



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1992 Volume IV: The National Experience: American Art and Culture

The Black Spiritual As Inspiration For Visual Art

Guide for Curriculum Unit 92.04.05
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In keeping with the national experience as seen through a specific American art or culture form, my unit focuses on the slave experience— in particular, the role of the Black spiritual.

Africans entered the American scene not as immigrants seeking opportunity, freedom and fortune, but as slaves condemned to a vile, hostile existence. They came in chains bringing nothing but their African tradition. This tradition, extraordinary in religion, song and poetry, combined with the American version of slavery, provided the catalyst for developing the Black spiritual.

The Black spiritual is rooted in African folk music. To understand and appreciate the spirituals a discussion of the American folk community is necessary. A folk community dictates and sings the entire range of its deep concerns. Subject matter for songs comes from deep felt community reaction to significant symbols and events in community life. A general study of the African folk community regarding basic religious beliefs, personality, politics and economics, musical and artistic heritage, will provide the necessary background for a better understanding of the spiritual.

My unit is constructed in three parts. Part one will study the African folk traditions which greatly influenced and contributed to the creation of the Black spiritual. Part two examines the spirituals focusing on their purpose, the needs they filled in their creators, themes and the use of literary device. The last section will provide three lesson plans designed to bring this information into the classroom as a source of inspiration, motivation and pride for New Haven school children.

(Recommended for Art, grades 6-12)

Key Words

Art Afro-American Music Spiritual African

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