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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume II: The Family in Art and Material Culture

Interpreting Selected Works of Art from the 20th Century African-American Experience

Guide for Curriculum Unit 91.02.03
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This unit is designed to integrate art appreciation into the art curriculum at the high school level. The artists to be considered are: Archibald Motley, Jr., Jacob Lawrence, Romare Beardon, William H. Johnson, Faith Ringgold, and Betye Saar. All African-Americans were chosen because they project a personal viewpoint within the American cultural experience. Their subject matter can be interpreted as socially or politically significant, or as examples of the Black experience in America but, ultimately their art has intrinsic value because it reflects specific times, places, and events through the individual artist's perspective. These works speak to the viewer about feeling and spirit within us through a universal language of form.

The process of object analysis allows the student to perceive the facts of a work by taking it apart layer by layer. In this way, speculation or how they feel about a work is reserved until last, and students are able to see things in the work they would ordinarily pass by with casual observation. Students interact with the works of art and become "active" viewers, not just "passive receivers."

Students will also learn to value art as they begin to create their own work based on a particular aspect of one of the selected works of art. Several slides by the same artist will be shown, accompanied by biographical information about the artist. One work will be selected and analyzed according to object analysis group discussion. A lesson will be presented which incorporates a stylistic or characteristic quality of the artist. Students will be encouraged to use what they have seen, discussed, and felt about the selected works of art. They will gain cultural perspective through active involvement and invention.

(Recommended for Visual Arts, grades 8 - 12)

Key Words

Art Afro-American History Harlem Renaissance African Twentieth Century Painting

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