



## The Art and Culture of the Afro-American

Curriculum Unit 90.04.09  
by Cynthia H. Roberts

The Black Culture is today engaged in forging it's image on the American Cultural Scene. Unlike his brethren in the earlier decades of this century, the Black is no longer content with a secondrate imitation of white middle class society, but seeks to be judged on his own terms, by his own Values and Standards. He takes new pride in his patterns, hair textures, body structure and his Culture. He is forcing changes in the curricula of schools and Universities. Refusing to remain the invisible American, the Black demands not only recognition, but compensation for Centuries of subjugation and prejudice.

I will tell in brief of the evolution of the American Black Culture.

The purpose of this Unit is to afford students the opportunity to become more aware of their Cultural Heritage, to help students feel a sense of pride, promote learning, social growth and help build their selfesteem.

This Unit will enable students to learn about their Culture in the community and the Role the Culture had and have on the AfroAmerican Art and the Artist.

This Curriculum Unit is designed for grades 9th12th Special Education Learning Disable Students. It is intended to take 910 weeks. (48 minute class periods)

This Unit is meant to supplement an earlier Unit I wrote in 1989, Entitled *URBAN NEW HAVEN IN THE MAKING* (1920-1980's).

The activities and strategies in this Unit will encourage students to use various skills and abilities for learning.

Students will learn a range of skills: 1) Critical and Analytic thinking 2) Reading Comprehension, 3) Vocabulary Building, Writing, Research and Map Skills.

The Majority of activities incorporated in this Unit will concentrate on Reading.

This Unit will help to educate students about their Cultural Background.

## OBJECTIVES

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1. Allow students the opportunity to better understand the Black community in which they live in.
2. Allow students the opportunity to learn about Afro-American Art and its relevance to the Black Culture.
3. To stimulate the production and preservation of the work of Black Artists.
4. To broaden the students acquaintance with the Black Artists.
5. To project the AfroAmerican Artist as a Role Model to be admired.
6. To examine the differences and similarities of different community groups.
7. To understand the Term Culture.
8. To express orally and in written form their feelings and emotions about the AfroAmerican Artist and his work.

By studying the Black Culture students will build a stronger identity of themselves that can reduce poor self-esteem, cynicism and apathy so common among many adolescents.

Culture channels, molds, and modifies a good deal of human biological functioning. Some patterns of every culture crystallize about the inevitabilities of man's existence as a biological organism.

By looking at and studying works of Art, students will learn to examine closely how they and others perceive the world. Students will learn to see and appreciate more of the visual form of Art. Students will develop a variety of skills including: analyzing, interpreting and an appreciation for Art.

Students will see that the artwork can have an influence on the culture and how the people of that culture view themselves. Students will also learn to recognize similarities and differences between cultures. Students are given the opportunity to learn about individual Artists and their works and the contributions they make in the Art world.

By studying biographical material about the Artists lives, he or she will be presented as a real person with the same types of problems we have including strengths and weakness. This way, student will be able to relate on a personal basis.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

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### *STRATEGY #1*

The teacher will introduce the Unit, followed by teacher centered lectures and discussion on historical background, selections emphasizing that particular element will be assigned as reading and discussion studentcentered discussion and related activity worksheets. The strategies in this section are purposely

geared towards discussion with a deemphasis on reading and writing by the students.

*SLIDE PRESENTATION* Students will view the works of Afro-American Artist. They will analyze and interpret each work of Art. Students will be given the purpose of each portrait painting. Student will be guided through exercises to help students interpret, analyze, and describe paintings. Students will be asked to summarize the findings in one to two paragraphs.

#### *STRATEGY #2*

The life and work of Several AfroAmerican Artists. Students will be given handouts on background information about the artist. Students will then complete comprehension questions and vocabulary words. After which, students will discuss in groups information they read about the artist.

#### *STRATEGY # 3*

*LIBRARY SETUP* In class, students will setup a selection of Novels taken from the school library on different Cultures in the community, Students will then select a Novel to read and write an two to three page book report. This will be followed by students sharing their written reports with the class.

