

JERALD MELBERG ORAL HISTORY

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CAMARA HOLLOWAY: [00:00:00] I'm Camara Holloway, and I'm the project manager for the Romare Bearden Catalogue Raisonné. It's April 17th, 2023, and I'm interviewing Jerald Melberg, a gallery owner and curator who knew Romare Bearden. Thank you for joining us. We appreciate it.

JERALD MELBERG: I am very delighted.

CH: Okay. So, to begin, we want to get a sense of your background. So, we'd like to know, when and where were you born?

JM: I was, uh, born in a log cabin. [laughs] I'll try to behave. I actually -- people won't believe this when I tell them, but I was born and raised in Lake Wobegon. You ever heard of Lake Wobegon?

CH: I believe I have.

JM: Garrison Keillor, *Prairie Home Companion*?

CH: Yes.

JM: Well, there's a little town 30 miles north of [00:01:00] Minneapolis called Anoka. A-N-O-K-A. And that's the little town I'm from, and it's the town that Garrison Keillor is from, and it is the real town that Lake Wobegon is based on. Lake Wobegon itself is fictitious. But I just like to say that, because I grew up in a really wonderful, small town. Far enough north of Minneapolis to be its own entity and not be a suburb, and it was a great upbringing. I rode my bike to -- I had one grandmother that lived a quarter of a mile away and another grandmother that lived just close to her. So, I would ride my bikes to my grandmothers' homes and, um, go to the

swimming pool. It was just a great place to grow up. So, I'm a -- I'm a Midwestern boy.

CH: Okay.

JM: And, [00:02:00] um -

CH: What were your parents -- uh, what did they do?

JM: My parents -- frankly, I came from a lower middle income family. Sometimes I think I still do. I still am. [laughs] But my mother was a homemaker. And a terrible cook. And my father was the custodian at the high school I went to. Not what you want, that your dad's a janitor where you go to high school. It was difficult. Um, and -- my parents were really good people, but my parents did not understand. They didn't understand me or -- the first time my parents were [00:03:00] ever in an art gallery or a museum was when I took them. My, uh -- see, I'm -- this is almost like I'm talking to my psychiatrist. [laughter]

CH: Well, how -- how did you discover art when you were a child?

JM: [pauses] You know, that's a very good question, and I've been thinking about that. Um, my first wife, who is deceased, was an artist. And I actually -- I was trained -- I went to college to become an actor. I majored in [sighs] dramatic production, oral interpretation of prose, [00:04:00] stage acting. And I did some, you know, local, regional kind of stuff. And I still say I'm an actor every day. Aren't all of us? We're all actors every day in a particular way. So, um --

CH: So when did you get the theater bug?

JM: You know, again, maybe it was the day I knew I was not a mathematician. [laughter] I'm not sure exactly how. That's, you know, back in those days, they were -- we were just getting electricity. It seems like I'm -- I was born in 1948. This August I'll [00:05:00] be 75 years old.

CH: Okay.

JM: But I'm still here and I'm still doing it.

CH: Did you like music or did you like -- did you see any paintings or anything when you were growing up?

JM: Growing up, the only music I really knew were church hymns because my parents and my upbringing was in a very conservative Baptist, believe it or not, environment.

CH: Okay.

JM: And that's part of the reason why my -- you know, there was -- there was one time I was -- by this time I was living in either South -- maybe when I first came to the South, I was in South Carolina, but then I was up visiting home. [00:06:00] Really, I should say, visiting my parents, because it really wasn't home any longer. But I'm sitting at the kitchen table while my mother was busy in the kitchen. And she said to me something that was really profound for her. She said, "I feel like I don't know you anymore. I don't know who you are. I don't know who your friends are. I don't know your activities." And I said, "Mom, ask me absolutely anything you want, and I will tell you the truth, but don't ask anything you don't want to know." Which I thought was profound on both our parts, actually. We're starting off in a really strange place here. Oh, we'll get to Bearden eventually.

CH: Yes, yes. Um, yeah, we just wanted to know if you had discovered, you [00:07:00] know, art, and whether or not --

JM: Well, because my first wife was an artist. And that was -- I, you know, I started out helping her stretching canvases, all that sort of stuff. And I got a long, long, really circuitous history that I kind of do my best to sometimes forget, which is -- [sighs].

CH: Okay. Well, that's fine. You can tell me when you --

JM: Then I came to Charlotte. I was in Greenville, South Carolina, and through some people that I had met, I was working in an art gallery in Greenville. One that you wouldn't know it at all. [00:08:00] And through a set of circumstances, I heard that there was an opening for a curator at the Mint Museum, and I applied. There were 52 applicants, and the director of the museum interviewed three. And [sighs] Camara, to this day, as I sit here with you right now, I still have no idea why they hired me. Because there must have been better qualified candidates. But he liked my attitude and my willingness to get in there and get things done. So, I took this job. At the time, my title was Curator of Exhibitions. And at that time, the Mint Museum was a very different organization. There was, I think, the entire staff of 12 or 14. And this was before any of the [00:09:00] construction of the -- you've seen the new building, but I don't know if you've seen the other, the older building as well? But --

CH: No, the Randolph Building? I haven't seen it.

