

UNIT IV

African American Continuity Through Art

Suggested Grade Level: 5th – 6th

Unit Overview

This unit consists of three lesson plans that explore African American artists and how they have reinterpreted African aesthetics to comment about Black experience, history, and racism in the United States. It explores narrative quilts, story painting, and art reflecting cultural experiences. Students will learn about narrative art, story telling, and recording events through art. They will investigate African American artists and how they maintained cultural continuity as well as using art to speak about racism and Black experience in the U.S.

Lesson 1 looks at the art of narrative quilting in the African American community of the eighteenth century. Connections will be made to African appliqué style and technique. Students will learn the historical context of the narrative quilts, their purpose, function, and aesthetic qualities. Finally, students will embark upon creating their own narrative painting on fabric.

Lesson 2 delves into how artists have recorded events and commented on racial issues and the Black experience in their art through painting. Connections will be made to the historical context of these paintings, their purpose, and aesthetic qualities. Students will then be asked to reflect on a social experience where they felt wronged or discriminated against and create a drawing that reflects that experience.

Lesson 3 continues looking at how different African American artists have explored issues of identity, racism, and the recording of experience in the US through their art. In this lesson students will be making a collage.

UNIT IV - AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTINUITY THROUGH ART

Lesson One

Narrative Quilts

LESSON PLAN

How have African American artists reinterpreted African aesthetics through their art, and more specifically, through the art of quilting? How have Faith Ringgold and Harriet Powers used the art of quilting to communicate a story?

Background Information

Refer to **Study Guide** section of this lesson.

Objectives

The students will:

- Understand history of quilt techniques in Africa.
- Understand history of African American quilting in the U.S.
- Look at artists' styles, techniques, and purposes.
- Create a narrative painting of a memory on fabric.

Elements and Principles

composition, balance, line, color, shape

Materials

8 x 10 inch fabric squares, fabric or acrylic paints, water bowls, brushes, newspapers

Vocabulary (see glossary)

quilts, quilting, appliqué, narrative, autobiographical, africanism, acculturation, abstract, syncretism

Engaging Students

Can any of you think of a time or a memory when you learned a valuable lesson? A memory or experience with others that was so strong that you hope to never forget it? Sometimes artists use these experiences and memories in their art to communicate a value or just to record the event for memory.

Today we are going to look at how African American artists have recorded events and narrative stories through the art of quilts. Then you will make your own narrative painting on fabric. This painting will be about a memory or experience involving a group, in other words, involving more people than just yourself.

Essential Questions

Looking at your own life, can you think of a very important experience you've had with your family or friends, or maybe even with a group of people you didn't know well at a social function (school, games, church, for example)?

Do you have a memory involving you and other people that had a powerful impact on you? Let's make a memory quilt that tells that story similar to the ways Harriet Powers or Faith Ringgold used in their narrative quilts?

Activity

1. You have the choice of using the style of Harriet Powers or Faith Ringgold.
2. On your narrative fabric painting you must include at least one abstract form that represents an object, person, or living creature in the style of the Asante people of Ghana, Africa, and Harriet Powers.
3. Include some patterns and designs influenced by the artworks you've seen. You may also adopt pattern ideas from the African appliqué styles.
4. Your narrative fabric painting must be a composition consisting of a group of at least three figures. Think of how to arrange the figures in your composition in an interesting way. What colors and patterns are you going to include?
5. First paint the background before putting the figures in the image. When setting the scene decide if you will depict daytime or night?

Rain? Snow? Sunshine? Try to remember every detail in your memory that you can use in your painting to add visual interest.

6. The teacher may want to demonstrate handling fabric and painting on fabric, how to use paint and paint brushes. Demonstrate for the students how to put background information down first and then add the detail later. Also discuss safety and respect of materials, tools, and each other.
7. Encourage the students to try balancing out their composition by thoughtful placement of color, pattern, and weighted forms.

Reflection

During Process: The students make entries both through writing and sketching in their sketchbooks of their ideas, process, and experiences with this project. Work can be done in class or at home.