#### *STRATEGY # 4*

*ART PROJECT* Together teacher and students will put together an *CULTURAL AWARENESS WEEK* . Students will be involved in making a variety of handson activities. Including: 1) Making African mask, using newspaper, paste and balloons. 2) Making African designs using clay to sculpture 3) Making a drawing or painting or collage. Students will then setup displays. Each display Includes different works of art. 1) art paintings of AfroAmerican Artist 2) handout on Artists, which would include background information. 3) recipes from different cultures, mainly AfroAmerican. 4) fashions, including clothing, hairstyles, headdress, beads, and pins.

This display will be setup in the school library, so that it may be shared with all students and staff in the school.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE**

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1. Culture is learned. Culture is not instinctive or innate; it is not part of the biological equipment of man.
2. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Man is heir to a social tradition. It represents our social legacy as contrasted with our organic heredity.
3. Culture is socially shared. Culture patterns are shared by human beings living in organized groups and are kept relatively uniform by social pressures.  
Culture represents the ideal forms of behavior. The group habits that comprise the culture
4. are viewed as ideal patterns of behavior. The members of the group are expected to conform to them; they are group expectations.
5. Culture is gratifying. Culture satisfies human needs and in this sense is gratifying.
6. Culture is Adaptive. Culture of necessity has to adapt and adjust to forces outside of itself.

7. Culture is Integrative. The part of a given culture and to form a consistent and integrated whole.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

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Culture provides us with a set of common understandings, a kind of map for life's activities.

The position of Black Artists in the United States today poses several questions: What is the role of the Black visual Artist? Where do his traditions lie—with the American Culture or with his African Heritage? Should he express his personal emotions in his art, or does his responsibility rest with his people? A question was raised about the relationship between African Art and the production of the AfroAmerican.

The search for identity by the Black Artist in American has been a continuous process. The 19th Century Artist often sought solace in Europe and the 20th Century Artist have found the same, but the essential question remains unanswered: Who is the Black Artist, and whom does he represent?

Poet Langston Hughes has urged a brethren to portray their blackness in their Art. Expressing contemporary slogans such as "Black is Beautiful" and "Black Pride", Hughes was documenting the separateness and uniqueness of the Black experience as long ago as 1926. He urged the Black Artist to be honest in his interpretation of black life. Langston Hughes states that: The younger artists who create now intend to express their individual blackness without shame or fear. They know they are beautiful, it does not matter if white people are pleased or not. Blacks are building their temples for tomorrow, strong and they know how, and they stand top of the mountain within themselves.

It is important to remember that the Culture of the Black man itself has produced beautiful and important works of Art. It is from the Black man that white Artist, have learned valuable lessons in simplicity, balance, and rhythmic grace.

Because of their ineffable power to express and communicate, the visual arts have invariably serve Blacks, as they have provided a language for all humanity, in their search for selfhood and for an articulated image of that sense of self.

Many of the AfroAmerican Artists directed their work toward the specific interests and sensibilities of Black people.

We are faced with the Black Dilemma; Who is he or she? Where does his or her identity lie? Are his or her needs to be met best by isolating him or herself within the Black community, or by struggling to gain full equality as an American Culture?

In this Section, students will focus on the Black Artist, his work, and his views on the Black Culture. I will list a few Artist and their work, and their views. This will give you an idea of the artists I will be discussing in my future lessons with my students.

Students will become acquainted with the facts about Artists and their works through handouts, oral discussion, field trips, to museum exhibitions, filmstrips, movies, documentaries, novels, and guest speakers. Students

enjoy the concrete learning strategies.

It is my purpose in this Unit, to actively participate in bringing about students vision of the future in the Black Culture.

Through this process, students will enter their community with a charge, to carry on the work of reproducing the life of the community.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARDS ART**

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Just as the history of man is reflected in much of the art he produces, so the changing role of the Black in America has revealed in the attitudes of the Artist who painted them.

Art helps to shape the Culture through ideas, it defines social attitudes, hopes, and fears.

An experiment in the Cultural education of the Afro-American was begun in Cleveland in 1915, founded by Russell and Rowena Jelliffe and staffed by Black and white instructors, the program of Karamu House sought to: Direct the black's talents into the mainstream of American life, thereby removing him from the isolation that had been detrimental to his creative development and enable the Black Artist to communicate his unique experience as a black man and artist to the Nation.