JM: Randolph, yes. Yeah, and that just had -- when I was there, it was the very first original building, and it's had an addition. And then, of course, there's the new uptown Mint. But I was there, I was working on some assigned projects, when

I first started going and getting there. And, uh, there was a staff meeting and the director said, "Well, we need some -- we need some new exhibition ideas."

And at that point, I obviously -- it would be difficult, it would be -- no, it would be impossible [00:10:00] to be in the arts in Charlotte, North Carolina, and not know who Romare Bearden was. That's just a given. And so, I did know who Bearden was. And I suggested in a staff meeting that we should consider doing a major exhibition for him.

And the director liked the idea. The staff liked the idea. And the director at the time, his name was Milton Bloch, B-L-O-C-H. He is -- to this day, he's one of my heroes. To this day. I will sometimes make decisions in my own business, and I will stop and say, How would Milton handle this? That's how important he was in my life. So, you know, uh -- [00:11:00]

CH: So you were in Charlotte and you heard about Bearden and you wanted to do an exhibition.

JM: And I suggested this, the director, Milton said, "Okay, it's your football."

CH: Okay.

JM: "Go run with it." So, I started thinking about it more and looking more and more into Bearden, and of course there was the -- 19 -- was it 70? Maybe even a little earlier, the first retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

CH: Right.

JM: And given the size of the Mint Museum at the time, and the staff at the time, I decided that we would do a show that

would begin where the Museum of Modern Art show ended. And so, our show was 1970 to 1980. So, it [00:12:00] was that decade.

CH: Okay.

JM: And so, I started doing a lot of research, and I said to the director, "I need -- I need to go to New York. I need to go meet Mr. Bearden." So, I went up. I had an appointment. At the time, he was represented by Cordier and Ekstrom Gallery, which I know you've heard of. Yes, of course.

CH: Yes.

JM: And the gallery was in the building on -- was it on Park or Madison -- Park, that at the time was the Sotheby Parke-Burnet building.

CH: Okay.

JM: And the gallery was in that building. And so, I had an appointment with Mr. Ekstrom and with Bearden. And we met and I was scared to death. [laughter] But it was a very cordial [00:13:00] first meeting. It wasn't formal, but it wasn't informal. It was just -- so Bearden and I talked.

CH: What did you think of him when you first met him? What was your impression?

JM: I found him to be friendly. I've often said that Romie would intimidate me without knowing that he was doing so, because he was whip-smart. He really was. And he was kind. I've been quoted as saying that, you know, he was as kind to a human being as he was on the -- to the pigeons on his windowsill. And, um, [00:14:00] his -- [UNCLEAR] about him, how I met him, impressions of him. I started coming up to New

York. And you have to understand in these days -- this was '76, '77, that I'm starting to work on the show. There are no computers. There are no cell phones. I would talk to Romie on the phone. Of course, there's no email.

And so, we'd -- we'd set an appointment, and I would arrive on -- at Canal Street, 357 Canal. And I would call him from the pay phone at the corner and say, "Romie, I'm here." Okay. So, and then he would come down and let me in. And it was a, [00:15:00] it was a walk up. It was either the second or third floor. It was very modest. It was he and Nanette and the cats. I'm sure you know about the cats.

CH: Yes. [laughs]

JM: And, um, then we would -- we would then start meeting at the studio in Long Island City, which was a, like, a three or four-story kind of warehouse building. And I'd meet him there and go up to his studio and it was literally just a door and a hallway of this building. And it said "Romare Bearden" on the door. And I would knock, and Romie would let me in and -- the studio was amazing because it was [00:16:00] waist-high with magazines and books that, that he would cut out and find the image that he was looking for.

CH: So, you got to watch him work?

JM: [sighs] I did actually watch him work somewhat, but, um, not a lot. Because he really did work alone. I do know that he had a -- of course it would be a landline telephone at the time, that he had hidden in the studio because he didn't want Nanette to know he had a phone. And I'd see works in progress. We'd talk about them. And then, I'd watch him -- you know, [00:17:00] he'd put an image down, he'd put Elmer's glue on it, and then he would place the image where he wanted it, and

then he'd use a brayer to kind of squeegee out the extra glue, and then he'd look at it and he'd peel it off. Because he wanted to put it in a little different position.

So, those sorts of -- I did get to witness those kinds of decision-making. He -- we used to go to lunch. He had a little favorite Chinese place a block or two from the studio. So, we'd always -- he'd always say, "Well, come around 11:30 so we can look around the studio and then go have some lunch." And Romie, [00:18:00] I don't need to tell you about his upbringing and his time in Ch-- all of that.

But, by the time I knew him, early '70s, Bearden knew who he was. He knew his place. He knew his status. He wore it comfortably. He did not wear it egotistically at all. But there was one thing. And I think it was just -- it was part of his -- not so much for me or other people, but for himself, that he, you know, he always wore those blue coveralls.

CH: Yes.