After Completion: The students will constructively critique each other's work, share intent and experiences

Curriculum Standards/Benchmarks

- 1B1) Research and discuss the relationship between art and artifact and their historical, geographical, cultural and political contexts.
- 2) Use visual arts to express ideas.
- 4) Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of the creative process.
- 4A1) Create art in which design elements and principles in conjunction with subject, themes and content are based on personal experiences to create meanings.
- 5A) Understand and distinguish multiple purposes and motivations for creating works of art.
- 5A1) Demonstrate the use of the elements of art to express moods and feelings in one's own art and the art of others.
- 6) Show increased awareness of diverse peoples and cultures through visual art.

UNIT IV - AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTINUITY THROUGH ART

Lesson One Narrative Quilts

STUDY GUIDE

Harriet Powers

Harriet Powers (1837-1911) was born a slave in Georgia in 1837. She created powerful narrative quilts that communicated stories about Christian faith, oral traditions in the African-American community and personal accounts.

Using the traditional African appliqué technique along with European record keeping and biblical reference traditions, Harriet records on her quilts local historical legend, Bible stories, and astronomical phenomena.

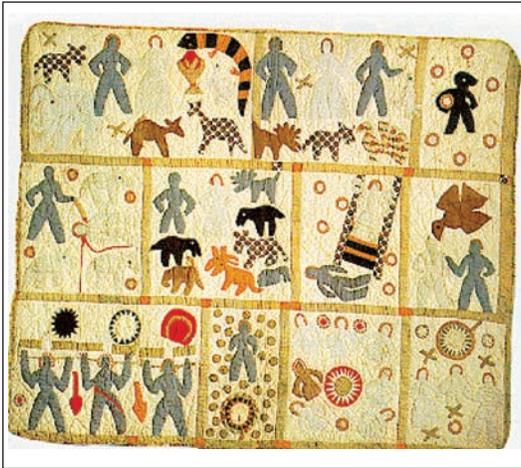
The cotton quilts consist of numerous pictorial squares depicting biblical scenes and celestial

phenomena. They were constructed through appliqué and piecework and were hand and machine stitched.

Narrative quilts are a distinctly American and particularly African-American art form. This quilt shares biblical stories of the fall and redemption. Visual records provided educational and memorial means for the illiterate Powers and many others.

During the antebellum period quilts were hung outside as signs—those with the color black in them indicated a place of refuge (a safe house) on the path of the Underground Railroad. *Jacob's Ladder* and *North Star* patterns were symbols for the Underground Railroad.

Harriet Powers Bible Quilt 1886



Looking Carefully:

- What do you see in this quilt? (shapes: figures, animals, stars, etc.)
- What story would you say Harriet Powers is sharing with us? (biblical stories, morals, community experiences)
- Why do you think she made these narrative quilts? (illiteracy, continuity of culture, recording of events)
- What aesthetic qualities can you see? (pattern, color, composition, etc.)

The third panel in the second row depicts the story of Jacob's dream when "he lay on the ground." Enslaved blacks identified with Jacob, for he was homeless, hunted, and weary of his journey. Her quilts interpret events and parables culled from the oral traditions of the community between the religious scenes. These quilts represented black southern culture and genealogy in the folktales, biblical stories and oral histories. Harriet Powers quilts are considered examples of folk art from the late eighteenth century which show African forms and/or African-derived content. Scholars claim evidence of Africanisms because the simple flat shapes are like those found on Fon (West Africa) commemorative appliqué cloths.

References

Patton, S.F. (1998). *African-American art*. Oxford University Press, NY.

