

African American Art

Essential Question: How have African American artists expressed their identities and histories through the arts?

Grade: 7th grade, 11 students, General Education

Length: 75 minutes

Curriculum connection:

- **7th Grade Scope & Sequence:**
 - 7.7 REFORM MOVEMENTS: Social, political, and economic inequalities sparked various reform movements and resistance efforts. Influenced by the Second Great Awakening, New York played a key role in major reform efforts. (Standards 1, 5)

Goals:

Students will be able to...

1. Identify the way that African American history is conveyed and documented through art.
2. Compare and contrast different mediums of art and the meanings they convey.
3. Construct meaning around African American identity based on what is learned from the artworks.
4. Analyze the concept of appropriation as a method of resistance when minority groups use it against a dominant group.

Objects:

Web of Life, 1958

John Biggers

Quilt, Housetop Pattern, circa 1945

Lucy T. Pettway

Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps, 2005

Kehinde Wiley

Rationale:

This lesson will explore African American identity and history as it is articulated in the work of three African American artists.

At *Web of Life*, we will learn about John Biggers and consider why he would have depicted this subject matter in a mural for a science building on the campus of a historically Black university. We will talk about community and how HBCUs were and are important spaces for community building among African Americans.

At the quilt made by Lucy T. Pettway, we will learn about Gee's Bend and the many quiltmakers there, and we will talk about quilting as an art form with specific meaning for the Black community. We will talk about the legacy of slavery in the south and how the strategy of improvisational quilts as a mode of resistance. We will engage in an activity that allows the group to try some hand-sewing.

At Wiley's, we will talk about appropriation and how appropriation by minority groups often attempts to undo the cultural dominance of Western history and white supremacy.

Vocabulary:

1. **Historically Black College/University (HBCU):** Historically black colleges and universities are institutions of higher education in the United States that were established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the intention of primarily serving the African-American community.
2. **Gee's Bend:** Boykin, also known as Gee's Bend, is an African American majority community and census-designated place in a large bend of the Alabama River in Wilcox County, Alabama.
3. **Appropriation:** The action of taking something from the work of another artist for one's own use.

Materials:

- Draw + Describe worksheets
- Sewing samples and fabric scraps
- Boards
- Pencils

Introduction:

- Bring students to lobby, sit in circle:
 - Welcome! Introduce yourself.
 - *Who's been here before? What did you see when you were here last time?*
- Community Agreements:

- Let's talk about some community agreements - or agreements for how we will take care of each other and the objects in the museum. One agreement is that we will not touch any of the artworks we see. *What other agreements should we have for our time together?*
- Give essential question:
 - I want us to keep in mind the following question as we move through our lesson today: **How have African American artists expressed their identities and histories through the arts?**
 - I believe you have been learning about African American literature in class, right? What are some things you've been learning?
- Social Schedule:
 - Today we're going to look at three artworks in three different galleries of the museum.
 - We're going to spend about 15 minutes discussing each artwork together, and we'll also do an independent activity at the end that allows you to do some exploring on your own.
 - Overall, we'll be together for 1 hour and 15 minutes.
- Take the elevator up to the fourth floor.

Object 1: Web of Life, 1958



Activity: Drawing

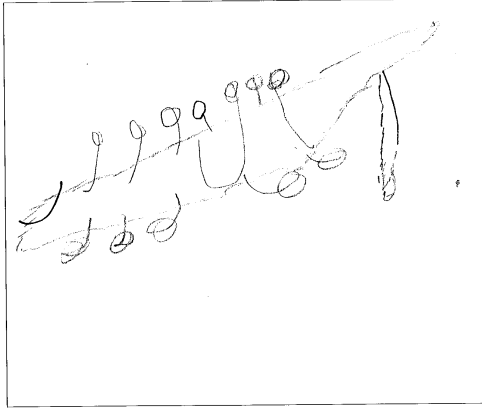
- Before we start talking about this artwork, we're going to take a moment to draw. I'm going to hand out boards, pencils, and a piece of paper to each of you. I want you to focus on one small part of this mural that is interesting to you, and take a moment to draw it. Then, describe what you drew. We're going to take about 5 minutes to do this. (Remind them when there's 1 minutes left)

Examples of Student Work:

Name: Daguerre

Draw and Describe:

Choose a section of the artwork to draw. Then describe what you drew on the lines below.



