



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **Points of View— Looking at Five Contemporary Female Artists of Color: Amalia Mesa-Bains, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, and Pablita Velarde**

Curriculum Unit 93.04.11  
by Eva Scopino

As a young art student I too began to notice the absence not only of women but of artists of color from art history books and classes. We studied only two female artists from prehistory through modern times. I was profoundly affected by African art, but though I learned of its influence on such major European artists as Matisse and Picasso as well as its contributions to Cubism and other art movements, we learned of no individual artists of color. The question, “where/who are women artists?” was asked in conjunction with, “where/who are artists of color?”

I began (and continue) to fill in gaps by seeking out classes, readings, lectures, discussions, and exhibitions about women and minority artists. The information was, and continues to be, a revelation. I am still learning much about the economic and social conditions that excluded women and minority artists as well as the differences between the Western/European idea of art, a separate activity done for its own sake (i.e. leisure) as opposed to the non-Western concept of art as an integral part of life involved in ceremony, magic, ritual, and belief (i.e. function).

Overall, education and leisure time, crucial in developing creativity, were limited for women and minorities in the U.S. In addition, for minorities, cultural ties were cut due to slavery, forced relocation, and/or Western cultural hegemony. Even today, women and minority artists are under-represented in museums, galleries, and art history books.

It makes sense to know about both male and female artists of diverse backgrounds working throughout history and today, creating a myriad of painting, sculpture, pottery, photography, mixed media, etc. As I continue to shift my point of view, I have expanded my horizons, and have a more balanced overview. In an attempt to present both Western and non-Western traditions, I have exposed students to the arts of Africa, the Pre-Columbian Americas, and Asia as well as Europe and the U.S.

In learning more about women artists and artists of color, I found many of their stories inspiring, and fell in love with many new works of art. This discovery is a continual process and adds tremendous dimension to my breadth of knowledge. Broadening my spectrum has helped me understand myself, art, and the world in new and deeper ways. As a teacher, I want to do the same for my students. In the classroom and in talking with others, I try to present a broad and balanced point of view, and attempt to fill in gaps by highlighting the

achievements of women artists and artists of color. I want my students to see art by and about all kinds of people.

I teach visual arts for grades 5-8 at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet, a public middle school. This unique learning environment draws approximately 600 students from various New Haven neighborhoods and emphasizes the importance of the arts in education. Each student is required to take four core arts classes—dance, music, theater, and visual arts—plus academics. The arts classes are heterogeneous, small in order to facilitate individualized attention, and meet for approximately one hour per week; students also select one art form as their “art emphasis” class which meets for an additional two hours per week. Though the format seems ideal in many ways, we face the same critical urban and adolescent issues as other educators and students: drugs, apathy, violence, crime, economics, miscommunication, budget cuts. The student population at Betsy Ross is diverse: 46% African-American, 16% Hispanic, 33% white, and 5% Asian. Because the classroom, our community, and the world are multi-ethnic, students need a balanced overview of art appreciation that includes diverse artists and role models.

I have found many heroines among U.S. women artists of color, since many overcome a double whammy of being both female and minority in our society. I am interested in those who cross boundaries between “craft” and “fine art” and who mix media, breaking new ground while carrying on traditions. I’m interested also in artists whose art reflects issues of gender, class, race, and heritage. Such artists are inspiring and exciting because they present points of view different from the majority and bridge gaps between traditional women’s art and “crafts,” (e.g. sewing, collage, quilting), and “fine art” or “high art” (e.g. painting and sculpture). In their work, tradition and innovation co-exist.

Because this work has been outside the mainstream art world, I feel such artists are truly in the vanguard. In addition, overcoming burdens and breaking barriers are lessons from which we all can draw inspiration. Today, there are more references than ever available on women artists and artists of color; they are no longer invisible. Still, I find very few materials for young people about contemporary American female artists of color. For all these reasons, the focus of my curriculum unit will be five such visual artists: Amalia Mesa-Bains, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, and Pablita Velarde.

I point out the ethnicity and gender of these artists not to label them but to help clarify their art. These five artists overcame discrimination and create empowering art based on their lives and experiences as women and minorities. As such, they overcame obstacles many artists never had to face. They look at the world with multiple points of view: as artists, as women, and as persons of color.

All five artists share similar issues across cultures: all use art as a vehicle to preserve traditions of their culture; confront issues of heritage, race, gender, class; and/or reflect or document issues about their people. Though each received formal art training in the U.S., they all work out of non-Western traditions (African, Latino, American Indian, Asian) and work with cultural traditions in non-traditional ways. Mesa-Bains, Pindell, Ringgold, and Saar combine traditionally female art forms such as sewing, collage, and quilting with painting and objects from various cultures to create assemblages and installations about heritage, family, discrimination, and stereotype. Velarde records traditions of her heritage in a non-traditional way—as a Tewa woman making documentary and mythic paintings. In her day, only Tewa men made paintings.

The work of these five artists addresses many issues relevant to adolescents and art students in multicultural society: looking at cultural heritage, crossing barriers, questioning the world around us, drawing on personal experiences, finding role models, confronting discrimination and stereotype. There are many lessons urban adolescents (and we all) can learn from their lives and struggles, and the meanings and symbols of their

imagery can provide much fodder for discussion. Because many students learn best when actively engaged, they will enjoy creating art work inspired by the artists. Looking at the work of the five artists will help expand creativity because it illustrates that art can be made in many ways from a wide range of materials in addition to drawing and painting. And, finally, because in art—a universal language that crosses all barriers—there is no right way, the unit and lessons can provide ways for all students to express themselves and their individuality.

