

Black Artists through HISTORY

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BLACK ARTISTS THROUGH HISTORY, LESSON 2 Folk Musicians by Romare Bearden, 1941-42

1- Three musicians, one with a guitar in hand, dominate this scene painted in rich browns and blues (Bearden's lavish use of the color blue, in fact, suggests the blues of the African-American folk music.) Bearden has turned to the folk music and Southern folk culture that he knew from his youth.

2- Bearden was influenced by the Social Realists of the Great Depression, along with the Mexican Muralists such as Diego Rivera, who was well-established in New York City. Social Realists, influenced by the art and politics of Soviet Russia, took as their subjects the working class, the poor, the masses, and folk culture, rendered in legible forms and compositions, seeking to ignite progressive social change on behalf of the workers of the world and to rectify social ills.

3- In this painting, Bearden has flattened the pictorial space and rendered the figures with Cubist block-like forms that overlap and are compressed within the shallow space, enlarging the trio's hands to indicate their humble working origins.

4- The brick wall behind the blues musicians simplifies the background and gives attention to the three figures. The trio are playing music in front of a rural scene (with the brick wall of a house and the trees in front of hills). This gives the impression of an impromptu blues singing session. Decades later, author Ralph Ellison, one of America's premier novelists would single out and praise these early works of Bearden's for their honesty and directness.

Activity:

After studying the Folk Musicians painting print the B&W outline and color it to match the artist's rendering -or adopt your own style.



Folk Musicians, 1941-42, Gouache and casein on kraft paper. 35.5 x 45.5". The Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States.



Facts about Romare Bearden (1911-1988):

1- Romare Bearden was an American artist, author, and songwriter.

2- He began his artistic career creating scenes of the American South. Later, he worked to

express the humanity he felt was lacking in the world after his experience in the US Army during World War II on the European front. He returned to Paris in 1950 and studied art history and philosophy at the Sorbonne.

3- Bearden's early work focused on unity and cooperation within the African-American community. After a period during the 1950s when he painted more abstractly, this theme reemerged in his collage works of the 1960s.

4- Bearden became a founding member of the Harlem-based art group known as The Spiral, formed to discuss the responsibility of the African-American artist in the civil rights movement.

5- He had long supported young, emerging artists, and he and his wife established the Bearden Foundation to continue this work, as well as to support young scholars.

6- In 1987, Bearden was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

7- Romare Bearden died in New York City on March 12, 1988, due to complications from bone cancer. The New York Times described Bearden in its obituary as "one of America's pre-eminent artists" and "the nation's foremost collageist."

8- His widow selected a collage by him to be recreated in smalti (glass tiles) by Crovatto Mosaics in Spilimbergo, Italy, for the grand reopening gala (June 18, 1989) of the "new" library.

9- In 2011, the U.S. Postal Service released a set of Forever stamps featuring four of Bearden's paintings.

Three Folk Musicians by Romare Bearden, 1967



Collage of various papers with paint and graphite on canvas - 50 x 60 x 1 1/2"

1- In later works such as this, Bearden begins to integrate snippets of his own earlier work into his collages.

2- Romare Bearden noted that the work pays homage to a scene he often witnessed at his grandmother's boardinghouse in Pittsburgh, PA: "After supper the boarders would sit in front of the house and talk, or play checkers, or plunk out 'down home music' on their guitars."

3- With hand-painted papers and pieces of magazine photographs, the artist composed a group portrait of two guitarists and a banjoist, honoring the jazz and blues music that inspired African American artists—and modernists in general—beginning with the Harlem Renaissance half a century earlier.