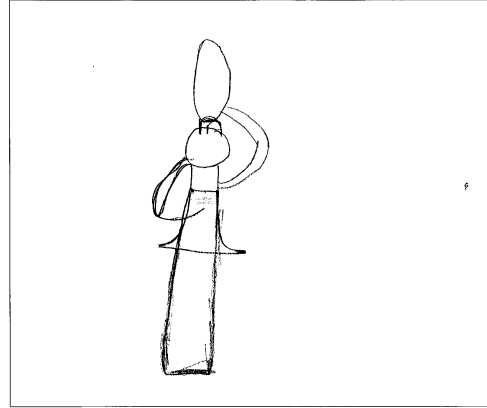
I drew ~~the~~ price of the tree

Kat Chavez, MEFP FY 20, Brooklyn Museum Education Division

Name: Kennedy Bass

Draw and Describe:

Choose a section of the artwork to draw. Then describe what you drew on the lines below.



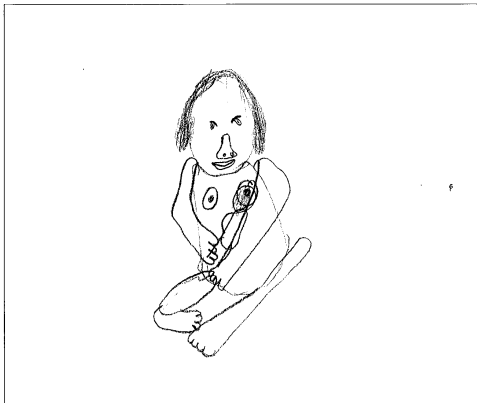
I drew the African lady with a basket
on her head.

Kat Chavez, MEFP FY 20, Brooklyn Museum Education Division

Name: Adrian A. J.

Draw and Describe:

Choose a section of the artwork to draw. Then describe what you drew on the lines below.



The mother is breastfeeding

Kat Chavez, MEFP FY 20, Brooklyn Museum Education Division

- **Now, what are some of the things you drew?**
- **We've noticed that we have images of both humans and the natural world in this painting. What is the relationship between them?**
 - This work is the final design for a twenty-six- foot mural.
 - Biggers centered the image on an essential earth mother. Throughout, he paired oppositional references to life and death (winter and summer), male and female (the two nudes), and Africa and America (in vignettes of harvest and sowing).
- This is a scale model for a mural commissioned by Texas Southern University, a historically black university in Houston, Texas. A historically black college or university is an institution that was established for the education of the Black community, who, for many years, were not allowed to study at most colleges in the United States. This mural was to be painted in the science building.
 - **What is a mural?**
 - **Why do you think the artist believed it would be important for members of the campus community to see this in the science building?**

Artist's Quote:

- **In talking about this mural, the artist said, "As early as my high school days I understood why man couldn't continue haphazardly and ruthlessly to exploit, to destroy nature without harming himself."**
 - **So, what do you think the artist is trying to tell us with this artwork?**

Transition: We've now seen how artist John Biggers use art to spark conversation amongst the community of African American faculty, staff, and students at Texas Southern University. Now, we're going to look at another artwork to which the community was of deep importance.

Object 2: *Quilt, Housetop Pattern*



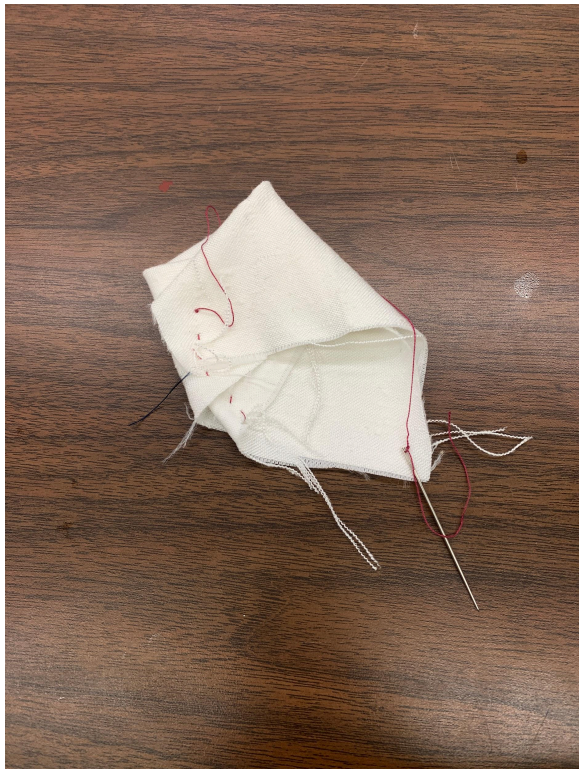
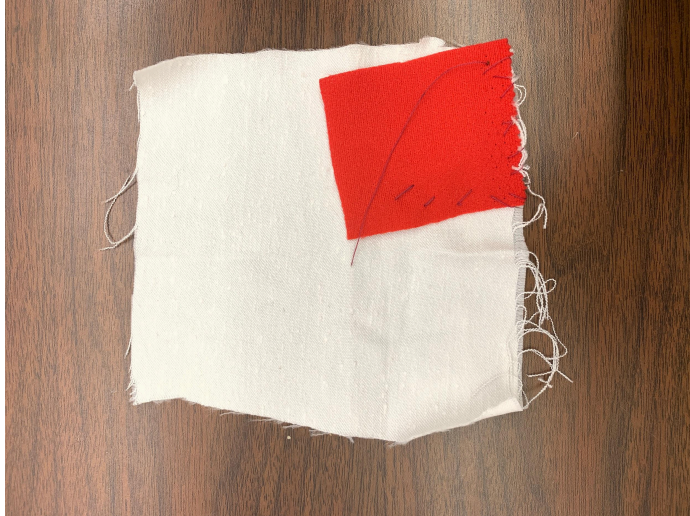
- **What do we see here?**
- **How is this artwork different from the first one we looked at?**
- **Do any of you have family members who enjoy quilting?**

