



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1987 Volume III: Writing About American Culture

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## How Do Artists Get Their Ideas? Culture and Environment as Sources of Ideas

Curriculum Unit 87.03.05  
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As an art teacher I constantly hear my students say “I don’t know what to draw,” or “What should I make?” The assignments they seem to enjoy the most are highly structured, e.g., constructing a color wheel, or lessons focusing on mechanical skills such as carving a linoleum block, coloring in letters, or tracing. In other words, they are tasks requiring their attention and coordination but little cognitive skill or imagination.

The majority have a hard time generating their own ideas. What usually happens is they fall back to some image they have done before. I have seen students draw the same image over and over with only the media changing. In the actual drawing of the image students rely on what they know, drawing set schema and symbols, rather than taking the time to study the world around them for more information. In the end they laugh over their efforts and most of these works unfortunately end up in the trash.

Individual inventiveness, self-expression, and creativity are qualities American society has valued and does value and reward greatly. Perhaps this is why I say to students, “Think of your own ideas, don’t copy! You have great ideas—you dream, work, play, go to school—look there for your images, not to your neighbor’s paper, or to copy a picture in a book! TRY!”

In our seminar *Writing About American Culture* we explored the relationship between the individual and society in America through a series of non-fiction readings. Our time period spanned the period from the Declaration of Independence to our present day high-tech world. In the past two-hundred years so much has changed the physical face of our country, our lifestyles, the peoples of America. What has endured is our high regard for individual freedoms, one being freedom of expression.

Learning to express yourself (with some degree of clarity) be it in writing, music, dance, or the plastic art forms is a difficult task requiring: 1) That you have something you want to express, and 2) that you have the skills to express it with. In the plastic arts three specific areas that aid this end are the development of students’:

- 1) *Perceptual Skills*— an awareness of: a) the world around them, and b) the world of their imagination
- 2) *Technical Skills*— instruction in the use of tools and materials (requiring practice for proficiency and eventual mastery)

### 3) *Knowledge of and Appreciation for Art / Beauty*

aids in the expansion of the imagination  
aids in the ability to find personal meaning  
and enjoyment in art.

As an art teacher my goals are to develop these areas and abilities in my students. This unit is designed with these goals in mind. It will expose students to the creative works of individuals with backgrounds both similar to and different from their own. Its purposes are to: 1) help students realize the effect environment and cultural background have on the way these artists and they themselves view life, 2) illustrate ways in which artists draw their ideas from their environment and background, 3) introduce students to ways of looking at and finding meaning in artwork, and 4) develop students verbal, written, and art skills. An understanding of these influences will expand self-awareness (by drawing students' attention to the things that influence them), enhance appreciation and knowledge of art, and aid in the creation of a more personal form of artistic expression.

The unit presents the lives and works of American artists from different cultural backgrounds. It is divided into three sub-units that can be taught separately or in sequence. It includes a Black artist, Jacob Lawrence; a White artist, Andrew Wyeth; and Native American art of the Plains Indians.

I have selected the work of Jacob Lawrence for three reasons. His style of painting is narrative, telling us a story in pictures. This makes his work easily accessible to younger audiences. Secondly, the inspiration for and the subject matter of his work are drawn directly from the struggle and life of Blacks in America. His work will be used as an example of how artwork can reflect the views, experiences, and cultural background out of which its creator was born. Lastly, visually his work has a vitality I believe students will respond to.

I chose the work of Andrew Wyeth to illustrate how important environment (in this instance the countryside of Pennsylvania and the coast of Maine) can be in motivating and inspiring artists. I feel students will appreciate his work's realism and the artist's technical skill but I am also hoping they will see the expressive qualities inherent in it.

The third sub-unit will present the art of the North American Plains Indians focusing on how the way of life of the group (nomadic hunters and gatherers) coupled with the environment in which they lived dictated how they viewed life, the images they made, and the objects they possessed.

Because a purpose of this unit is to increase students' ability to generate their own ideas for images, each lesson will be divided into two parts. First students will look at and respond to a specific work of art. Then students will be asked to look at some aspect of their own life and draw upon their own experiences to create images. I believe students learn a lot by example. It is my hope that by exposing students to these artists' work and to the context of their lives they will be able in turn to apply this information to their own situations.

They will be asked to examine their lives, times, and concerns (drugs, violence, and the good aspects) to find issues they want to communicate.

It will be my task to help students realize that they possess an endless source of ideas that they can and should draw from. I will first help them find ways to get their ideas out verbally, and then help them translate these ideas into tangible forms beyond the level I described earlier. This requires a lot of dialogue and a lot of demonstration.

The following three sub-units will be used in art classes by students in grades five-eight. The unit on Jacob Lawrence will be used from January through February of 1988 in conjunction with Black History Month. The unit on Andrew Wyeth will be used by seventh and eighth graders during the second semester of the coming school year, and the Native American art unit will be used in April of 1988. Lessons will vary, in terms of their depth, in relation to the age and ability level of each group.

For the fifth and sixth grade students who have art once a week each unit will last for seven weeks. The sequence of lessons will run as follows:

*Week 1 : Looking at the Works*— learning some tools to help us communicate our thoughts. Responding through the written word.

*Week 2 : Introduction to the Historical Background*— answering questions like: Who was Jacob Lawrence? What were his life and times like? Where did he get his ideas? . . .

*Week 3 : Personal Response*— Introduction to visual assignment. Brainstorming ideas as a class, and then individually (issues that concern them). Sketching out their ideas on paper.