## **BLACK ARTISTS IN AMERICA**

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*ROMARE H. BEARDON* Born 1914-

Beardon grew up in Harlem and was a graduate of New York University. He studied at the Art Student's League in New York. Beardon was influenced by the artists he men in New York and later in Paris.

During World War II Beardon served in the army. Upon his return he had his first oneman exhibition in Washington, D.C.

Beardon's vision reflects the life of black people throughout our country. Mixed in with his paints, we find bits and pieces of paper and cloth that Beardon has picked up here and there in his travels through AfroAmerican.

To be sure, the ethnic character of black experience is unmistakably rich and unique. However, Beardon goes further than simply providing straight documentation. Because his art is larger than life he gives us much more than mere illustration. His collages vividly project classic themes that are common to all humanity. Love, Anger, Death, and loneliness for example are treated with awesome power and brilliant inventiveness.

In a typical Beardon piece we may see a picture of a mother and child. They are Black. That is important for their identity. But, even more important, they are human beings. The child is small and helpless. The mother is a tower of strength and support, lending security and love to the child in her lap. You can't help but feel touched deeply by the spirit and the mood of the picture.

Beardon brings contact with the basic humanity of his people. He shows us the groping reach of figures arising from a night's sleep, the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a family sitting down to dinner together, or going to worship with each other—and always the scene comes through with poignancy and profound honesty.

For a Black person seeing the Beardon exhibition must have been rewarding and infinitely worthwhile because it unfolded layers of reality that confirmed the experience only black people have ever really known and felt in specifics of their life. For Nonblack person the Beardon exhibition was also worthwhile because through his work, the artist shared a wealth of experience that white people could never truly know except in a vague, approximate sort of way.

Through contact with Beardon's art, a genuinely concerned person may sense something of the hopes and despair the flesh and the spirit, the pleasures and the pain, the inimitable, invincible blackness and the imposed whiteness that are the daytoday reality of life in Black America.

His paintings included: Black Manhattan, 1969, collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Theodore W. Kheel, New York, Carolina Interior, 1970 collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint. Collection Shorewood Publisher, New York, Palm Sunday Processional 196768, Collection Cordier and Ekstrom, New York., Patchwork Quilt, 1970, Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Evening, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

*HUGHIE LEESMITH* Born 1915-

Born in Eustis, Florida but went to school in Cleveland, Ohio, graduating from the Cleveland School of Art with high honors and a grant for postgraduate study. He served in the Navy during World War II, and there completed a series of paintings entitled the History of the Negro in the United States Navy. He had his first oneman show in Chicago 1945, and has exhibited his works in oneman, group and jury shows ever since.

Mr. LeeSmith began to win prizes in 1938 for his art, and has had such awards as the Detroit Institute Founders prize in 1953, that of the National Academy of Design (four times), the Emily Lowe Award (1957) and the 1960 award from the American Society of African Culture.

Hughie LeeSmith is a realistic and yet magical painter of the loneliness of decaying urban life. A fine draughtsman and quiet colorist, he paints with the precision of the surrealists in a highly poetic, minor key.

LeeSmith brings contact with the basic humanity of his people. A pervading sense of loneliness emanated from this painting. He best known for his painting called: Boy with a Tire (1952).

The artist is marvelously skilled at depicting textures. The care with which he minutely details non-organic objects—crumbling plaster, cement, wire, wood contributes to the overall feeling of desolation. The brooding intensity and penetrating honesty of his work have truth for all of contemporary Western civilization.

*JOSEPH OVERSTREET* Born 1934-

Born in Conehatta, Mississippi, when he was a boy, his family moved to California. In the early fifties, he lived and worked in Berkeley and San Francisco where he had his own gallery for a while. In 1955, he worked for Walt Disney in Los Angeles, drawing the characters in animated films.