JM: And they had big pockets in the front, and he would never, never let me buy. [00:19:00] It was part of the fact that he has -- he's able to do it. And he would pull -- reach into the pocket of those coveralls, and he'd pull out a wad of cash like this, and peel off a \$20 bill. And it was -- I think for Romie, it was his way of saying, I can do this. I am able to do this. I have -- I am an artist of stature and I can sell my works of art and buy Jerald's lunch. So, I saw him do that more than once. We -- he was very amenable to my doing the exhibition, for the most part. [00:20:00] Parts of it, he wasn't quite so willing. And I -- if I'm gonna tell you everything, I need to tell you everything, right?

CH: Sure, we are very curious of what you can tell us.

JM: Well, [sighs] when I was trying to decide which pieces to put in this ten-year retrospective, and -- do you have a copy of that catalogue?

CH: Yes.

JM: You must have. They're tough to find, believe me. I don't know if I told you, but four or five years ago, I was in the old Whitney. And I was in the bookshop, and there were three copies of that catalogue in the Whitney bookshop. I bought them as quickly as I could, because they're just impossible to find. And it was pretty cool for me to see that in the Whitney bookshop. Let's admit it, okay. [00:21:00] So, [pauses] we're, -- we're looking at works and we're trying to compile a -- you know, a listing, not a catalogue raisonné, but it was close, for that ten-year period.

CH: Yes, that's a very useful list.

JM: It should be a very useful list for you.

CH: Yes.

JM: And as we're going through this process, I -- we were -- we would be in this -- in the apartment. And he had a big desk, and I was sitting on the other side of the desk. And I'm saying -- well, first of all, I had been given a lot of information from Mr. Ekstrom. He kept pretty good records. Romie, on the other hand, did not. [00:22:00] And there were times he would say, "Well, do we have to include this one?" I said, "Well, Romie, I have to if we're going to do this right. He said, "Well, I kind of, uh, bought that -- I sold that one to somebody without Mr. Ekstrom knowing." But I said, "Well, Romie, we have to."

So, we would sit there and he would go through -- he had four or five old address books that were stuffed and had a big -- each one had a rubber band around it. And so, he'd thumb through them and, uh, he said, "Well, this, this person bought something." And I'd get their name and what address Romie had. And so, that's how I started compiling. [00:23:00] So that's how we started compiling the list, of focusing down. I went to several collectors' homes to see works while I was doing this. I dealt with private collectors in Atlanta, I dealt with the -- Jerald, help me out -- the gallery in Cleveland, and [sighs] there was another place. Oh, yes. This gentleman was wonderful. He was in Detroit. I'm trying to think of his name.

CH: Are you thinking of Sheldon Ross?

JM: Sheldon Ross. Thank you. Shelly and I became good friends. I -- you have to -- you have to forgive me because [00:24:00] I suffer from CRS disease. Do you know what CRS is?

CH: No.

JM: Can't remember shit.

CH: Oh. [laughs]

JM: That is -- don't all of us suffer from that occasionally?

CH: Yes, yes, but you're doing good. We're -- and I'm enjoying what you're telling us. So your -- how are you picking the works? I mean, you said the 1970s, but what made you --

JM: Well, I began with the fact that we were going to -- limit our -- because we were gonna do the show in October of '80. And I had decided early on that we would not rehash what MoMA had done at that point. That we were just gonna concentrate on

this ten-year period. And that was a -- actually a very good [00:25:00] decision.

And then, I wanted to try to include all of the different series. And all of the -- and Romie and I would work on that together. And at this point I'd have -- back in those days, we had 3x5 transparencies. Which are antique at this day. And so Romie and I would spread out these transparencies on that same desk and look at them. And I'd say, "Well, what do you think Romie, between, you know, these four Mecklenburg County ones, which one do you -- would you prefer seeing?" And we would have those sorts of back and forth discussions.

CH: Do you have any insight as to what -- why he would pick a certain work over another?

JM: No, not really. Not [00:26:00] really. He would just, um, [pauses] you know how that is. Or -- human nature is that you're gonna gravitate toward your personal favorite. I would do that. He would do that. You're probably doing it when you look at Beardens.

CH: Yes, definitely.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

JM: So, uh, this is my copy. We -- it was a paperback book. You have to -- you also -- you have to understand, this was 1978, '79, and getting -- and color printing, getting things done was very different. Budgets were very different. To this day, I'm really so disappointed that we were not able to do this whole catalogue in color. [00:27:00] But we -- the director and I had this idea, and we had a dozen or 15 of them hardbound. This is my prized, prized possession. Can you see this?

CH: Yes. "For Jerald with great appreciation, Romare, May 1985, Charlotte."

JM: Yes.

CH: Wonderful.

JM: So, uh, someday this copy will need to go to somebody. Maybe to WPI or maybe to [pauses] Archives of American Art, maybe to the Mint Museum, one of those.

CH: Yeah.

JM: But for now, it's still going to sit right here on my bookshelf and I treasure it and I look at it with some frequency. [00:28:00]

CH: Yes.

JM: But, um, I have to tell you about -- Philip Morris.

CH: Okay.

JM: You know their involvement?

CH: Yeah, I know that they were involved, but I don't know the details.