*Week 4-6 : Continue work on project*— Introduce painting techniques.

*Week 7 : Review of Unit*— Sharing of completed works.

With the seventh and eighth grades the lessons will proceed in the same order. The depth of each lesson and my expectations will be greater. Because they have art class three times a week I would hope that this unit will be completed in three weeks.

### ***SUB-UNIT 1: Jacob Lawrence***

Living in society we are all pushed, pulled, and shaped by our experiences with people, our culture, and our environment. By examining these influences we can learn a lot about ourselves, others around us, and our relationship to the world. This kind of questioning can bring out concerns, ideas, and interests which could stimulate students' ideas.

### ***STUDENT OBJECTIVES***

In this unit students will learn:

- 1) Who Jacob Lawrence is
  - 2) A general overview of some of the events in Black History
  - 3) That artwork can express emotions, feelings, and tell stories
- They will be able to state:

- 1) The major source of inspiration for Jacob Lawrence's work
- 2) Two places where artists look for their ideas

They will be able to identify and/or define the following terms and people:

- a) migration
- b) Harlem Renaissance
- c) motivation
- d) inspiration
- e) narrative
- f) Jacob Lawrence
- g) Harriet Tubman
- h) composition
- i) space (figure/ground)
- j) sketch
- k) perspective
- l) viewpoint

They will be able to:

- 1) Cluster their feelings about a particular piece of artwork
- 2) Write written responses—stories inspired by the artwork, and
- 3) Create a painting in the narrative style of Jacob Lawrence that will tell a story, in a series of pictures. These stories must relate to a personal experience of the student and contain no words.

## **LESSON 1**

When I introduce my students to the artwork of Jacob Lawrence I will turn off the lights, turn on the slide from his Harlem series (pieces depicting street scenes of Harlem) and ask students to tell me how does it make you feel? What is your first impression? Is it lively or dull? Does it remind you of life on Grand Ave.? . . . While this dialogue proceeds I will be writing their responses on the chalkboard. Rather than listing their answers I will cluster their responses. When I have at least fifteen reactions I will stop and review. Here I will point out to students that one picture gave us all these feelings and ideas—Why do they think this is? My point here will be that artwork communicates ideas, feelings, and it can stir our memories.

Next, I might have them describe the work. What do they see, what smells can they imagine, what would they be hearing if they found themselves in that scene? How would they feel? My purpose here is to help students feel personally related to the work. I want them to realize art doesn't just have to be a picture on a wall; it can present a world to us. It expresses feelings and ideas if we take the time to pay attention to it.

At this point I would ask my students to pretend they were walking down that street. Who do you see, isn't it hot outside? . . . I will pass out paper and have them write a short story about their walk asking them to include all their senses commenting on what they might hear, see, smell, touch, and taste.

After they finish I will put on one more slide, this time one from Lawrence's *Migration* series. This series is a set of sixty paintings that tell the story of how, at the turn of the century, there was a great mass movement of Blacks leaving rural life in the South for the promise of better opportunities in the North. Once again students will cluster their responses to this piece. I will then ask them to pretend they are artist who painted this piece. What was it you wanted to tell us? What is it about? Why did you paint it? What gave you the idea—something you read about, or saw, or thought about? I will encourage them by reminding them there is no right or wrong answer: all I want to hear are their ideas.

The purpose of these exercises is to help students become comfortable with looking at and finding meaning in art. They will also help them discover where this artist found his ideas. Most importantly they will help them realize that artwork communicates feelings and ideas. It can stir our memories and tell us stories.

After I have gathered together all their stories I will read as many as time permits. We will end each lesson with a review of the ideas we have learned.

- 1) that a picture is worth a thousand words—speaking a different story to each of us
- 2) that art can express ideas, feelings, and tell us stories, and
- 3) we learned how to cluster our ideas

## **LESSON 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

In this lesson I will:

- 1) review the major concepts from the previous week

2) give students a brief history of the life and times of Jacob Lawrence

### ***JACOB LAWRENCE : Brief Biography***

Jacob Lawrence was born in 1917 and is still alive today. He grew up in Philadelphia living with his mother, brother, and sister, he was the eldest child. When Jacob was twelve years old his family moved to Harlem, the year was 1929.

In 1987, when we think of Harlem we think of a tough place to live. Harlem brings to mind images of crime, drugs, and poverty. But in the 1920's Harlem was quite a different place. The era of the 1920's came to be called the Harlem Renaissance. This Renaissance was marked by the coming together of many creative Black individuals who were trying to establish their own style, sound, and culture. They wanted to contribute and enrich American life by establishing a unique Black voice that could speak to all peoples.

By the 1930's things changed, America was in the throws of the great Depression. The Depression hit hard in Harlem. The Renaissance was over and in its stead, massive unemployment, soup kitchens, overcrowding, and evictions became the way of life. At the age of thirteen, this was the Harlem Jacob Lawrence found himself in the midst of. His mother was afraid Jacob would get into trouble on the streets of Harlem so she sent him to after school art classes. Jacob enrolled in a painting class, loved it, and has been doing artwork ever since.