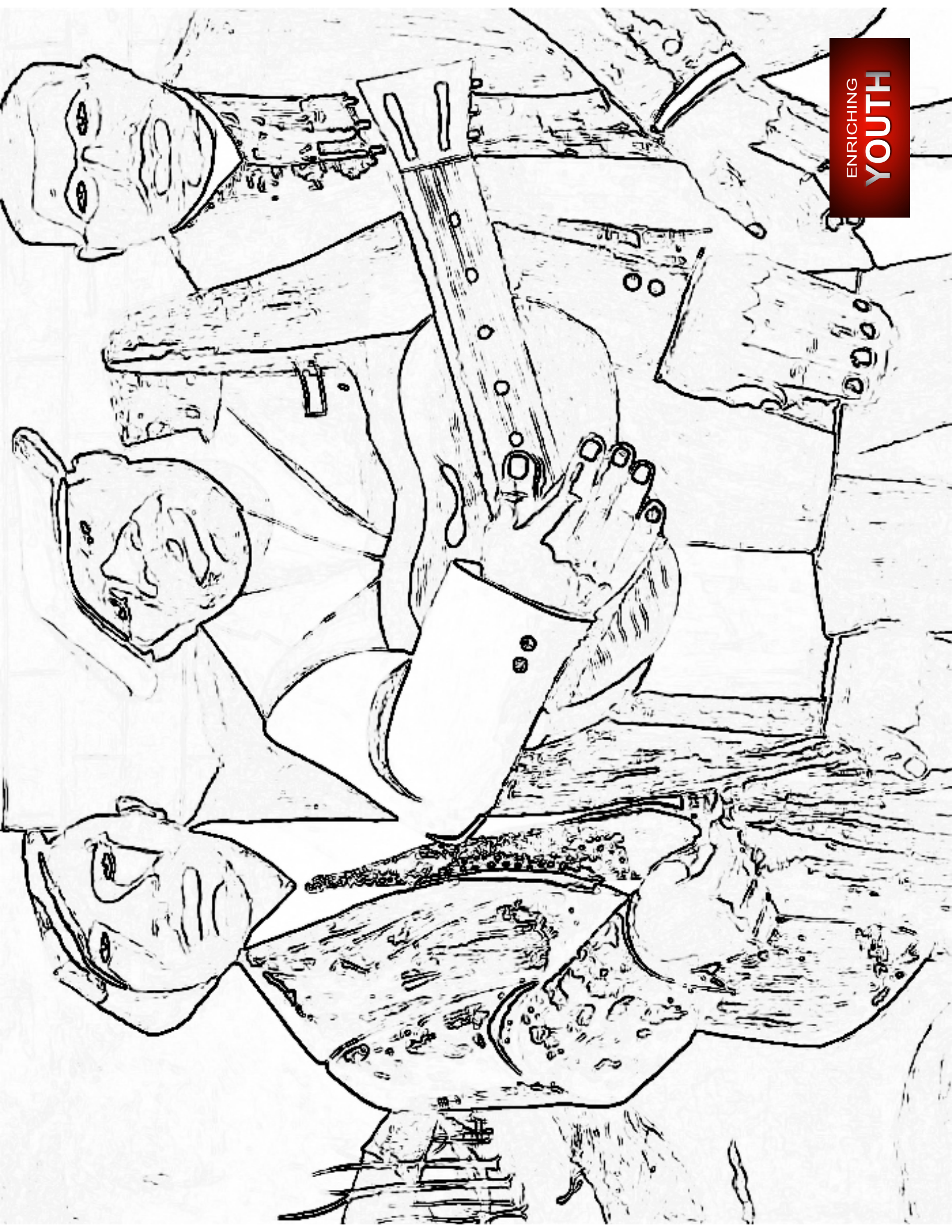
4- Whereas in the earlier painting the musicians stare wide-eyed and directly out at the viewers, here, the trio's eyes are down-turned to suggest thought/introspection.

5- One of his most renowned and recognizable individual works, "Three Folk Musicians" has appeared in major exhibitions of the artist's work hosted by the nation's top-tier museums.

Discussion:

Compare the two pieces of art and find similarities and differences (think about the artist's different styles) Hints: the paintings' compositions seem very similar with the musicians taking up the full frame except for the scene on the left which seems the same?)







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