JM: Well, they were -- again, this was mid, late-'70s, and believe it or not, when they sponsored the show, there's a different couple parts of how they sponsored it, or the opening at the Mint. They had -- true story. They had three or four cigarette ladies with trays of cigarettes with those -- you remember the little, like, six cigarettes in a little pack?

CH: Yes. [00:29:00]

JM: Yeah. And they would be handing them out. That's how different it is than today. When we negotiated, myself and the -- Milton, the director, we did a lot of negotiation with Philip Morris. Including one of the things they insisted upon were the cigarette ladies, which we didn't like, but -- so, they gave us a grant of \$50,000. Now, mind you, at that point, that's an enormous amount of money. And it was that grant that allowed us to do the show, allowed me to travel, allowed me to go see all the works and make [00:30:00] several trips to New York to see Romie.

But I've always thought it was kind of curious that Philip Morris [phone rings] spent a great deal of money telling everybody that they had given us a grant. In the fact that they did full-page ads in *Time* magazine. They've got -- those ads have got to be somewhere in somebody's archives, probably *Time* if nothing else. And they would -- it was -- we found it a little humorous that they spent \$250,000 advertising that they gave us \$50,000. Now they didn't -- nobody knew the amounts, we did, but it was -- it was kind of humorous.

CH: Yeah. [00:31:00] Had they ever done anything like that before, um, sponsoring?

JM: I don't know. I'm sure they've done other exhibitions. And when we were organizing the show, something I found out early on in my career at the Mint is, you know, if I had not a Bearden, another show at the museum, and I'd have an \$8,000 budget for a 12-week show. So, I started collaborating with other museums and I'd say, "Okay, I'll charge you a \$5,000 rental fee." And I'd get three other museums. So, all of a sudden, instead of having an [phone rings] \$8,000 budget, I had a \$23,000 budget. And [00:32:00] that's what we did with

the Bearden show. I negotiated. It went to Jackson, Mississippi; Richmond, Virginia; and -- you'd think I'd remember, wouldn't you? CRS. CRS. Yes, Baltimore. Opened at the Mint October 12, 1980. Then it went to Mississippi, then to Baltimore, and then to Richmond. During the course of the tour, the Brooklyn Museum came forward and said, "Is there any possible way we could add another museum?" Which we were thrilled to do, especially given the fact that it was gonna give it a New York City venue.[00:33:00]

CH: Right.

JM: So, um, it took a lot of doing to convince collectors who had already had to be convinced to let it be gone for the -- almost a year for the first four locations. So, but we were able to do it, and I was able to attend the opening at all those venues. [sighs]

CH: Were some of the -- were there a lot of collectors in Charlotte at the time or were they from outside?

JM: There were some in Charlotte, yes.

CH: Okay.

JM: Yes, but there were -- as you might suspect, the majority was in New York City, which made it a little easier for me to see things. So, I'd have my [00:34:00] list and I'd make appointments with people and I'd go from cab ride to cab ride. Of course, you have to understand at that point, you know, to go from 32nd Street to 72nd Street would cost you \$2.70. [laughter] Not now.

CH: Not now. No. Was there any work that you really wanted to have in the show but couldn't get?

JM: As I recall, there probably must have been. I can't give you one specific. There are some that I desperately, desperately did want to have and was able to have, which were -- like, uh, the one on the cover, *Maudell Sleet's Magic Garden*. What a spectacular work of art. *Patchwork Quilt* from the Museum of Modern Art. And of course -- [00:35:00] have you seen photos of the installation at the Mint Museum?

CH: No, just the photo of Romie and Nanette, I think? I've just seen --

JM: So you've not seen --

CH: Not installation photographs, no.

JM: The Mint has got to have some install photos of that show, and we somehow convinced the Metropolitan to loan us *The Block*. We were the only venue. It wouldn't go to the other ones, but we did have it in Charlotte. And I was -- that was, that was thrilling. Thrilling.

CH: Yeah.

JM: You know, there's so many great works -- *In the Garden*. Of course, *Carolina Shout*.

CH: Yes. [00:36:00] Which is now at the Mint.

JM: Which is now -- in and of itself has become an icon.

CH: Yes.

JM: I'm just kind of paging through this as I'm -- oh, there was a little controversy. Because we had a couple of, uh, prudish board members.

CH: Oh, okay. [laughs]

JM: And as you know, there's two or three of them that are -- the one that probably caused the most ruckus was the one called *Electric Evening*.

CH: Right.

JM: And *Dream Images*, *Hidden Valley*, they were more silhouette nudes, but still. And there were a few prudish people. But the director of the [00:37:00] museum just said, "Get over it."

CH: Okay.

JM: However, I must tell you, this is very sad for me. There was one board member who just dug in his heels and said, "What is the Mint Museum doing this show for? Why is the museum doing this show for a Black man?" And do you know what happened? He was asked to resign from the board.

CH: Okay.

JM: The rest of the board got together and said, There's no place for you here.

CH: So, there was definitely support from the board to have Romie sort of come home.