### ***WHAT DOES HE PAINT AND WHY? WHERE DOES HE GET HIS IDEAS ?***

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It was in his neighborhood in Harlem where Jacob first learned of some things that interested him. One day he came upon a man standing on the street corner lecturing to a crowd about black history. He had heard some of it before but this time:

They related these events and people to what was happening in my own life . . . I could see that because we had no history, blacks felt inferior. We weren't in physical slavery, but we were certainly in economic and psychological slavery. <sup>2</sup>

Lawrence became motivated, running to the library, he researched the men and times he had heard about. He decided to find out for himself what his people's history was. When he found out he became inspired to tell others.

### ***HIS STYLE***

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Lawrence's style of painting grew out of his belief that above all else art should communicate a message. Everyone of his paintings is meant to tell us something: it expresses a story, event, or a timely concern. He is a narrative painter because he tells us stories with his paintings. What kind of stories does he tell and why did he choose the themes he did?

Events and injustices . . . galvanize Lawrence into action . . . <sup>3</sup>

Living in the world today it is hard to avoid hearing news, news of the world around us, news from across the globe, news from around the corner. We hear so much, most of these things we forget but some things we can't forget because they interest us or bother us too much. These are the things we talk to our friends about or think about.

Jacob Lawrence was black and he grew up in Harlem. When he was growing up the black man wasn't free to go everywhere. There was hatred, segregation, and violence between blacks and whites. This affected him; he couldn't help but wonder why? What was the reason? He couldn't forget it because it effected him everyday.

This is what motivated Lawrence to investigate his peoples' past. He wanted to understand and be proud of his heritage and he wanted to share his discoveries with others so they in turn could be proud. Through his paintings he told the story of great black leaders. He found that one painting was often inadequate to tell the whole story so he painted a series of pictures, telling history through pictures as a book tells us stories in words.

A review will follow that will test for comprehension. I may even read some of the stories from last week to see how perceptive we were at interpreting Lawrence's work without any background knowledge. After our review conversation will focus on the students. I will ask a question like: What kinds of things bother you? In school, on your way home from school, at home, or on T.V.? We can pick one of these topics and brainstorm ideas as a class. As the students throw out their ideas I will be writing them on the board. Next we can look over our list and pick one concern to discuss. This concern might be about drugs. My next question would be—How can we communicate this idea without using words, with pictures alone? I will remind them to think about Lawrence's work. We would then brainstorm ideas for different approaches.

### ***WEEK 3: THE PROJECT***

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By this time all students should have an idea they might want to communicate. At this point I will present the project we will be working on for the next few weeks. We are going to have an art exhibit in our school. The theme of the show will be "My life in America: 1988." We will invite our school community and parents to view it. The exhibit will contain paintings that tell personal stories about the artists who made them.

### ***ONE LAST LOOK: LAWRENCE'S COMPOSITION—STRATEGIES***

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But how are they going to express it? There they are sitting at their desks and staring at the clean white paper that has just been placed in front of them. Everything was going so well until this moment. How are they going to begin?

It is important not to give them a formula of how to paint a picture, for methods often limit possibilities. Yet you have to give them some instruction so their technical skills and perceptual skills can grow. I find that students' work improves greatly if I have them concentrate on two ideas: *composition*— the arrangement of objects on a page (stressing the relationship between parts to parts and parts to whole), and *expression*— conveying a mood, feeling, or idea in a piece of work. In the following suggested lesson plan I will focus on

these two concepts.

*Suggested Activity : Jacob Lawrence*

Lesson Plan: *week 3, grades 5 and 6*

*Activity : Preliminary sketches for painting project*

**ASSIGNMENT:** Each student will sketch at least four designs for a series of three paintings. The theme (discussed in a previous lesson), will be the same for all four drawings but the composition will be different for each. The finished sketches should convey the idea/story the student wanted to tell us without using words. The sketches will reflect four different vantage points i.e.: looking down on the scene, looking up at the scene, a close-up view, and looking (head on) a frontal view. Students will draw large. They will fill the page so both figure and ground enhance each other.

**MATERIALS NEEDED :**

white or manila drawing paper 12" x 18"

pencils, erasers

slide projector—slides or reproductions of J. Lawrence's work

**CONCEPTS COVERED :**

- 1) telling a story in pictures
- 2) *composition*— the arrangement and interaction of elements on a page.
- 3) *space*— figure/ground relationships (space is a material in itself).
- 4) *viewpoint/perspective*— seeing different relationships depending on where you view a-scene.
- 5) *expression*— the feeling or mood conveyed in a piece of art

**OBJECTIVES :** Students will learn what composition, space, viewpoint, perspective, and expression mean.

**REVIEW :**

Students will be able to apply the concepts covered in class to their own artistic creations.

- 1) where do artists get their ideas?
- 2) the life and times of Jacob Lawrence



## **INTRODUCTION : Today's Lesson**

Today, and for the next three weeks, we are going to be the artists. Like Jacob Lawrence we are going to paint a series of paintings (at least three). This set is going to tell us a story. The story is going to be about something that interests you, or bothers you, or something that you particularly love and want to share with us. Each painting will tell part of the story. Last week you decided on your ideas, this week, I wanted to talk to you about how to compose your pieces. Composition is the way you arrange your picture, i.e., where you place everything on your page. One way to think about composition is to think about viewpoint or perspective.

### **STIMULUS :**

I will show three slides of works by J. Lawrence: *Tombstones* , *No. 9 Harriet Tubman—Dreamt of Freedom* , and *Daybreak— A Time to Rest* . We will discuss each piece in terms of its composition (here meaning viewpoint), and its expressive qualities.