Provide info: The quilters of Gee's Bend are part of a small Black community in rural Boykin, Alabama. An isolated hamlet bordered on three sides by the Alabama River, Gee's Bend has a continuous tradition of quilting going back multiple generations through several families. For many in Gee's Bend and rural America, quilts were important for survival, and families would layer multiple quilts on top of each other for warmth, create pallets from them, or use them to patch the walls and windproof windows.

Activity: Hand-sewing

- I'm going to hand out a fabric piece to each of you. These fabric pieces have a needle and thread attached, and you can attach more of these fabric scraps if you would like, or just practice going in and out of the fabric with the thread.
- **Info:** The Housetop quilt begins with one central patch (often in the center of the quilt, but here it is the square at the bottom left corner). Dominated by concentric squares, the Housetop pattern is typically pieced from a starter square, with an improvisational pattern then formed by adding strips and additional squares.
- **How does this feel for you?**

Examples of student work:



Provide info: Pettway and the Gee's Bend quilters believed that there was a connection between singing and sewing. Pettway said, "I'll tell you, if I got nothing worrying me, the whole part of the time I'm sewing on the machine, or quilting or something, I'm singing. Tapping my foot, just singing."

- **Why might music and quilting be connected for these artists?**

Artist info: The artist, Lucy T. Pettway, who made quilts for seven decades, recalled in an interview that she started piecing when she was about twelve, and went on to become an adventurous adapter of local as well as more traditional patterns.

Pettway started piecing quilts at the age of twelve after watching her mother quilt. She completed her first quilt at the age of thirteen. At the time, most of her quilts were made out of old clothes her family didn't wear anymore.

Pettway is a very common last name in Gee's Bend, and is the surname of Antebellum slave owners who used to live there.

Transition: We've now looked at two different examples of art by African American artists that engage with community and history in really important ways. These works were from 1958 and 1945. The next work we're going to look at is much more recent, having been made in 2005, but it's also referencing history. (Collect fabric)

Object 3: *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*



- What's going on in this picture?

- **Is anyone familiar with the painting over here?** (Gesture to *Jacques-Louis David's Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*)
 - It's a painting made between 1800 and 1801, depicting French general Napoleon Bonaparte.
- **Does anything know what it means to *appropriate* something?**
 - In this case, Kehinde Wiley, the artist of this portrait, appropriated elements from the older painting to create a new painting with a different figure at the center.
Why do you think he did this?
- The man in this portrait is anonymous - we don't know who he is. **Does that change your thoughts on this painting? How?**

Label Info: Historically, the role of portraiture has been not only to create a likeness but also to communicate ideas about the subject's status, wealth, and power. During the eighteenth century, for example, major patrons from the church and the aristocracy commissioned portraits in part to signify their importance in society. This portrait imitates the posture of the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte in Jacques-Louis David's painting *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand-Saint-Bernard*. Wiley transforms the traditional equestrian portrait by substituting an anonymous young Black man dressed in contemporary clothing for the figure of Napoleon. The artist thereby confronts and critiques historical traditions that do not acknowledge Black cultural experience. Wiley presents a new brand of portraiture that redefines and affirms Black identity and simultaneously questions the history of Western painting.

Time to Explore: Take a few minutes to explore this exhibition on your own. You can take a look at the timeline or watch the video, but please don't exit past the timeline.

Conclusion:

So, what did you learn today from the artists we looked at?

Thank you all so much for exploring these artworks with me today.

Invite back. Give out family passes. Return items from bin.