He exhibited in several oneman shows and group shows at the Artist Cooperative in San Francisco 1958, Aegis

Gallery, St Mark's Church 1963, C.O.R.E. exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery 1963, The Pearl Gallery 1966, Countee Cullen Library 1964, Pan American Building 1968, Allen Stone Gallery 1969, Studio Museum 1969, Brooklyn Museum 1969, Boston Museum of Fine Arts 1970 and the Hudson River Museum 1970.

Overstreet wanted his paintings to have an "eye catching 'melody' to them—where the viewer can see patterns with changes in color, design and spaced and when the viewer is away from them [the paints], they will get flashes of the paintings that linger on the mind like that of a tune or melody of a song that catches up on people's ears—my painting will catch up on the people's ears and mind."

There is a feeling of magic and ritual evoked in his paintings which strongly relates to Overstreet's ideas on Black art. Overstreet likes to think of black as being infinity and not as having a scientific scale. Black art is a spiritual movement like black magic or witchcraft. He believed that his paintings have such qualities in them—earth qualities. He was best known for the painting, Justice, Faith, Hope and Peace (1969).

*MARIE JOHNSON* Born 1920-

Born in Baltimore, Johnson first attended Coppin State Teachers College there and was awarded an elementary school teaching certificate. Marie Johnson is a busy, committed woman. In addition to her professional activities, plus an active exhibition schedule, she is involved in community work.

Johnson is dedicated to the human values that unite mankind, the values that have too often been abandoned in the name of technologic and economic progress. As a black and an artist she is seeking to rediscover her roots, to examine the poignancy, dignity, humor, and beauty in the black experience. These are the themes of her work. Some of her work include; Mrs. Jackson, 1968, and Hope Street 1968.

In the Hope Street painting an elderly black man is framed by a window on which is perched a bird cage containing a live canary. Johnson is preoccupied with human values, Johnson states that her work is aimed to depict the disparity between humanistic ideas and an increasingly impersonal and repressive society. She tries to create images which are intimate reflections of the lives of black people, images which are deeply rooted in black strength and black love. It is important to Marie Johnson that black people understand and identify with her work. She also looks at the dreams, suffering, pride, and anger in her paintings. She wants her work to be recognized by black Americans.

#### *LESSON PLAN # 1*

Students will select a Novel to read and write a two to three page book report. These Novels will be displayed in the classroom. Novels will include: 1) Italians, 2) Afro-Americans, 3) American Indians, 4) Hispanics etc.

Students will share written book reports with the class.

The Format for the book report includes:

- a. Title Page
- b. Introduction
- c. Body
- d. Conclusion
- e. Likes and Dislikes about the book

## LESSON PLAN # 2

Students will be given a short passage on an AfroAmerican Artist, his works and background information. Students will then read and answer comprehension questions 1-10.

### GEOFFREY HOLDER

Born 1930 in PortofSpain, Trinidad, of mixed French, African and Irish descent, was brought up surrounded by art, for his grandfather was a French painter and his elder brother is, like Holder himself, a painter and a dancer. Holder attended the Queen's Royal College and taught himself to paint at the age of fifteen when a minor illness kept him at home and gave him the opportunity to "steal" his brother's paints.

Holder is passionately devoted to painting in oil and to drawing. In addition to easel paintings, he has executed two large murals, both in TrinidadHilton Hotel and one at the University of the West Indies. He has also designed costumes for ballets, and in 1968 worked on costumes, sets and choreography for a ballet on a Brazilian theme for the Rebekah Harkness foundation.

### Tempo (1963)

The black experience in the Caribbean is at once more African and more European than it is American. There was not as much pressure placed on African slaves in the Caribbean Islands to break with their past.

1. Where was Geoffrey Holder born?
2. Who were his ancestors? (3)
3. What did his grandfather do?
4. His older brother was a \_\_\_\_\_ and a \_\_\_\_\_ like Geoffrey.
5. What school did Geoffrey Holder attend?
6. How did Geoffrey get paints when he was 15 and ill at home?
7. What famous opera company in New York was Mr. Holder the first dancer?
8. What two types of art is Geoffrey Holder devoted to?
9. Where would you find two of his large murals?
10. Write two sentences that describe "Tempo".

## VOCABULARY

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Impressionistic-a style of drawing and painting that began in France around 1875 that stresses a glimpse of the subject and the effect of light on color.