“Here are three paintings by J. Lawrence, I want you to tell me where would you be standing if you saw these scenes? Would you be lying on the ground? standing on the roof? What would your perspective be in each?”

I like to approach teaching composition in this way because it forces student’s thinking away from the typical frontal view. This approach also increases students’ awareness of how they perceive their world by focusing their attention on the world around them.

After the viewing point has been determined in each of these paintings I would ask questions like: Why did he choose this viewpoint? e.g. in *H. Tubman—Dreamt of Freedom* why did he choose to show only the slaves’ legs in chains? Why not the whole body? This is where the second idea, expression, would be brought into the discussion.

### **DEMONSTRATION**

I will take the theme from the Harriet Tubman painting. I will draw four sketches on the blackboard. Each drawing will depict the same idea from four different viewpoints. This demonstration will show students how the emotional/expressive impact of a work can increase or decrease depending on its composition. I will point out that sometimes an artist will choose a close-up because they tend to focus the viewer’s attention on a specific detail. At other times, and artist may prefer a wide angle view. Artists choose a certain composition to convey a certain idea. (see composition illustration fig. 1L)

The second art concept I want to introduce in this lesson is the relationship between figure and ground, or negative space and positive space. Negative space/ground is the space around objects. Positive space/figure is the object, the thing we can touch.

### **A POSSIBLE PRESENTATION**

So many times I ask students to draw me a picture what I get is a drawing with a few small figures and a lot of empty space. Everybody begins their drawing by saying. “O-kay, I’ll draw a person, and he has two legs, and arms . . . Oh, and I better put in a house, and maybe a flower too” (see fig. 2L). What most of us seem to do is draw things without paying attention to: 1) what it really looks like, and 2) where it is in relation to its environment. Today when you draw, remember to think about the background. Where you are affects how you see things and how you feel. In Jacob’s Lawrence’s work we see that when he paints, he thinks about the whole picture. He thinks about: where the scene is and what we would see if we were there. He fills every inch

of his paper. In *Tombstones*, we see the building, the door, the front steps, people walking by . . . He creates a feeling in the painting of what it would be like to live on that street. When I look at this piece I get a feel for how hot it is, for the sounds I might hear on the street . . . He gets these ideas across to us through his composition. He thinks of his painting as a window into the world (see fig. 3L).

### ***PRESENTING THE ASSIGNMENT TO THE STUDENTS***

What I want you to do is to divide your paper into four rectangles—fold your paper in half, and in half again. Remembering the story you wanted to share with us, I want you to tell us that story in pictures. I want you to imagine each box on your paper to be a window. You are going to look through that window and draw what you would see. Each window is in a different place. One window is on the top of a three story building (so you will be looking down at the scene). The second window is on the ground floor (so you will be looking head on). The third window is a basement window (looking up), and the last window is as if you were looking through a telescope, so it would be a close-up view. In each of these pictures you will see the same things, but, in each the angle from which you see it will be different. This will give you four different compositions. I want you to draw large and fill the space. You will have people and an environment in your sketches. Remember, when you finish your drawings they should be the same way. I should be able to see things in the foreground, middleground, and the background.

#### *STUDENT WORK TIME*

#### *FORMATIVE CRITIQUE :*

As students work the teacher will hold up successful pieces to the entire class. She will point out their most successful parts.

#### *STUDENT WORK TIME*

#### *CRITIQUE/EVALUATION :*

We will view all the pieces. The teacher will discuss each piece in terms of its composition, use of space, and expression.

#### *REVIEW/CLOSING REMARKS :*

Review vocabulary and concepts: composition viewpoint/perspective space—figure/ground relationships telling stories in pictures

#### *WEEKS 4-6*

In these next few weeks I will work individually with the students as they continue to work on their projects. Each week a few new words and concepts will be introduced e.g. color, painting . . .

#### *WEEK 7*

When the paintings are complete we will view them in front of the class to see if they indeed tell the story the artist intended us to hear. Next, we will discuss the works for their artistic merit, i.e., their composition, use of color, etc . . . For a final review a test will be given to determine if the objectives have been accomplished.

## ***SUB-UNIT 2: Andrew Wyeth***

In the previous sub-unit the concept I tried to stress was that people are affected by their environment and their cultural background. Things happen to us everyday because of who we are or just where we are, and we react in certain ways. Jacob Lawrence was affected by the events and ideas of his world so he painted pictures about them. In this unit we will look at the work of Andrew Wyeth. The sequence and presentation of the lessons will be the same, except here, I will stress how this artist was motivated and influenced by his physical environment and his familial background.

Andrew Wyeth was born into an artistically talented family. His father was the famous illustrator and painter N.C. Wyeth who “considered organized life to be “canned,” schools a “menace,” and analytical thinking destructive of creativity and feeling.”<sup>4</sup> Following this line of thinking Andrew was educated at home by tutors and N.C. himself. Much of his time was spent in wanderings over the countryside. These wanderings were in later years to become the source of his inspiration.

At home his life was filled with “all kinds of creative activities.”<sup>5</sup> His father encouraged everyone in his family to develop the talents they possessed. At that time in America, there were no T.V.’s, life was quiet and news didn’t travel quite so fast as it does these days. On a typical night in the Wyeth home on a winter’s eve one might find the whole family telling stories, writing music, or plays, or painting pictures to illustrate their favorite stories.

This was the kind of house Andrew grew up in. His world was and remains this countryside of Pennsylvania. It is from this place and all the memories attached to it that Wyeth draws his imagery.