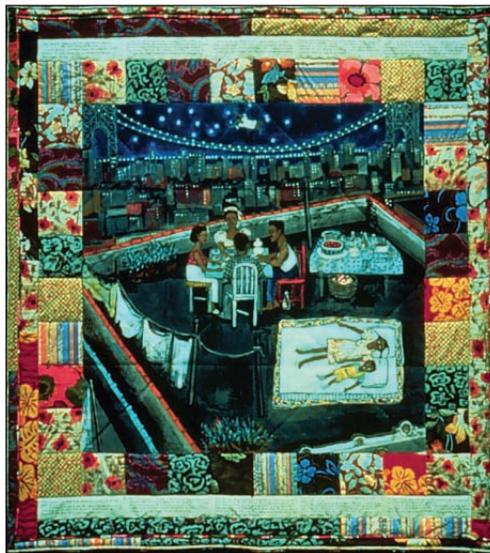
<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2577>

Faith Ringgold

Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) is most famously known for her story-quilts. She describes them as feminist art because they "came out of being a woman, and the use of craft." Her choice of media is influenced by cost considerations (quilts are less expensive to ship for exhibitions) and by her acquaintance with Tibetan *tankas* (sacred paintings on unframed fabric).

Ringgold started making quilts featuring representational images, as in a canvas painting, framed by colorful decorative quilt borders. The borders were made by her mother, Wili Posey, from 1971 until her death in 1981. In 1977 Ringgold began her autobiography (*We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, 1995). She did not immediately find a publisher, so decided to write her stories on her quilts.

For her the quilt, so intimately connected with women's lives, seemed the most effective vehicle for telling a women's life story. The narrators in all her quilts are women and consequently the merging of the heroine/narrator is a significant shift, some are fictional others are biographical. By combining this format with written narrative and images of women, Ringgold expands upon what it means to be a woman, and particularly an African American woman.

Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach*, 1988

Acrylic on canvas, tie-dyed, pieced fabric border
74 x 69 inches

From the Series: *The Woman on a Bridge*

Looking Carefully:

1. How is the style of Faith Ringgold's quilt different from Harriet Powers's? (painting on fabric vs. appliqué, flat abstracted shapes vs. more representational, etc.)
2. How are they similar? (narrative, both involve quilting and fabric)
3. Do you see more than one figure in her work? How about in Harriet Power's quilts, was there just a single figure or more?

References

Patton, S.F. (1998). *African-American art*. Oxford University Press, NY. www.faihringgold.com



African Fabric Appliqué

Fabric appliqué. Fon People, Benin.
no specific information provided
http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/news/voudon_exhibit.html

What are some things that you notice in these works of art? Is there a story? What is going on?

Looking Carefully:

1. Look at the examples of appliqué from the Fon peoples of Benin. Compare the styles with Harriet Powers and Faith Ringgold.
2. What are the similarities? (story format, abstract forms, color, style)
3. What are the differences? (representational vs. abstract, bold color vs. saturated patterns)
4. Can you see influences of American aesthetic in Faith Ringgold and Harriet Powers art?
5. Similarly can you see a reinterpretation of African aesthetics in their quilts?

References

Wilson, N. (2003). *Heart of West Africa: Textiles and global issues*.

Resources

Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) *Tar Beach* 1988; *Church Picnic* 1988; *Dancing on the George Washington Bridge* 1988; *Crown Heights Children's Story Quilt* 1994

African appliqué: Fon of Benin; Kuba of Democratic Republic of Congo

Harriet Powers (1837-1911) *Bible Quilt* 1886; *Bible Quilt* 1898

Classroom References

Lyons, M.E. (1993). *Stitching stars: The story quilts of Harriet Powers*. C. Scribners Sons, NY.

Ringgold, F. (1995). *We flew over the bridge: The memoirs of Faith Ringgold*. Little, Brown, Boston.

Ringgold, F. (1991). *Tar Beach*. Crown Publishers, Inc., New York.

Ringgold, F. (1992). *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. Crown Publishers, Inc., New York.

UNIT IV - AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTINUITY THROUGH ART

Lesson Two

Social Commentary and Response

LESSON PLAN

In this lesson students will become familiar with the struggles and experiences of African Americans in the United States in the 19th to the 21st century and how some African American artists felt compelled to respond to historical events and social injustices through their art. What are different ways in which African American artists have responded to social injustices in their art?

Background Information

Please refer to the **Study Guide** section of this lesson.

