Abstract:

In the mid 1960s, the artist Romare Bearden curated two exhibitions of African American art in Harlem: “Art of the American Negro” (1966) and “The Evolution of Afro-American Artists: 1800-1950” (1967). The former was an exhibition of contemporary art held in the basement of a furniture store on 125th Street, while the latter, a historical exhibition, took place at the City College of New York at 138th Street and Convent Avenue. Although virtually unacknowledged in the vast literature on Bearden, these two exhibitions are critical both for understanding his unfolding ideas about the function of African American artists in light of the civil rights and black power movements and for assessing the place of Harlem in the 1960s New York art world. While discussions of Bearden, exhibitions, and 1960s racial politics often privilege his work with Spiral, art historical scholarship on New York City in this decade focuses almost exclusively on the downtown scene of Soho. This paper counters these two tendencies by arguing for the centrality of Harlem—a place whose international reputation was predicated on a history of racial and artistic excellence—within Bearden’s development in this decade. The paper analyzes the curatorial strategies of the two exhibitions, how they attempted to engage the Harlem community, and their place within the heretofore under-historicized Harlem art scene of the 1960s. Taken together, they offer a distinct model for “alternative” exhibitionary practice in American art of the 1960s, one that attends to the relationship between race, place, and history.