You see, I don’t say, “Well, now I’m going to go out and find something to paint.” . . . Really I just walk a great deal over the countryside. I try to leave myself very blank—a kind of sounding board, all the time very open to catch a vibration, a tone from something or somebody . . . If it holds in my memory, maybe weeks or even years later . . . Then the idea enriches in my mind and I embellish it . . . or it disintegrates and goes into nothing.<sup>6</sup>

This quote reveals a very different kind of approach to artwork when compared to J. Lawrence’s ideas. Wyeth was motivated by a quality inherent in the scenes and objects he painted. He doesn’t try to tell a story he tries to reveal another kind of quality. A source of inspiration for Wyeth could be a bowl of fruit, or the wind blowing through the window.

A white mussel shell on a gravel bank in Maine is thrilling to me because it’s all the sea—the gull that brought it there, the rain, the sun that bleached it there by a stand of spruce woods. Most artists just look at an object and there it sits. What I’m trying to say is that I start every painting with an emotion—something I’ve just got to get out.<sup>7</sup>

When viewing Wyeth’s work, students will no doubt be impressed by its “realism” but I would stress that Wyeth wasn’t just trying to make a picture that looked real—he could have taken a photograph for that. What he wants to reveal to us is some feeling or quality that he sees, and wants to share with us.

While he draws his ideas from the world around him he is motivated by something completely different than Lawrence because his life, his upbringing, and where he lived were very different. The things that concerned him were the things he knew and saw and experienced. He tells us something through his work—what is it? . . . maybe its something about the beauty and mystery of life and nature.

This was just a brief history of what might be said in the second lesson of this sub-unit. I would go into greater depth in describing what life was like in rural Pennsylvania—what things you might find and observe on long walks in the woods. I would talk about the four seasons and the feelings, smells, sounds, and sights associated with each. I would again ask students to imagine themselves living at a time when there was no television—What would you do in the evening?

I would also like my students to hear from the artist what his intentions are, so I will read, or have them read quotes whenever they are applicable.

*Suggested Activity : Andrew Wyeth*

Lesson Plan: *week 3 , grades 7 and 8*

Activity: Portrait Drawing—drawing what you see vs. what you know

*ASSIGNMENT :*

Each student will draw a portrait of a friend from within our class. They will first cluster their impressions of the person they select. They could start with the physical qualities and then include feelings (i.e. is the person happy, sad . . . ) that person brings to mind. They will sit directly across from their chosen model and take turns drawing and modeling. Students will draw large filling the space. Students will draw only the head and shoulders using line only, no shading. Students will try to convey a mood or feeling in their drawing.

*MATERIALS NEEDED :*

paper 12" x 18"

pencils, erasers slide projector—slides or reproductions of Andrew Wyeth's work

*CONCEPTS COVERED :*

- 1) space—negative/positive
- 2) meaning/feeling in artwork—looking beyond appearance
- 3) drawing what you see vs. what you think

*OBJECTIVES :*

Students will be able to define what a portrait is and what negative space and positive space are.

Students will understand the difference between drawing what you see vs. drawing what you think.

Students will learn drawing techniques.

*REVIEW :*

- 1) Who is Andrew Wyeth
- 2) Where does he get his ideas

### 3) What are his motivations

#### *INTRODUCTION :*

In the second half of this unit we will become the artists. We will look at the world around us for our inspiration. We will draw the objects and people we come in contact with everyday.

#### *STIMULUS :*

Students will view two portraits by Andrew Wyeth “Studies for Anna Kuerner,” and “Pencil Study for Karl”. Students will then read several quotes by Wyeth. The quotes state what it is he tries to express in his portraits. We will discuss his work to see if students think he achieved what he was after. After our discussion we will talk about drawing from life, i.e., drawing what we see vs. drawing what we think.

Often when we draw from our imaginations we don’t pay attention to what something really looks like. What we draw are symbols (see fig. 1W). What I want you to do is concentrate on what you see. Open your eyes and study the world around you like Wyeth did.

#### *DEMONSTRATION :*

I will choose a student to model for a quick portrait. I will draw his/her portrait on the board. I will begin by illustrating the difference between drawing what you see vs. drawing what you think (see fig. 2W). I will stress that I want them to draw what they see. I will tell them that one way to begin drawing is to start at the top of the person’s head. I don’t want them to think about drawing an ear, or hair etc . . . all they are to do is draw a line where the negative space and positive space meet. They will be asked to draw slowly, crawling along the outline. After the outline is completed they will be asked to study the space to determine where the eyes, nose, and mouth belong. I will finish my demonstration by reminding students that artwork conveys feelings to us. They will be asked to think about their model’s expression. Students will also be told that they need not put in every eyebrow, eyelash, or hair. What I want their drawings to reflect are 1) a feeling or quality of the person they are drawing, and 2) a sense that they are drawing what they see.

#### *STUDENT WORK TIME*

#### *FORMATIVE CRITIQUE :*

As students work the teacher will hold up successful pieces to the entire class. She will point out their most successful parts.

#### *STUDENT WORK TIME*

#### *CRITIQUE/EVALUATION :*

We will view all the pieces. The teacher will discuss each piece in terms of its use of space and expression.

#### *REVIEW/CLOSING REMARKS :*

Review vocabulary and concepts: negative space and positive space portrait, and self-portrait meaning in artwork—artwork can reveal qualities of things.

