



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1993 Volume IV: The Minority Artist in America

Jacob Lawrence's Freedom Trail

Guide for Curriculum Unit 93.04.08
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This curriculum unit will focus on the lives of two great Americans, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, as they are depicted in the masterful paintings of Jacob Lawrence, a man who was able to illustrate vividly the horrors of growing up Black in a racially divided South. Jacob Lawrence was able to celebrate African-American history, its significant figures, and their exploits through the use of historical narrative. Through these personal journeys to freedom students will be better able to understand the tragedies of slavery that many of their own ancestors endured.

Students are challenged to excel and develop a greater awareness of Jacob Lawrence's art and his modern interpretation of Black history. From an early age, Lawrence was inspired by the Harlem community to develop a keen interest in the stories of early Black leaders and to read about their struggles and their deep convictions. As a result, Lawrence's paintings adapted a narrative style to teach Black History to better convey the emotions and the ideas in the stories which he wished to tell. Jacob Lawrence painted the Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman series between 1938 and 1940. The paintings in each of these series forms a cumulative narrative history of the subject, with each individual painting describing a specific event in the central character's life, accompanied by a brief description of related events and information pertinent to the painting. The Frederick Douglass series contains thirty-two paintings and the Tubman series contains thirty-one. Ten paintings from each narrative have been selected for study in this unit.

Students participating in this unit will read and appreciate the candid and powerful first-hand account of what it was like to be a slave and to be forced to endure incredible hardships and severe persecution. Other objectives of the unit include dramatically improving the reading and writing skills of students and exposing them to quality pieces of literature written by and about powerful, positive role models. The unit is meant to improve critical thinking and inferential skills through discussions of both literature and art.

(Recommended for African American History, Reading or Literature, Grades 6-12)

Key Words

Lawrence Jacob Artists Afro-American Tubman Harriet

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