JM: There was tremendous support to come home. [00:38:00]

CH: What was the audience like for the show? I mean, it sounds like you had a big --

JM: Overwhelming. Overwhelming. Yes. I don't know if you've read my little part of the catalogue intro and the

acknowledgements. I was kind of pleased with this, this statement of mine. It was the last paragraph of my introduction and I said, "The realization of Romare Bearden at the Mint Museum is an accomplishment, which can rightfully make *Carolina Shout* an expectation as well as the title of a Bearden collage."

CH: Nice.

JM: So, now I have to talk a moment that I think you've heard me say. I loved Romare Bearden.

CH: Yeah. [00:39:00]

JM: [sighs] He became such an important part of my life just because I organized the show. Yes, of course, that was part of it. But because [pauses] that I got to know the man, and in -- and even in occasion, I would -- I would see his shortcomings. We all have them, and he -- he was -- I often said that if Romare Bearden had one fault, he was too generous. He was too generous, and he would be naive in his generosity. Because young [00:40:00] artists would make an appointment to the studio and it became known if you were an artist and you went to visit Bearden, you'd leave with something.

CH: Okay.

JM: And sometimes I think these young artists were more interested in leaving with something than they were getting to know the man. You know? I own half a dozen or eight Bearden prints. I own a couple of important ones, and I owned a really beautiful collage. And it was a very difficult day for me -- I sold it to be able to buy my house. So, I've often said I live in -- I live in my house because of Bearden. But, um [sighs] -

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CH: Do you have a specific [00:41:00] criteria for what you collect?

JM: Well, yeah, probably what I can afford.

CH: [laughs] Okay.

JM: You know that -- it's kind of curious how [pauses] -- I deal in and I sell works of art that I can't afford. I can't afford personally. But I think that's the case with most dealers, you know? And I've sold the same Romare Bearden four times through the years.

CH: Okay.

JM: You know how that happens? It's either a death or divorce.

CH: Okay. [laughs] Yeah, that makes sense.

JM: And these days, you know -- well, you know this as well -- better [00:42:00] than I do, that there are very few Beardens out there on the marketplace.

CH: Right.

JM: And the Foundation has very little. Again, I'm telling stories, but I think part of the reason for that [sighs] is -- you know, Nanette had, I think it was seven sisters?

CH: Yes.

JM: And when Romie became successful, these -- how shall I say this -- these sisters would come around and say, Romie, could you give me a collage? I need some money. And he would do it.

And I think that's part of the reason there are very few in the Foundation.

CH: Okay. [00:43:00]

JM: Is that a -- is that a terrible thing for me to say? No.

CH: If -- not if it's true.

JM: Well, I know it on very good authority.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

JM: Okay. I have a prepared lecture on Bearden that I've given literally from New York to California to Florida, all over. And perhaps one of my favorite Bearden stories. [sighs]
[00:45:00] I should probably give you a copy of this lecture. I give it -- I'm going to be giving it in Asheville, in a couple of months. The Asheville Art Museum has requested my entire Bearden show that we have on view now to travel to them. And I talk about this in this lecture that, there's
[00:46:00] this -- it's sometimes, it's a little difficult for me to remember back, not because it's painful, but because it is so -- he's --

CH: In your heart. Yes.

JM: But I'm gonna read you just a little bit of this, because I think it's -- for me, at least, it's important. This is near the end of my lecture. "In October 1980, Romie had his retrospective, which I had the honor of [00:47:00] organizing at the Mint Museum, the city of his birth. People came from many parts of the country to celebrate Romie. New York, Chicago, Boston, other cities. It was a demonstration of the great love all these people had for Romie, the artist.

Equally, it was a demonstration of the great love we all had for Romie, the person.

The morning after the opening, Romie was scheduled to give a talk to a group of African-American school children in age from about 9 to 12. Present were about 30 boys and girls and Romie, talking not down to them, but with them. And his gentle voice reaching to them and embracing them with his words. Hanging on the classroom walls were reproductions of Joshua [00:48:00] Johnson, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Horace Pippin, Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, and he talked about the paintings tenderly and with veneration.

He talked not only about the paintings, but about the artists themselves: where they sprang from, the history of their period, and the lives they led. And when he said, soberly, gently, embracing them with his words, 'And so, you see, children, each of these painters had a beginning, but no real end. Because they made a contribution to the painters that followed them.' I knew that some of those children had a glimmer of what Romie was talking about, the continuation of life through a contribution in art."

And this is where I [00:49:00] was headed with this, perhaps my favorite story about Romie. "This could be further demonstrated through a letter I would like to read you. It is from Romie to a Charlotte grade school student." At the time, it had just been given to me.

"Dear Clarence, Mrs. Shaw, one of your teachers, wrote me about your splendid talent for art. Since I am an artist, this pleased me very much. It's always nice to know of someone with your interests. Also, let me tell you that I was born in Charlotte, when it was a sleepy little town, not the big city it is now. So, you can understand it is especially warming to

hear of someone from your own home who's doing so well, not only in his art endeavors, but all his subjects as [00:50:00] well.