## **OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR THIS UNIT :**

- 1) careful studies after nature—further studies that ask students to draw what they see.
- 2) drawing/painting a favorite place—a place that has a special meaning for you (the teacher could show slides of Wyeth’s landscapes as a stimulus).
- 3) introduction to Tempra painting—using Wyeth’s tempras as examples.

## **SUB-UNIT 3: NATIVE AMERICAN ART**

In the previous two sub-units we viewed art work by two American artists. They had very different upbringings and because of their cultural/familial backgrounds they respond to their world (as seen in their artwork) in different ways. One chooses to use his art as a social mirror telling us stories of its history and events. The other is more concerned with exploring his environment and imagination to reveal the inner quality of things as he experiences them, a much more private vision.

What these two have in common is that they share the American tradition. This is a tradition that encourages self-expression. Artists in this society can earn a living and reap pleasure and prestige from their artwork. Artists in this society are encouraged to make “statements,” to “be creative, innovative, and inventive, to say something unique.” While such fostering of self-expression is not unique to America, in other societies and cultures it is not always encouraged or allowed.

Mankind by its nature is creative; we are makers of objects and ideas but the avenues of expression that are open and acceptable to us differ from society to society.

Perhaps the clearest way to help students realize the degree to which one’s culture and environment affect the way they view the world is to compare their culture with one that is very different. In the last subunit students will study the art of the North American Plains Indians (before their acculturation). The purpose will be to point out how their culture, environment, and way of life dictated the avenues of expression that were allowed them.

### **WEEK 1: LESSON 1**

Following the same format used in the two previous sub-units I would begin by showing the artwork of these people. I have selected the religious art objects rather than the everyday functional craft pieces because:

religious art is often a little more complex, original, made with greater attention to detail, and frequently more forceful than ordinary domestic art, and as such, usually has a greater emotional appeal for the average viewer. <sup>8</sup>

The works I will show are the war shields. Because of the nature of these works other kinds of questions would have to be asked. I might begin by asking students to tell me what are the similarities and differences between these works and the other works of art we have seen in class? Other questions might be: Who do you think made this? What do you think it is? and, What do you think the artist is trying to tell us? Next, I would have the students describe the work. They will be asked to describe the work in terms of its colors, shape, and

imagery.

## **WRITTEN RESPONSES**

Possible topics could include:

- 1) pretend you made this object:
  - a) what is it used for?
  - b) why did you decorate it the way you did?

## **WEEK 2: LESSON 2 — HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

When I present the historical background I want to do more than just tell the facts. I want students to begin to feel what it might have been like to live in that way and in that era. To attempt this I will first show them slides of the Plains region as it would have appeared one hundred years ago. These slides would depict the vastness of the region. A possible conversation could be: Can you imagine living there—the winters are severe, the environment is harsh, shelter hard to find . . . I would then try to relate it to their own experience asking: Have you ever been outside in a thunderstorm or a blizzard? In our society we can find shelter in a nice warm house; in the summer we have all kinds of ways to escape the heat—air-conditioning, swimming pools, and ice cream. During a thunderstorm we can go inside, turn on a radio and forget about the storm outside. The Indians couldn't escape their environment. There was nothing separating the Indians from nature.

## **WRITING ASSIGNMENT**

Here we might write or talk about how they would feel if they were caught out in the middle of nowhere during a thunderstorm. What would they do if the only protection they had was what nature had provided? How would they feel? What thoughts would be going through their heads? When the stories are complete and have been shared I might say something like: The Indians' environment made survival difficult. When life is hard people seek help. For the Indians, help came in two forms: 1) from the other members of the tribe, and 2) from spiritual helpers.

## **THE TRIBE**

The tribe was a tightly knit society whose members looked out for one another. Because of many reasons, the omnipresent forces of nature, the high mortality rate, etc, it was the survival of the tribe rather than any one individual that grew to be of import. To illustrate this relationship between the individual and his society I will have students read the opening passage in John Neihardt's book *Black Elk Speaks* . This passage reveals a lot about Indian values and thought. It is a passage that is filled with ideas that would be perfect for class discussions. Some possible topics could include: 1) the relationship between the individual and his world, and 2) Black Elk's view of life. This life view is very different from the westerner's view. It views man as part of the world equal to the animals, the trees—all of life. As I stated earlier, this view values the survival of the group over any one individual.

In a society where the members feel expendable it is little wonder that the art forms they created were not at all like those of the Western artists. They weren't paintings that were to be hung on walls, or sculptures to be

placed on pedestals. Individuals were not praised for their artistic talent. In fact there were no “artists” in Indian society; there were only craftsmen/women. Everybody in the tribe was able to make their own goods and everything that was made served a purpose. Everything that was needed for living was made, such as: spoons, bowls, cups, clothes, and housing. These objects were decorated—but only when time permitted. The forms and patterns used in their design were traditional patterns that were in some cases generations old. New patterns were rarely introduced because their sense of beauty was tied in with their tradition.

### ***THE VISION QUEST***

It was in the making of religious objects that more creative or inventive works were born.

As I stated earlier, when life became too overwhelming the Indian turned for help, help from his brothers, and help from some spirit helper. Contact with a spirit was sought by all members of a tribe. This contact was made through a “vision quest.” A young boy went off into seclusion usually to the mountains to meet with his spirit helper through a vision. The boy would fast, pray, and stay up until his fatigue produced an hallucination, the vision.