Objectives

The students will:

- Become familiar with major events in U.S. history pertaining to the rights and struggle of African Americans as well as relating to current social injustices of today.
- Look at African American artists and how they responded to social injustices. Examine their style, technique, and content.
- Create a drawing that responds to a social injustice.

Elements and Principles

line, shape, form, complimentary color

Technique

Drawing a group experience as record of personal history.

Art Materials

Images and artists information sheets, paper, erasures, pencils, rulers

Vocabulary (see glossary)

The Great Migration, racism, segregation, racial segregation

Engaging Students

Today we are going to be looking at African American artists who have been inspired to make commentary on social injustices and struggles. We will look at how different artists have responded to struggle and inequities through their art. In response, you will create a drawing that reflects a social injustice that either you have personally experienced or that you have studied as experienced by someone else.

Essential Questions

- Can you think of a social injustice in history? Or perhaps you've experienced a difficult struggle?
- How can an artist through her or his art respond to a social experience that was not fair or just? Do you think that artists have a social responsibility to comment on social inequities for the purposes of promoting a positive change?
- Have you experienced injustice or do you know someone who has? What are ways that people overcome difficulties (working for positive change, education, dialogue, protest, etc.)? Can you think of an example today where people have tried to change a social injustice (protests against war or social injustice)?
- Some of the social injustices that these artists are responding to aren't necessarily moments that they have personally or directly experienced. Is it possible for an artist, or anyone, to be so moved by an event that they want to respond by making art about it?

Activity

1. Students are to think of an experience where one person or group of people were/are struggling. Express this event and its outcome or your response in a composite drawing.

2. First develop the cause, what is the social injustice that is occurring that you want to talk about in your art? Where is this event or experience taking place? What is the scene? What is happening? What are the feelings and how would you express them?
3. There are many ways in which artists respond to a social injustice. You can choose your own response: You can turn a negative situation into a positive one; you can record the moment with its intensity and emotion. As the artist, you can decide what you want to communicate to your audience. Several views, ideas, or time frames may be combined into one drawing.
4. The teacher should demonstrate drawing techniques such as shading, use of varied line, and cross-hatching. Show the development of an idea (content or cause) and how it translates to the drawing including how to depict the scene to engage the viewer and provoke emotions. Teacher should discuss how students must respect the concepts and artwork of others.

Reflection

During Process: Students will make an entry in their sketchbooks through writing and drawing their ideas, process, and experiences with this project. Sketchbook entries can be made during class and at home.

After Completion: Students will constructively critique each other's work, share intent and experiences.

Curriculum Standards/Benchmarks

- 1B1) Research and discuss the relationship between art and artifact and their historical, geographical, cultural and political contexts.
- 5) Observe, discuss, analyze, and make critical judgments about artistic works.
- 5A1) Demonstrate the use of the elements of art to express moods and feelings in one's own art and the art of others.
- 5B) Understand contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry.
- 5B1) Demonstrate how history, art and culture can influence each other in making and studying works of art.

UNIT IV - AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTINUITY THROUGH ART

Lesson Two Social Commentary and Response

STUDY GUIDE

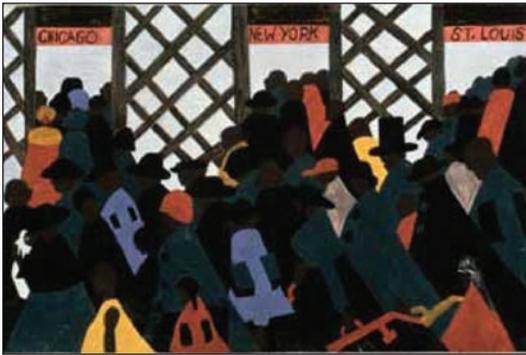
Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)

Jacob Lawrence is a story-painter and is sometimes referred to as a visual griot (West African poet, praise singer, or wandering musician considered a repository of oral tradition) who focused on the struggle for freedom and justice in America from the Civil War period of the 1860s through the civil rights movement of the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century. He demonstrated a deep concern in African American history and in Black people's collective struggle to attain racial equality.

