



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume IV: American Family Portraits (Section I)

Highlights of Modern Family Art and Literature

Guide for Curriculum Unit 90.04.10
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During the beginning of the 20th Century, painting progressed through a variety of experiments. I will discuss the Grassroots Artists and the Social Realists Movement. The group called the Social Realists attacked the injustices and dehumanization of the industrial/urban life in America. They believed that art/artists and photography must be engaged with the contemporary world. This past setting will be used in the classroom for a comparative study of urban problems and the homeless of today. Some of the Caucasian painters that are included are: Ben Shahn, Raphael Soyer, and others. Raphael Soyer painted a portrait in 1936, "Reading from Left to Right," which depicted homelessness. I have also examined some major works by African-American painters depicting family and the extended family such as: Charles H. Alston, "Family;" Annie Lee; Varnette P. Honeywell, and others in the 20th century.

An African-American painter, Jacob Lawrence, became famous during the years of the Depression. He painted "Tombstones" in 1942, which conveyed overcrowded tenements and families living in Harlem. The painting had a symbolic comment that provided grave markers which constantly reminded an individual of death. Jacob Lawrence was a very distinguished artist who depicted the ghetto life and the struggles of African-American families struggling for equal rights in a pluralistic city and an American society.

The unit will teach the students that family structure can vary from region to region in different decades. Families serve as transmitters of culture to the youths. Migration and immigration of people from different cultural backgrounds have influenced each other. Social and political systems are based on people's beliefs. The academic, artistic, and recreational activities of people are reflections of their values and beliefs.

The designed learning activities are to extend and enhance students' reading of literature and interpretation of paintings toward a better understanding of cultural differences and social attitudes. The designed activities will address various learning styles, interests, and abilities of our students to build self-esteem through such paintings as "The Banjo Lesson," 1893, by Henry Ossawa Tanner. He was the first renowned African-American male painter.

Thinking and literary skills will be taught to the students. The students will identify the following when discussing the specific paintings and photography: theme, setting, characters, time, place, problem, events, goal, climax/outcomes, students' opinions, predictions, and viewpoints of the artists/photographers. Imagery and propaganda will be discussed through written and oral brainstorming: "Zeely," by Virginia Hamilton, "The Color Purple," by Alice Walker, and other trade books.

Other skills, feelings, description, dialogue (nonverbal/verbal), theme, mood, and descriptive vocabulary will be addressed. Other Caucasian paintings and painters examined are: "Adoration of the Magi," 1464, by Andrea Mantegna; "Watson and the Shark," 1778, by John S. Copley; "Sunday Morning in Virginia," 1877, by Winslow Homer.

(Recommended for Reading, Language Arts, and regular education classes, grades 5-8)

Key Words

Africa Art Family American Life Literature

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