In the usual vision, an animal . . . plant, or inanimate object appears . . . with instructions that may determine the individual’s role within society for the rest of his life. <sup>9</sup>

When he returned to the tribe he would share his vision with the group. From this vision a boy might receive a new name and be required to construct his shield.

### ***THE WAR SHIELD***

The war shield was usually made of buffalo hide. It was carried into battle. In battle, its purpose was not to physically deflect any weapon, rather, it was thought to actually embody the protective power of the spirit helper. Because these objects were religious in nature much care and time were devoted to their construction. The designs used were very symbolic and very personal because they were determined by the animals and or objects that appeared to the individual in his vision. Every mark placed on the shield was there for a purpose. There was a meaning behind every feather, every line, and every color that was applied.

Once again, this was a brief overview—other good sources for more information about Indian Art, and the vision quest will be found in the Teacher’s Bibliography at the end of this unit.

*Suggested Activity : Native American Art of the Plains Indians*

Lesson Plan: *week 3 , grades 5 and 6*

*Activity: Preliminary sketches/designs for a personal shield or emblem .*

### **ASSIGNMENT :**

Each student will design four personal symbols and a format for a shield. This shield will reveal something about the artist that made it. Each symbol will represent an aspect of their life. One symbol will represent their family life, one their relationship to society, the third, what their dreams for the future are, and the last, an important event from their past. Students will decide on a format of their choosing, e.g. a circle, square, diamond, or a non-geometric form. Upon this form they will arrange their four symbols. Each symbol chosen will be drawn large enough so that it can be seen from a distance of several feet. The shield’s composition



should integrate negative space, and positive space (i.e., there should be a visual balance between figure and background). The arrangement will be balanced asymmetrically.

*MATERIALS NEEDED :*

white or manila drawing paper 12" x 18"

pencils, erasers

slide projector—slides of Indian War Shields

visual aids (made by the teacher to illustrate art concepts)

*CONCEPTS COVERED:*

- 1) What is a symbol
  - a) national symbols
  - b) personal symbols
- 2) *Balance*
  - a) symmetrical balance
  - b) asymmetrical balance
- 3) *Space*
  - a) negative/ground
  - b) positive/figure

*OBJECTIVES :*

Students will be able to:

- 1) define the word symbol. They will be able to state the difference between a national and a personal symbol.
- 2) spell and define: balance, asymmetrical, symmetrical, space, negative and positive space.
- 3) cluster their ideas and thoughts about themselves in relation to different aspects of their life.
- 4) state why he/she chose the symbols they did.

## *REVIEW :*

- 1) Who the Plains Indians were
- 2) How the way of life/environment/ and cultural background often dictates the kinds of objects/images we make.

## *INTRODUCTION :*

Last week we talked about how the Indians created shields to represent and protect them. The symbols they painted on their shields were personal in that they told the viewer something about its owner. Today I want to talk about symbols. A symbol is something that stands for, or represents something else. The American Flag is a national symbol. It represents our country. The Cross, the Star of David, the Buddha are all symbols representing different groups of people and different beliefs. A personal symbol is a symbol that represents you and its meaning may be understood by you alone.

## *STIMULUS :*

I will show four slides of Indian War Shields to the class (see fig. 1NA). Each shield will be discussed in terms of: its symbols, its sense of balance, and its spatial relationships (negative/positive).

## *POSSIBLE PRESENTATION :*

“Here is a slide of an Indian War Shield. I want you to tell me if it looks like the symbols have been pasted on the background in any old way, or, has the artist placed them in a particular way? For myself, it seems as though each artist thought about where to place the objects. The reason I think this is because the design of each of these shields are balanced in their arrangement.”

Balance means something has the same amount of weight on both its sides. In art, there are two kinds of balance: asymmetrical and symmetrical balance. Symmetrical balance is when something is visually the same on both sides. In other words, whatever I do to one side of the paper I must do to the other (see figure 2NA). If I were to fold my paper in half the image would be the same on both its sides. Visually, symmetrical balance is often less interesting than compositions that are balanced asymmetrically. This is because your eye tends to focus right in the center of the piece and rest there.

Asymmetrical balance is a balance that has to be sensed, that is, felt inside. There are no formulas as to how to achieve it. Asymmetrical balance is when something feels balanced/steady/equal but the image, visually, is not the same on both its sides.

The two shields (see figs. 1NA a & b) are asymmetrically balanced. If I divided them in half they would not be the same on both sides, yet, I feel as though they are balanced.

Personally, I think asymmetrical balance forms a more interesting composition because the equal but varied distribution of weight leads your eye in, around, and through the piece. Asymmetrical compositions do not feel static/still.

The other idea you need to think about is very closely related to balance, that is, space. Space is very important in art. Most people ignore space when they draw. They think of the figures they need to draw but they pay no attention to the (ground or negative space) environment they place them in.

In the last two shields we saw the artist achieved a sense of balance because he paid attention to both the objects and the space. The background does not feel empty. In figure a. from fig. 1NA, the yellow ground is as important as are; the feathers, the lines he has painted, and the cloth that hangs from the bottom side. All the elements in the piece add to its sense of balance, if I took any part away the balance would be lost. (The second shield will be analyzed in a similar manner).