In 1940-41 he created a sixty-panel narrative, *The Migration of the Negro*, based on the experience of his family, the recollections of people in his community, and research that he conducted in the Schomburg Collection (Museum of the City of NY). This powerful portrayal of migration communicates the struggle, strength, and perseverance of African Americans who, between 1900 and 1940, moved from the agricultural communities of the South to the industrial cities of the North and Midwest in search of a better life.



The Migration of the Negro • Panel 3
1940-41, Casein tempera on hardboard
12 x 18 inches



The Migration of the Negro • Panel 1
1940-41, Casein tempera on hardboard
12 x 18 inches

© 2006 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation,
Seattle/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Looking Carefully:

- What is happening in these paintings? Where do you think these people are?
- Who are these people? Where do you think these people are going? Why? (The Great Migration)
- What colors does Lawrence use? (bold, saturated, few colors)
- Are his figures representational or abstract?
- What kinds of events or conditions make people decide to migrate or immigrate?
- How has Lawrence addressed concerns for education?

Lawrence liked to refer to his stylistic approach to painting as “dynamic cubism,” which involves a pictorial narrative that flows from left to right, like a written text.

“My pictures express my life and experiences. I paint the things I know about and the things I have experienced. The things I have experienced extend into my national racial and class group. So I paint the American Negro working class.”

References

Patton, S.F. (1998). *African-American art*. Oxford University Press, NY.

The Art Institute of Chicago. (1999). *African Americans in Art*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.

<http://www.whitney.org/jacoblawrence/index.html>

Kerry James Marshall

(b. 1955)

“I don’t want to keep making paintings just because I can. I want to make them when it matters that they are paintings. The medium is an important component of the message. The form, the style, all have an essential relationship to what I think is the message. It has to reinforce the content.”

Marshall’s images are rich compilations of layered paint, collage, pencil, glitter, and ink on canvas or paper. His work portrays a sense of humor while at the same time being politically confrontational. His scenes portray moments in African American urban life and experience during the turn of the millennium. Referencing visual culture (films,

pulp novels, fairy tales, newspaper photographs, and art history) his scenes are dreamlike narratives of social relationships and the imagination.

Many Mansions is the first in Kerry James Marshall’s series of five large-scale paintings depicting public housing projects in Chicago and Los Angeles that employ the word “garden” in their titles, such as *Rockwell Gardens*, *Wentworth Gardens*, or, as in *Many Mansions*, *Stateway Gardens*. Struck by the absurdity of associating the term with these failed solutions to low-income housing, Marshall was inspired to represent on canvas the profound contradictions of living in such an environment.

Looking Carefully:

- Both Marshall and Lawrence are responding to an experience by a group of people that involved struggle and a situation of social injustice. How do the artists portray overcoming the obstacles? (Lawrence- records the Migration, Marshall-positive portrayal in his paintings) Do they portray overcoming a struggle? (Lawrence-actual, Marshall-perceived)
- How do these artists respond to the social injustice? (recording, transforming, reinterpreting the situation).
- What is going on in Marshall's paintings? What are some things you can see?
- What is different about Marshall's paintings as compared to Lawrence's style?



Kerry James Marshall, American, b.1955, *Many Mansions*, 1994, Acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 289.6 x 342.9 cm, Max V. Kohnstamm Fund, 1995.147 The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

References

http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA_AfAm/pages/AfAm_11.shtml#

Walter Ellison

Like many African Americans, Walter Ellison (1899-1977) migrated from the rural south to the urban North after World War I. Many African Americans have used trains and migration as powerful metaphors. They can symbolize movement, the future, and hope for prosperity and they can also signify displacement, dispossession, and loss. In this train station scene, Ellison records the racial segregation that occurred during those times. His painting reflects social injustices and unequal social conditions.