One of the things about being an artist, Clarence, is that you don't have to deal with words. Our pictures explain the way we feel. Since in this case, I can't paint my feelings, let me say I'm proud of you and hope you'll enjoy this book of mine. Continue to make your mother and your teachers think as highly of you as they do now. Remember, always, this talent you have has been given to you, entrusted to you."

I'm gonna intersect, uh, interject myself and say, remember this is Bearden talking to a nine-year-old student. "Remember always this talent you have that has been given to you, entrusted to you. To have people see and [00:51:00] feel and understand that world as you do. You have the insight which others of us are not blessed with your talent, do not have. However, when you share your talent with others, they too have the benefit of your blessing. As you continue, and I trust yours will be a long and fruitful life, that you will only be as good an artist as you are a human being."

CH: That's lovely.

JM: Camara, I think that that tells you right there who that man was.

CH: Yes, definitely.

JM: And then, this is the last couple sentences of my lecture. [00:52:00] "The world is poorer for the loss of this noble, generous, greatly gifted human being. But what Romie said to those children that morning in Charlotte and to Clarence in his letter is equally true of Romie. The continuation of life

through a contribution in art. Romie's contribution is solid. He will continue to teach artists for a long time. His work will inform the totality of art for a long, long time. In this sense, Romare Bearden continues to live."

CH: Yes. Definitely.

JM: And here's -- I have this terrible [00:53:00] xerox in Romie's hand of the letter from Clarence.

CH: Oh, wonderful.

JM: You should probably have a copy of that too.

CH: Yeah, that needs to go to the archive. Definitely.

JM: I don't have any idea where the original letter is, but having -- so, I think your question was, is there one particular thing -- and I would -- there are so many. But when I found that letter, I was -- it was actually given to me by another grade school teacher in Charlotte who said, "Jerald, you should have a copy of this." For her, it didn't have the same meaning that it did for me, but I was so thrilled [00:54:00] to receive it. So, um --

CH: So, maybe we can talk a little bit about your gallery.

JM: Well, that will lead us back to Romie, too, at the same time.

CH: Okay, yes. What made you decide to open the gallery?

JM: I was happily working at the Mint Museum. Romie's show was over, and the Mint on Randolph Road was closing for almost a year because of renovations to the existing building and

expansion. And that's -- that was the [00:55:00] first expansion on Randolph Road. And so, all the staff -- a board member had a large office building that was vacant, and he just gave the museum the building to use so that all the staff had a place to go and be.

But at that time, I had an amazing woman who came to me and said, "Jerald." And again, you have to remember this is -- wow, 19 -- well, I founded the gallery, '84, '84,. And she came to me and she said, "I think Charlotte's ready for a good gallery. I think you should do it. The opportunity is there because you're, you know, the museum's [00:56:00] gonna close for a year and it's a great time for you to transition."

So, I thought about it. I talked to two or three close friends. One, of course, being Milton Bloch, the director of the museum. And he said, "Jerald, I understand completely. I think you're crazy. But at the same time, I wish you well. Just do not bring it inside the walls of the museum." Which is a very fair statement.

So, I did a lot of research. I went to the chamber of commerce and got every book and every pamphlet on how to start a small business and how to raise [00:57:00] money. And I didn't have any money. I mean, at that time, working for a small museum was, you know, making sure you pay your rent, kind of. And so, this lady said, "Well, I can help us out some, but probably not enough to get you going."

So, I contacted a good friend. You may have heard his name. His name is Zach Smith. If you haven't heard it, you may eventually.

CH: He's a collector.

JM: He's a big-time collector. He's -- was president of the board more than once. He was the chairman of the building committee for the Uptown building. Well, at the time, [00:58:00] I was 32. Zach was 38, 39. And he incorporated me, helped me get going. And so, I came up with this idea that I was trying to raise \$100,000. And I had -- I would make appointments with people that I knew in the community and I'd go sit on their sofa in their living room at 7:30 on a Tuesday night and say, Here's what I want to do. Here's how I want to do it. At that point, I'd put together the business plan. I still have it. I put together a list of prospective artists. And I said, "I'd like you to see your way clear to [00:59:00] invest \$20,000 with me."

And some people said, Jerald, well, I can -- I can put in -- and remember, early '80s, that's still a lot of money. And they said, I think I can -- I can help you with 10. And somebody else would say, "Well, it's not for me," and tell me later. They thought I was crazy. But the way we structured it was that we sold stock and people put in -- they put in half of their declared investment at the beginning. 25% six months [01:00:00] later, 25% six months later. So the gallery would have two booster shots. Well, that, and I had raised \$87,000, so it was fish or cut bait. So, we went fishing. And we put it together, and we had our opening, and it was huge.

I'm very proud to tell you that I never took a second or third payment. And within a year, I paid everybody off at 40% above their investment. That's how I did it. I was an entrepreneur. I have often said my entire life, I've lived on the edge. That's what an entrepreneur does, I think.

CH: Yes, [01:01:00] yes.

JM: And there are times that -- times that it -- I've felt a little flush, and there are times [phone rings] that I had to borrow against my house mortgage to keep going. It's what it takes.

CH: Yeah, but you've kept going for a long period of time.

JM: It'll be 40 years next year. We're gonna do a big celebration.