#### *DEMONSTRATION :*

One way to help you understand both these ideas (asymmetrical balance and the relationship between figure and ground), is to think of everything contained in your image as having a weight. I will demonstrate by drawing on the blackboard. I will ask students to think of their entire paper as having a certain weight. If I place a circle in its center your eye focuses there (see fig. 3NA). That circle has a weight. Add another smaller circle to the far right corner and your eye moves back and forth between the two. Add more dots and the movement increases. I will remind students that the dots are only part of the composition. In addition to the dots they must also pay attention to the spaces in between the dots. Balance can be achieved if, and only if, the objects and the spaces are taken into account. Figure 4NA illustrates what happens when one sticks the dots anywhere without thinking.

#### *ACTIVITY:*

To begin the activity students will:

- 1) cluster their ideas and feelings about themselves in relation to each one of the following categories:
  - a) family
  - b) society
  - c) the future
  - d) the past
- 2) students will choose one idea from each of their clusters—the one they feel best represents how they feel.
- 3) students will create a symbol that represents the idea they chose.
- 4) after they have completed the four drawings they will decide on a format. I will remind them that the format they choose can be a symbol as well.
- 5) Once the format has been selected students will:
  - a) sketch it out
  - b) cut out the symbols
  - c) arrange the symbols on the format asymmetrically until a sense of balance is achieved. I will remind them to think of both the figures and the spaces around the figures.

*DEMONSTRATION :*

Drawing on the blackboard I will demonstrate how I would create my symbols and arrange my composition.

*STUDENT WORK TIME*

*FORMATIVE EVALUATION :*

The teacher will walk around the room and select successful pieces to share with the entire class.

*STUDENT WORK TIME*

*CRITIQUE/REVIEW :*

Work will be collected and discussed in terms of the concepts discussed today:

- 1) Balance—asymmetrical, symmetrical,
- 2) Space—figure, ground, and
- 3) Symbols—national, personal.

*WEEKS 4-6 :* Continue work on project—teacher will introduce new concepts each week.

*WEEK 7 :* Share final projects

Review major concepts of the unit

COMPOSITION ILLUSTRATION—fig. 1L

*(figure available in print form)*

SKETCHES AFTER INDIAN WAR SHIELDS—fig. 1NA

*(figure available in print form)*

SYMMETRICAL BALANCE—fig. 2NA

*(figure available in print form)*

fig. 4NA

*(figure available in print form)*

ASYMMETRICAL BALANCE—fig. 3NA

*(figure available in print form)*

fig. 1W

*(figure available in print form)*

Typical Symbols Students Often Draw

fig. 2W

Drawing What You Know or Think

## Drawing What You See

(figure available in print form)

## Notes

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1. Clustering refers to a brainstorming technique developed by Rico. For illustrations of the process refer to: Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. *The Process of Writing* . 1986, Vol. IV.
2. Avis Berman, *Jacob Lawrence and the Making of Americans*, p.83.
3. Ibid. p. 86.
4. Wanda M. Corn. *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* , p. 120.
5. Ibid. p. 120.
6. Ibid. p. 45.
7. Ibid. p. 55.
8. Norman Feder, *Two Hundred Years of North American Indian Art* , p. 6.
9. Ibid. p. 5.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS

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Berman, Avis. "Jacob Lawrence and the Making of Americans." *Art News* . February 1984.

A good introduction to the life and work of Jacob Lawrence—includes color reproductions.

Brown, Milton. *Jacob Lawrence* . Whitney Mus. of Art, New York: Dodd, 1974.

The text is not too informative but the reproductions are great.

Corn, Wanda M. *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* . Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973.

Very good book about Wyeth's life and work. Includes a section on his father N.C. Wyeth. Of special interest is

an interview with the artist.

Fax, C. Elton. *17 Black Artists* . New York: Dodd, Mead and Comp., 1971.

Includes anecdotes and brief biographical sketches of each artist, some photos.

Feder, Norman. *Two Hundred Years of North American Indian Art* . New York: Praeger Pub., 1971.

A very helpful introduction by Feder gives a concise explanation of Indian society, ritual, an religion and its influences on art forms. The reproductions are of good quality.

Furst, Peter T., Furst, J.L. *North American Indian Art* . New York: Rizzoli, 1982.

Great reproductions. The book is divided into regions. Each regions' art forms are discussed in terms of their function within the society.

Hoving, Thomas. *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth a Conversation with Andrew Wyeth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Comp., 1978.

Good text. Reproductions include preliminary sketches for his paintings.

Huggins, Nathan I. *Harlem Renaissance* , New York: Oxford Press, 1971.

Good book for background into the Harlem Renaissance. The book includes a brief history of what life was like for blacks in Harlem at the turn of the century. Includes photos.

Lawrence, Jacob. *Harriet in the Promised Land* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

Children's book illustrated and written by Lawrence.

Neihardt, John. *Black Elk Speaks* . New York: Washington Square Press, 1959.

A personal account of the life of a medicine man.

Rodman, Selden. *Conversations with Artists*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1961.

Includes conversations with Wyeth and Lawrence. The book is divided into sections on architects, painters, sculptors, and others.

Storm, Hyemeyohsts. *Seven Arrows* . New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Interesting book about the life view of the Plains Indians told in dialogue through parables.

Wernick, Robert. "Jacob Lawrence: art as seen through a people's history." *Smithsonian* . June 1987.

Good reproductions. The article presents a broad overview of Lawrence's life, times, and work.

## STUDENT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Students will read selections from the following books:

Corn, Wanda M. *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* . Greenwich, CT: N.Y. Graphic Society Ltd., 1973.

Neihardt, John. *Black Elk Speaks* . New York: Wash. Square Press, 1959.

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