top right quadrant a nearly camouflaged passing train with billowing smoke travels to an unknown location. The central figure, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, appears lost in thought. A woman stares at the viewer with a disproportionately large eye, her hand on the windowsill. In the "background" (at right), blue birds fly. These elements and others recall Romare Bearden's childhood in rural North Carolina and personify journeying, a central theme in African-American history. The train suggests the Underground Railroad—the network of abolitionist-run safe houses that secretly transported slaves—and the post-slavery migration of African-Americans, primarily northward, to seek better lives.

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and raised primarily in the surrounding Mecklenburg County, Bearden eventually settled in New York City to finish college at New York University. He was a social worker there for several decades, during which time he spent nights and weekends on his art. Originally an abstract painter, Bearden began creating collages in the early 1960s using images from photo-magazines such as *Life* and *Ebony*. He came up with the idea after suggesting it to the other members of *Spiral*, a group of New York artists formed to create art based on African-American issues. In addition to his unflinching, faceted images of black life, Bearden is remembered for his published books on art and aesthetics and for his political energy on behalf of black culture.