Walter Ellison, American, 1899-1977, *Train Station*, 1935, Oil on cardboard, 20 x 36 cm, Charles M. Kurtz Charitable Trust and Barbara Neff Smith and Solomon Byron Smith funds; through prior gifts of Florence Jane Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison and estate of Celia Schmidt, 1990.134 The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

Stylistically, Ellison uses a sharp and exaggerated perspective. The space in his painting appears physically inaccessible. By placing his initials on the suitcase of the man in the right foreground, Ellison inscribed his own experiences of racism and economic struggle into the work, adding an autobiographical element.

Looking Closely:

- What is happening in this painting? Where are the people going?

- What indications can you see in this painting of racial segregation? (separated people white vs. black; "colored" sign over doorway, the division of space in the painting)
- What kind of artistic tools (elements and principles) does Ellison use to magnify the scene? (sharp angles and exaggerated perspective)
- How does Ellison tie himself with the events and experiences portrayed in this painting? (initials on suitcase)

References

The Art Institute of Chicago. (1999). *African Americans in Art*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.

Resources

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) *The Migration of the Negro* 1940-41, panels: 1,3, and 58

Kerry James Marshal (b. 1955) *Garden Project Series: Many Mansions* 1994;

Walter Ellison (1899-1977) *Train Station* 1936

Classroom References

Duggleby, J. (1988). *Story painter: The life of Jacob Lawrence*. Chronicle Books, San Francisco.

Lawrence, J. (1993). *The great migration: An American story*. NY Museum of Modern Art, NY.

UNIT IV - AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTINUITY THROUGH ART

Lesson Three

African American Identity

LESSON PLAN

The students will look at different African American artists and their construction of identity through art. What are different ways in which African Americans have discussed issues of their identity through art? In what ways have these artists commented on African American experience, history, and African heritage?

Background Information

Refer to the **Study Guide** section of this lesson.

Objectives

- Study different African American artists and their approach to creating an African American identity in their art.
- Learn how African Americans not only construct identity, but also address experience and heritage in their works.
- Create a work of art that reveals your identity, experiences, and heritage.

Elements and Principles

composition, complimentary color, line, texture, hue, value

Techniques

cutting, gluing, making compositional choices.

Materials

scrap paper, newspapers, glue, scissors

Vocabulary (see glossary)

collage, stereotype, identity

Engaging Students

Today we are going to be looking at the African American artists Howardena Pindell, Romare Bearden, and Kerry James Marshall and how they dealt with issues of racism and Black history and identity in the US. We are going to be thinking about the collage process and these artists' works. Finally, you are to create a collage that speaks about your identity, an experience or your heritage.

Essential Questions

Have any of you thought about your identity or the identity of others? What is identity and how is it shaped? How do personal experiences, heritage, culture, and biology contribute?

When working on your collage art think about *who you are* and what characteristics define you personally. Do groups shape your identity? How is one group different from another group? When thinking about your identity do you relate to your family heritage? Do your experiences help shape your identity?

Activity

1. Think about the artists and issues that we've studied. Consider their artistic approaches and styles. Use their process as inspiration for your collage art.
2. Things to consider include: shapes (of figures, space, and objects); proportion (natural or disproportionate); visual associations or symbols of your identity or experiences; color choice (use at most three different colors but as many variations of that color as you wish).

3. Your collage must speak about your identity and include ideas you have of your heritage, experiences, and yourself. Think of this collage as a personal story about who you are. You are taking someone through a picture book of yourself including snippets of your family background (heritage), major life experiences (winning a game, seeing a play, Christmas, traveling), and ideas of yourself.

Reflection

During Process: Students will make an entry in their sketchbooks through writing and drawing their ideas, process, and experiences with this project. Sketchbook entries can be made during class and at home.

After Completion: Students will constructively critique each other's work, share intent and experiences.

Curriculum Standards/Benchmarks

- 2B2) Identify and describe the emotional connotations of the use and placement of design principles and elements in one's own work and the work of others.
- 4A) Explore the influence of personal experiences, imagination and the dynamics of culture to works of art.
- 4A1) Create art in which design elements and principles in conjunction with subject, themes and content are based on personal experiences to create meanings.