CH: Okay. And what artists do you --

JM: Well, when I started -- that leads me back around to Romie. I may have told you this story. But I was -- we'd gotten all this put together and I was, again, having lunch with Bearden in the same Chinese restaurant that [01:02:00] we'd love to go to. And again, buying. Never one time did he allow me to buy.

So, we're sitting there having lunch and I said, "Well, Romie, I need to tell you that I'm going to be leaving the museum." And he looked at me and said, "Well, I've already heard." I said, "Well, then you've probably heard that I'm going to open a gallery in Charlotte." And he nodded. And I said, "Romie, it would be such a privilege and honor for me to represent you in your hometown." And he looked at me and said, "I would be -- I was going to be very disappointed if you did not ask."

[01:03:00]

CH: So, that's -- he supported the venture. Yeah. That's wonderful.

JM: So since then, I've done seven or eight solo Bearden shows. Some of them I think actually quite important. I did one called *Romare Bearden, The Mother and Child*, and it was

obviously all different mother and child images. Spectacular. I did one called *Romare Bearden, The Print, The Source*. And I was able to gather 17 collages and the associated prints and hang them side by side.

CH: Impressive, yeah.

JM: Yeah, that was a big deal. And that took a lot of work, a lot of work to get those together. But it was pretty wonderful. [01:04:00] Romie -- he came to, I think until he died, almost -- he came to every opening that I had. He'd come back to Charlotte. And there was one, and I need to find a photo of this for you, too. But one of Bearden's best friends -- maybe his best friend -- was Al Murray.

CH: Yes.

JM: Are you familiar with Murray?

CH: Yes.

JM: Novelist, essayist. Well, we had hired Al to write this major essay for this 1980 retrospective. And Al was a serious character. And he submitted the essay to me [01:05:00] handwritten in pencil on legal pads. But Al helped Bearden a lot with his titles. And often, in some groups of works, there would be a title, and then there would be a short little statement that went with it. Like, *Maudell Sleet's Magic Garden* would be the title, and then it would say Maudell Sleet -- I'm paraphrasing, but Maudell Sleet would be the famous gardener in the neighborhood, something like, you know. In other words, there'd be the title, and this little didactic that went with it.

CH: Right.

JM: And [01:06:00] Al and Murray -- Al Murray and Bearden would work on those together.

CH: Okay.

JM: And so, we were doing a show at my gallery and we were starting, we were two or three days before it was to open and before Romie was coming to town. We were doing the labels and I had the labels and then I had the little sayings, and I got this idea. I asked for a -- I gave him a magic marker. And you know, he had a very distinctive handwriting.

CH: Yes.

JM: I said, "Romie, I want you to write those little sayings on the wall next to the collage." He said, "You want me to write on your walls?" I said, "Yes, Romie." You know, to this day, I wish I would have just cut the sheetrock off the wall, [laughter] but I ended up having to paint over it. [01:07:00] But it was really wonderful to see. And I have photos of those too.

CH: Okay.

JM: I have a photo of Romie actually writing on the wall.

CH: So, you have a great archive. Do you have plans for it?

JM: Well, you know, that gets it kind of -- gets us back to this little sticky wicket we have. My 16 years of research, which sits on the other side of this wall. I mean, what am I going to do with it? [sighs] Do I give it to the Archives of American Art, who has already said they'd like to have it? Or do I give it to the Mint Museum? Do I give it to [01:08:00] WPI? [sighs] I don't know. One was -- I don't know. Something

needs to happen with it. It's -- maybe I'm the only person in the world who thinks it's important, but I think there's a lot of enormous information there.

CH: Yeah, you want to help keep the legacy -- help keep the legacy alive.

JM: Yes, yes. So, I'm really thinking a lot about what I'm going to do with it.

CH: Okay. Fair enough. Yeah.

JM: Yeah. I'll tell you this little tidbit. Did you know that, uh, [01:09:00] did you see -- I can't remember, was our Bearden show on view when you were here?

CH: Yes, we saw it briefly.

JM: Yes. In the back room there was one of those wonderful collagraphs. It was in -- actually, he did it with shoe polish. That brown one that's of the baptism.

CH: Yes.

JM: It's on loan approval right now to the Museum of Modern Art. It looks like they may be buying it.

CH: Oh, wonderful.

JM: Which would be a great thing.

CH: Yes.

JM: I'd love for it to go to the Mint, but I'm also -- I'm also a businessman. I've got to keep myself and my business afloat.

CH: Right.

JM: And, you know, I've been encouraging Jonathan Stuhlman that, you know, [01:10:00] he changes out that Bearden gallery about every four or five months. And I've been encouraging him to do a change out on the *Baptism*, because there's several permutations of it. The Hirshhorn owns one. Well, the Mint has *Carolina Shout*. The [Met?] has a couple others. I'd love to see this one go to the Mint, but I, frankly, I can't afford to give it to them.

CH: Right.

JM: And they can't afford to buy it.

CH: Right.

JM: But along comes MoMA. Which is --

CH: Yeah. Well, it's good to see a wide audience [for its allure?].

