

# ROMARE BEARDEN

**Meet the Artist** • Romare Bearden (1911–1988) was born in Charlotte, North Carolina. He moved to New York City when he was three years old and grew up there in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance. Many of his family members were musicians and artists. Poet Langston Hughes and musicians Duke Ellington and Fats Waller were friends who dropped in regularly. As an artist, Bearden tried many styles and mediums—he even worked as a songwriter! During the 1960s he found his signature form of expression in collage.

**Bearden's Style** • Memories from Bearden's childhood inspired much of his collage work. He often combined fragments and images of newspapers,

magazines, and photographs with other art materials to draw attention to social issues and conflicts in African-American life. Bearden experimented as he worked. Often he didn't know how the final piece would turn out; the process brought surprises. Bearden said, "It's like jazz; you do something and then you improvise."

**The Block** • In 1971 Bearden created *The Block*, a six-panel collage measuring 4' x 18', as a tribute to his old neighborhood, Harlem. The block is a vibrant community with brownstone homes, the corner store, a barbershop, a funeral parlor, and a storefront church. Private aspects of everyday urban living also are shown, so that each group of people tells its own interesting story—a parade of life.

## In Your Own Neighborhood

### Walk the Block

Take your students on a neighborhood walk, notebooks in hand to record the sights and sounds. Have them look for buildings that meet each of these needs: shelter, education, safety, food, health, religion, government, entertainment, and recreation. Compare and discuss their discoveries.

### A Classroom Collage

What communicates the idea of neighborhood better than everyone working together to create a wonderful project? Combine all of your students' talents by trying your own collaborative collage, like the one made by the first graders at New York's Brooklyn Friends School (see page 40). ■

## A WALK THROUGH THE BLOCK

### What Is a Collage?

A collage is a work of art in which pieces of different materials (such as paper, photographs, paint, cloth, and wood) are assembled and fastened onto a flat surface. Look closely at *The Block* with your students. How did Bearden use this technique?

### Fanciful Images

Bearden uses elements that are realistic (the funeral) as well as figurative (angels) to reflect the moods and tone of the block. Can your class find them?

### Color Effects

Bearden thought colors in art carried action, that they could "walk like free men." Take a walk down this street with its brightly colored buildings. See how Bearden does not show "true" colors but combines them to produce a feeling of harmony.

### Visual Symbols

Notice the light bulb above Sunrise Baptist Church. What do your students think it represents? Why? Can they point out other visual symbols in Bearden's collage?

### Multiple Views

See how the facades are missing in many of these brownstones, revealing what is happening inside each of the buildings. Notice the different sizes and perspectives. Bearden's combination of multiple views tells us much more about his memories of the neighborhood.

### Sound

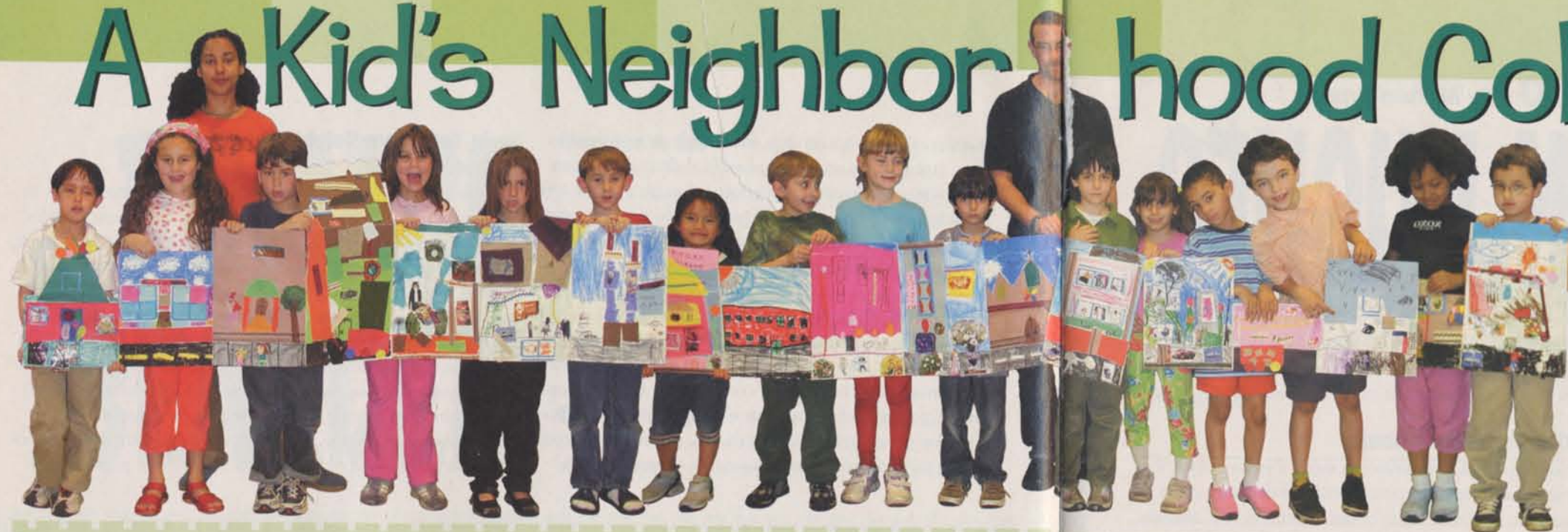
When this mural was originally displayed, a recording of street sounds played in the gallery. Ask students to imagine what it may have sounded like.

See Pull-out Poster! Pages 44–45



ROMARE BEARDEN, *THE BLOCK*, 1971. CUT AND PASTED PAPERS ON MASONITE, 4 BY 18 FEET. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. SAMUEL SHORE, 1970. (1970.61.1-6) PHOTOGRAPH © 1992 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART © ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION/LICENCED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

# A Kid's Neighborhood Collage



How do first graders create a whole new neighborhood? With a Romare Bearden-inspired group collage!

Michael Bruno's first-grade class at New York's Brooklyn Friends School created this fabulous cityscape collage with the help of artist Christy Hale. In a project that encourages both individual and cooperative work, students make observations and take photographs on neighborhood walks, then return inside to make their own new neighborhoods, first as a collage and then as a complex, three-dimensional block town.

Making the collage buildings is fun and demanding. The class spends time brainstorming the needs and wishes of a community, from water supply to ice cream shops. Then each student chooses a neighborhood building and recreates it with paper. The students use photos, newspaper or magazine clippings, and bits of cloth or colored paper. They glue these materials down and then draw and paint to complete the neighborhood scenes. In some of the buildings there are hand-drawn or collaged signs, as well as windows and doors that reveal what's happening inside. Finally, the children gather the completed building panels together and attach them with tape across the back. A new neighborhood is born! These innovative first graders then use what they've learned to create their own elaborate town built out of blocks. ■



1. Allegra starts her building by cutting and pasting window-frame shapes.
2. Pictures of best friends and a bunny rabbit fill the windows of this building.
3. Sara works on a patterned roof design.
4. Norris chooses her colors carefully.
5. Natalie and Ariana are hard at work with scissors and glue.
6. The first graders carefully sketch building plans and map out their town before they begin block construction. The last step is to paint streets and scenery!