- 5A1) Demonstrate the use of the elements of art to express moods and feelings in one's own art and the art of others.
- 5B) Understand contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry.
- 5B1) Demonstrate how history, art and culture can influence each other in making and studying works of art.

UNIT IV - AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTINUITY THROUGH ART

Lesson Three African American Identity

STUDY GUIDE

Aaron Douglas (1898-1979)

Douglas studied West African sculpture and modernist European paintings. He combined the stylized forms from these two worlds in a series of illustrations and murals. This syncretism of the two distinctive styles spoke to a "new Negro art" that was to be informed by Africa and celebrate the lives and history of African Americans.

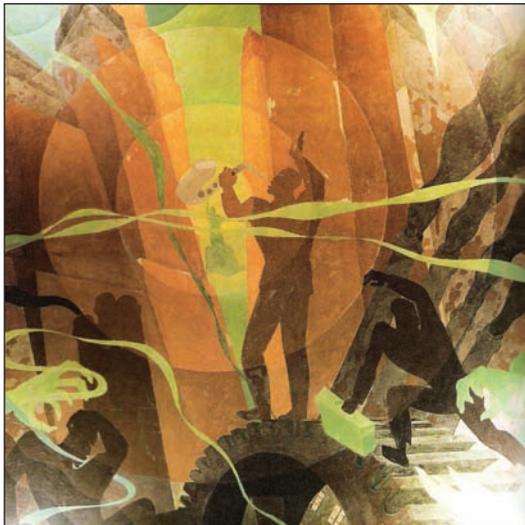
In this painting Douglas includes symbols of African American and modern culture: the saxophone, Statue of Liberty, tractor tire, and briefcase. Through this painting he makes a critical comment on the forward march of science and technology, which has had little effect in improving the economic and social situation of African Americans. Douglas' compositional choices and use of perspective enhance his

sympathies with socialist organizations that were attractive to African Americans during the 1930s and 1940s due to their credo of social and economic equality, and anti-racism. The artist conveys a spirit of hope and determination in his paintings.

His figures are flat, sharply outlined silhouettes, using geometric forms, and contrast between light and dark. The power of his outline figures is familiar to the style seen with Egyptian wall-paintings.

"Our chief concern has been to establish and maintain recognition of our essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality. This has been a difficult fight as we have been the constant object of attack by all manner of propaganda from nursery rhymes to false scientific racial theories."

Aaron Douglas, The New Negro in American Culture, 1936



Aaron Douglas. *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*. 1934. Oil on canvas. Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Looking Closely:

- What do you see in these paintings? Can you identify shapes? (geometric)
- How about colors? (muted colors, mostly the variations of the same color)
- Can you see any symbols or markers of African culture? (masks, drums, spears) the American culture? (Statue of Liberty) the African American culture? (saxophone-jazz) of industrialization and urbanism? (skyscraper buildings, smokestacks, wheel cogs, the worker)
- What is Douglas communicating as an African American identity?

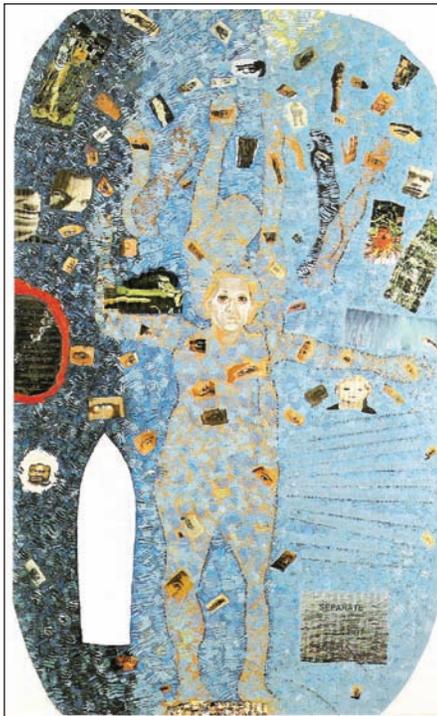
References

- Patton, S.F. (1998). *African-American art*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Pohl, F.K. (2002). *Framing America: A social history of American art*. Thames & Hudson, Inc., New York.