## LESSON PLAN # 3

Students will learn to evaluate and give opinion on famous works of art shown during slide presentation.



After viewing and discussing the artists and his work, students will be able to distinguish between the differences and similarities.

Materials include: pencil, slides, projector, screen, handouts.

After students have answer questions, together teacher will go over answers with students followed by discussion.

## **QUESTIONS INCLUDE**

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1. What is the painting showing?
2. List the objects showed in the painting?
3. What do you think the artist was trying to tell us?

## **EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

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### *MAP SKILLS*

Students will locate specific geographic features on Connecticut map.

Students will state at least two ways the geography of Connecticut affects the people of Connecticut? ( jobs, way of life, and communities)

Students will compute the distance between two or more given neighborhoods using a scale of miles.

Students will construct a specialized map of New Haven’s neighborhoods using appropriate symbols.

### *ACTIVITY LESSON # 4*

## **VOCABULARY**

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STUDENTS WILL WRITE A SENTENCE AND A DEFINITION USING THE FOLLOWING WORDS.

1. Photomontage
2. Collage
3. Image

4. Organic
5. inorganic
6. Texture
7. Culture
8. Texture
9. Community

## CLASSROOM MATERIALS

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- a . blackboard
- b. slides/screen/projector
- c. vcr
- d. paints/ construction paper
- e. Library books/magazines
- f. encyclopedia
- g. tracing paper
- h. maps
- i. filmstrips
- j. crayons/markers/color pencils

## EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

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### *A PHOTOMONTAGE*

Materials: A photograph of Yourself, other photographs, pictures of things that interest you, paste, scissors, and background paper.

Suggestions: Make a photomontage about your life. Arrange your photograph and the other pictures so that they tell something about your life. Have some photographs and pictures overlap. Cut pictures into interesting shapes. Experiment with different arrangements before pasting the parts in place.

### **Make a Mosaic Mask**

Materials: Colored papers, colorful pages from magazines, paste, scissors, and a background paper.

Suggestions: We will design a mask using bits of paper about one inch square. Cut various colored papers into small squares. Arrange squares on the background paper so as to suggest a mask. Let your imagination do

the work. Paste parts in place.

### **More To Do**

List words that describe feelings: love, hate, sorrow, joy, surprise, etc. A pupil secretly selects a word and then acts out that word. The pupil must not speak. Classmates try to guess the actor's meaning.

## **TEACHER'S BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Burnett, Whit ed., *Black Hands on a White Face*, New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1971.

Selection of stories written by black and white authors which deal with significant dramatical experiences in there lives.

City of New Haven, *"Inside New Haven's Neighborhoods"* New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1982.

This book examines the history of New Haven's neighborhoods and offers a guided tour of some of their most colorful spots.

Goldshlag, Patricia, *"Many Americans one Nation"* , Noble Publishers, Inc., 1974, Units VI, VII, VIII.

This text examines the roles of various ethnic groups as they "melt" to create a unified Nation.

McDonagh, Edward C., *"Ethnic Relations In the United States"* , Negro Universities Press, Westport, CT. 1953.

An examination of the various ethnic groups in an attempt to understand and improve race relations.

Mittler, Gene A., *"Art In Focus"* , Glencoe Publishing Co. 1989.

This book examines the art works of the AfroAmerican artist in the 1920's-the 20th Century.

Sandifer, Jawn A., ed., et. al., *"The AfroAmerican In the United States History"* , Globe Book Comp., NY., NY., 1972.

An examination of the history of the African American from Africa to the civil Rights era.

## **STUDENT READING LIST**

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Burnett, Whit ed., *Black Hands on a White Face* , New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1971.

Selection of stories written by black and white authors which deal with significant dramatical experiences in there lives.

Chase, Elizabeth, *Looking at Art* , New York, Thomas Y., Cromwell Co., 1966.

The author has taken several aspects of artists craft and shown how each has been used in different times

and Cultures.

Goldshlag, Patricia, *"Many American one Nation"* , Noble Publishers, Inc., 1974, Units VI, VII, VIII.

This text examines the roles of various ethnic groups as they "melt" to create a Unified Nation.

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