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Romare Bearden, *Mecklenburg County: Round About Sunset*, 1977, paper collage with watercolor and acrylic on Masonite. Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P.986.77.3, © Romare Bearden / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

CHECKLIST

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988  
*Mecklenburg County: High Cotton Mother and Child*, 1978  
Paper collage and acrylic on Masonite  
Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P.986.77.2

*Mecklenburg County: Round About Sunset*, 1977  
Paper collage with watercolor and acrylic on Masonite  
Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P.986.77.3

Frank C. Churchill, American, 1859–1912, and Clara F. Churchill,  
American, 1851–1945  
Photo album, about 1899–1902  
Photographs on paper  
Gift of Frank C. and Clara F. Churchill; 46.17 Photo Album #1

Mike Disfarmer, American, 1884–1959  
Homer, Laura, and Alton Jackson, 1940  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Harley and Stephen C. Osman, Class of 1956, Tuck 1957;  
2005.83.17

Walker Evans, American, 1903–1975  
*Bed, Tenant Farmer's House, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of the Class of 1935; PH.973.6

*Sharecropper's Wife, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of the Class of 1935; PH.973.8

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Romare Bearden, *Mecklenburg County: Round About Sunset*, 1977, paper collage with watercolor and acrylic on Masonite. Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P.986.77.3 (detail)  
© Romare Bearden / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



## PICTURING FAMILY IN “THE SOUTH” *Legacies of the American Civil War*

For all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance . . . in the hope that [they] will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South.

—James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*



Frank C. Churchill and Clara F. Churchill, photo album, about 1899–1902, photographs on paper. Gift of Frank C. and Clara F. Churchill; 46.17 Photo Album #1

One legacy of the American Civil War (1861–65) is the cultural divide between “the North” and “the South” professed by inhabitants to either side of the Mason-Dixon line. Many who live in areas of the United States that sided with the Union in the Civil War believe that the South—defined here as the Confederate States of America and their wartime sympathizers—“lost” the war, and that the region’s once-prosperous agricultural businesses, infrastructure, and economy were irrevocably damaged. Despite coexistent and contradictory realities, such Northern perceptions of the unchanging poverty, rural lifestyle, and racial segregation of the South persist and have been reinforced since the Civil War by later political and social events, including government settlement of the southern “Indian Territory,” the regional impact of the Great Depression, the migration of freed slaves out of the South, and the civil rights movement. This *Space for Dialogue* installation presents portraits of southern families who experienced these events and examines how the images participate, deliberately or not, in

a shared characterization of the southern United States as impoverished and hopelessly rural.

After the American Civil War ended, a renewed American interest in westward expansion emerged, along with the seizure and settlement of the Indian Territory, an area of present-day Oklahoma where many Native Americans were forced onto reservations. This Indian Territory had supported the Confederacy in the Civil War and the ownership of black slaves by some Native Americans. As part of the postwar efforts to politically dominate and then incorporate these lands and peoples into the Union, the U.S. government sent officials such as Frank C. Churchill to the newly settled Indian Territory to administer it. From 1899 to 1909 Churchill photographed his travels for his personal records, offering candid views of a territorial culture in transition, including especially families of mixed Native American and African American ancestry in American-style clothing, posed outdoors or in front of Anglicized architecture. The forced arrangements of the portraits and the interest in presenting new homes, schools, and farms echo the government’s view that these people, like the land, benefited from Union “cultivation.”

In 1936, Walker Evans, a staff photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), worked in conjunction with writer James Agee on a piece for *Fortune* magazine concerning the plight of Alabama tenant farmers who had been hard hit by the Great Depression (1929–39). Though *Fortune* never published the article, the work developed into the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and Evans’s photographs became government property. For the project Evans took a series of photographs of Allie Mae Burroughs, a tenant farmer’s wife, that exploited the harsh reality of her weathered features and evocative expressions. The image with her furrowed brow and clenched lips became particularly iconic of the era through its inclusion in *Let Us Now* and its further government use. Although the FSA photography program had the arguably good intention of drumming up support for southern farmers, the wide dissemination, proliferation, and promotion of such images also acted to reinforce a largely Northern notion of southern primitivism. Agee claimed that Evans had tried to avoid these readings of his work by allowing his subjects to indicate how they should be photographed, whereas other FSA photographers were known to have posed their subjects or taken candid shots that show their subjects in a degrading light.

During the Civil Rights movement, Romare Bearden mobilized black artists to address the experience of African Americans in the United States. Bearden recognized that his recollections of the South reflected the common experience of African Americans whose families separated after the abolition of slavery, with some members moving north in search of employment and equality. In his *Mecklenburg County* series of collages, Bearden documents his personal memories of

family, and especially of summers in North Carolina with his great-grandparents. He represented his memories through a combination of everyday media, including photographs and magazine cutouts, with acrylic paint, while alluding as well to European art. His collages elevated the artistic vision of the African American experience to new heights in their colorful reinterpretations of this painful history.

Throughout periods of great political change, the subject of the poor southern farming family has remained ingrained in the popular conception of American history and identity, especially in the North. Images of this subject, whether made for political purposes, historical documentation, or personal record, offer insight into how notions of the South have developed over time. The creators of the images in this *Space for Dialogue* use the theme of the Southern family to represent the region and its cultural values. Yet by exploiting this theme, the images also evoke a broader human experience that transcends notions of place, class, or race. The images challenge the immediacy of the subjective perceptions that viewers, regardless of their backgrounds, might bring to the works, and they beg the question about how these contemporary associations about the South have changed since the Civil War.

Sophia Hutson '06  
Kathryn and Caroline Conroy Curatorial Intern

Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's Wife, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, gelatin silver print. Gift of the Class of 1935; PH.973.8