Howardena Pindell

Howardena Pindell (b. 1943) is committed to a discourse about discrimination and sexism, colonialism, and post-colonialism. She addresses how Western societies have tried and still try to sustain their privileges as the paradigms of civilization, culture and intellectualism worldwide. After training in art at Yale, Pindell became politically committed in the 1960s and '70s, protesting against the Museum of Modern Art and setting up a women's co-operative exhibition space in New York City called the Air Gallery.

Pindell assigns each painting its own explanatory subtitle, which is key to understanding a particular subject. The work above depicts Pindell in silhouette, except that she has multiple arms like a Hindu deity. Centrally positioned, she literally commandeers the position of authority as the narrator of the written and visual text before us. The oval canvas displays family photos; photocopies of antebellum edicts governing slavery and the rights of slave-owners; a diagram of the hold of a slave ship; and printed texts which comprise an encyclopedia about genealogy, miscegenation, and African-American history. *Autobiography* is about power vested in racial and gender privilege.



Howardena Pindell. Born Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1943. *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* Acrylic, tempera, cattle markers, oil stick, paper, polymer photo transfer, vinyl type on sewn canvas. 118 x 71 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1989.17

Looking Closely:

- What do you see in this painting?
- What references is Pindell making to African culture? African American history? (slave ship) Herself? (her body outline is main figure, represented as Hindu deity with multiple arms)
- What are the words speaking to in her painting? (racial segregation, antebellum edicts governing slavery and the rights of slave owners)

- Why do you think there are so many eyes in her painting? What is she saying?
- What is the predominant color in her painting? Why did she paint this color over her body? What is she saying? (drowning or smothering, struggle with connection to self and identity.)

References

Patton, S.F. (1998). *African-American art*. Oxford University Press, NY.

Romare Bearden

(1914-88)

Photomechanical reproduction, synthetic polymer and pencil on paperboard, 9 1/8 x 12 inches

"I work out of a response and need to redefine the image of man in the terms of the Negro experience I know best."

Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism 1964

Bearden creates collaged images and paintings. In this image he creates figures by assemblage of different parts including African masks, animal eyes, marbles, and mossy vegetation. Figures in his collage have disproportionate scale, for example: large hands or large heads as compared to the body. His stylistic approach bears a certain familiarity to appliqué quilts. The rhythmic qualities of his compositions echo the musical influences of jazz and blues.

"In my work, if anything I seek connections so that my paintings can't be only what they appear to represent. People in a Baptism in a Virginia stream are linked to John the Baptist, to ancient purification rites, and to their African heritage. I feel this continuation of ritual gives a dimension to the works so that the works are something other than mere designs."

In the upper left hand corner you can see an image of a train which is found in many of Bearden's art works. The train not only signifies movement, marks the migration of African Americans to urban centers, but is symbolic of the civil struggle of African Americans.



Looking Closely:

- What do you see in this painting?
- How do you think Bearden created this art? What was his process? (collage)
- Are the figures proportionate? Why not? (larger heads or large hands and small bodies)
- Can you see any symbols of African culture? (abstract forms, collaged mask elements) Or African American history? (train)
- What can you infer is taking place? What is the title of this piece?
- What do you think this artist is saying? What connections is he trying to make? How do you think Bearden considers African American identity?
- What colors do you see? (gray, orange, blue)
- How does Bearden achieve variety in his work? (texture)

References

Pohl, F.K. (2002). *Framing America: A social history of American art*. Thames & Hudson, Inc., New York.

Resources

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) *Study for Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an American Setting* 1934; *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers* 1934.

Romare Bearden (1914-88) *Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism*, 1964

Howardena Pindell (b. 1943) *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* 1988.

Classroom References

Brown, K. (1995). *Romare Bearden*. Chelsea House, NY.