JM: But it's also, you know, what a great place for it to go.

CH: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. So, have you seen a change [01:11:00] in the market for Bearden over time?

JM: Yes. No. Um, I used to sell a lot of Beardens. When I started representing him in, like, the show I was just telling you about when he wrote on the wall.

CH: Yeah.

JM: You know, there were collages that were maybe 9 by 12 inches, 10 by 14 inches. And at the time, they were \$6,200. And today, you'd put a one in front of that 62, you know? So what's happened is as there are fewer and fewer of them and they have become more and more expensive, [01:12:00] the market has shrunk. Not that people don't love the work. It's just that they have -- by the nature of their very being, become more expensive. And fewer and fewer people can step to the plate. You know? And that's -- that's sad for me, but, what are you going to do? Again, it's my being an entrepreneur.

It's, uh -- at this point, too, with the Foundation having very few works, three or four of the pieces that are in my show are Foundation pieces on consignment to me. Everything else in there, I own. Because [01:13:00] these days, it's the only way I can get them all by -- a typical situation for me is a dealer will call me and say, "Jerald, I have a line on a collection of 16 works of art. And one's a Bearden and it's not an artist that I deal with, but I know you do. Would you be interested?" That's how I sometimes find them. Of course, prints, I'll sometimes buy at auction.

And I have been off and on, been a -- I don't want to use the term expert, but I have been consulted by Swann and a couple of the other auction houses about the authenticity of things. And I've seen a couple that are -- that really -- I wouldn't [01:14:00] touch. You know?

CH: Okay.

JM: It's tough. I think -- I think you all have an enormous, enormous job in front of you to find everything.

CH: Yeah, it's gonna be a big, long project.

JM: How are you finding them mostly now?

CH: Um, we're still sorting through the information that we're getting, to process all of the information so that we know exactly where we're at and what we need to keep looking for.

JM: Yes. And you'll never find them all.

CH: No, no.

JM: Because of the fact that a lot of things are unrecorded and [01:15:00] you should be thanking me for this. [points to catalogue]

CH: [laughter] Yes, I do thank you for that. I do use it to find the things, yes.

JM: This was a lot of work, and my colleague Jane that helped me put this together is -- it's pretty amazing.

CH: Yeah. Yeah.

JM: Uh, it's where we were able to -- we, of course -- now it's a lot of years ago. But I'm sure you'll go through every one of these names and see if you can find --

CH: Yes.

JM: -- the person, where they are now. And if it's their daughter that has the work or --

CH: Yeah, that's the plan. That's the plan. Yeah. So, is there anything that you think we [01:16:00] should know about Bearden that I haven't asked you?

JM: [pauses] Well, in a sense, I think Bearden said it for us with his letter to Clarence. To me, that is one of the most poignant and important contributions. Uh, he -- [pauses] [01:17:00] he was an amazing human being who, you know, I think even today, if you look at a lot of contemporary artists, you can see Bearden's influence in their work.

And, you know, of course, in some cases, too much so, but that's the -- that's what makes the world go round, you know? So, I don't -- I don't know if this has been [01:18:00] helpful to you. I don't know if this is at all what you would have wanted.

CH: No, it's been -- it's been wonderful. Yeah. No, I mean, we are hoping to capture everybody's perspective on Bearden and you've told us an immense story. So, thank you so much.

JM: I may well think of some other things. And if I do, I'll send you an email and let you know. Um, so -- he, I think I told you. Without knowing so at all, he would intimidate me. And it was -- he would [01:19:00] intimidate me because of how bright he was. He would intimidate me because of who he was. He would intimidate me by what he made, these things. I -- you know, sometimes --

CH: Well, it seems like he was remarkable.

JM: -- it's the remembering of things that's almost more so than the actuality. And that reminds me of a little something Romie said to me, and then I'll end. I said, "Well, Romie, where did -- where would you get these thoughts that would

make you compose a particular picture?" [01:20:00] And he said, "Well, some of them were my memory." But he said, also, he said, "Jerald, remember back on your 10th birthday. I mean, you may -- you don't specifically remember your 10th birthday, but what if at some point someone said to you, 'Jerald, you did the silliest thing on your 10th birthday,' and then they repeated it to you. Well, all of a sudden, that repeating becomes part of your collective memory."

And that's what Romie said would happen to him. People would give him anecdotes. About the South and these -- and then they would become his collective memory and he said it doesn't [01:21:00] matter if it's specific to the moment. What matters is if it tells what I'm trying to say, you know? And one time I remember him saying, "Perfection ain't interesting." [laughs] And, you know, that's -- that's how it was.

CH: Yeah.

JM: I have very, very fond memories of the man.

CH: Yeah. Your admiration is very strong.

JM: And I am -- I will forever be grateful to have had him in my life. And, you know, as I said in my [01:22:00] lecture, he's still there. Still there.

CH: Well, this has been wonderful. Thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your memories.

JM: You are -- you are more than welcome. If there's something else I think about, I'll let you know if you have any other questions or if I don't know who else will look at this.

CH: Yeah, I'm going to stop the recording and then I'll answer you.

JM: Okay.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]