Overall I hope this unit will help widen horizons, illustrate that art can reflect many aspects of people and society, and help students see how they are connected to and fit into the world around them. Specifically, by examining the lives and works of these five artists I aim to help students:

- get in touch with their cultural heritage and deepen self-awareness
- increase awareness of the achievements of women artists of color
- use art as a vehicle for confronting issues of race, gender, stereotype
- experiment with materials in new ways
- find cultural role models
- develop sensitivity to and awareness of cultural differences and similarities
- dispel and de-mystify cultural stereotypes and myths
- identify issues, ideas, customs, beliefs, traditions of various cultures
- transcend barriers between “craft” and “fine art”
- find common bonds in order to form a greater sense of community

In this unit you will find biographies on each artist (which also discuss works of art and include questions), a glossary of terms, a bibliography, a young people’s reading list, and art lessons and activities. The bios highlight backgrounds, circumstances that led/encouraged each to become an artist and create the kind of work she does, obstacles each overcame, and specific works of art each created. These can be used for reference and/or read out loud in the classroom as a way of introducing each artist, and are to be accompanied by reproductions of each artist’s work.

A set of slides or color copies can be made from color reproductions in books or exhibition catalogs (consult the bibliography at the end of this unit for further information); postcards and posters can also be used. Slides may also be available from galleries which represent the artists. For Pindell, Ringgold, and Saar try the Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC or the Schomburg Center for Black Culture at the New York Public Library; for Ringgold try the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in Soho, NYC; for Mesa-Bains try the INTAR Latin American Gallery

in NYC; for Velarde, try the Museum of the American Indian in NYC or the Wheelwright Museum in Albuquerque, NM.

In the classroom, students can write individual stories or biographies of the artists based on the enclosed bios, give an oral report, or read and write together as a group. Additional suggested group activities include: discussing aspects of each artist's life including difficulties each overcame in order to become an artist; looking at and discussing examples of each artist's work; talking about themes and related issues such as racism, sexism, and stereotype; sharing personal experiences and role models; and discussing how to translate themes to our own lives and into art work. The bulk of time is to be spent on individual hands-on art activities—designing and creating 2-D and 3-D art work inspired by or based on the work of each artist.

To facilitate student art work, I feel it will be helpful to make students aware of essential and accessible qualities that exist in each artist's work. Try and get to the essence of each artist's work and her point of view. For example:

Amalia Mesa-Bains makes shrines and altars to favorite Chicana heroines as a way of highlighting their achievements.

Howardena Pindell makes paintings and collages that explore racism and her heritage, travels, and personal experiences.

Faith Ringgold makes stuffed, beaded, quilted, painted, and sewn objects and story quilts, using traditional African crafts, that tell stories about family, heritage, and discrimination.

Betye Saar uses objects from various cultures and nature to create assemblages that confront and expose cultural stereotypes and examine the shaping of identity.

Pablita Velarde documents traditions of her Tewa Indian heritage in detailed paintings in order to keep the heritage of her people alive.

This unit is intended to be used as a springboard. I hope that as the result of looking at these artists and their work, you and your students will come up with many additional interpretations, responses, issues, and project ideas.

## **AMALIA MESA-BAINS**

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is a Chicana artist, writer, and educator who lives in San Francisco. The name Chicano/Chicana refers to Mexican-Americans who fight for equal rights for their people. Chicanas are Mexican-American females; Chicanos are Mexican-American males.

Amalia grew up with the home altars (“altares”) and yard shrines (“capillas”—small chapels) which are popular with the Latino culture. These are sacred religious spaces. “Altares” might be set on top of the TV, on a table, or in the bedroom; “capillas” are placed outside in the yard, facing out toward the street. An altare

consists of religious statues, flowers, candles, lights, and family photographs.

Heritage, identity, family values, and rituals or cultural practices are important to Mexican-American culture. Some Chicana art may be about family history, daily life, or resistance to exploitation. The shrine can be all of these; it's also a symbol of spiritual belief. A strong part of Chicana identity and culture, it represents communication between sacred beings and humans—a place where people ask or give thanks for special favors.

Amalia's first art work was about religious shrines. She then took this theme further by using the traditional shrine form to honor her Mexican cultural heroines such as artist Frida Kahlo, actress Dolores Del Rio, and her own family members including her beloved grandmother. In making shrines and altars, she is identifying with her heritage, independent women, and those who break social barriers. Eventually the works grew to room-size installations which sometimes also include music and sound. Where have you seen an altar or shrine? What is a heroine or hero? Who are some of yours? Why?

One of Amalia's pieces, dedicated to the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, consists of a little stone room placed in a landscape of dead leaves filled with souvenirs of Mexican popular arts, such as folk toys and pottery figures, that Kahlo loved. What do you think this means? Why is the room made of stone? What do the dead leaves represent? Why did the artist include Mexican folk art?

Another of her shrines, to the Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio, is 8 feet high. At first you see lots of shiny satin, ribbons, lace, and glittery mirrors, bottles, and pearls. It seems Dolores was a very glamorous movie star! But closer inspection reveals that Amalia is also praising the actress for her accomplishments: Dolores Del Rio was the first Mexican superstar to break through the Hollywood color barrier, much the same way Jackie Robinson was the first black to play in a major league baseball club. The shrine includes photographs of Dolores, information about her, and personal letters. She was a friend of the artist Frida Kahlo, and was committed to helping artists in Mexico.

An object that Amalia often uses in her work is that of a mirror, sometimes broken. Looking in a mirror can symbolize pride; a broken mirror can also symbolize a shattered self-image. Mirrors reflect how we see ourselves and others—sometimes, in a mirror, you see something in a new way. How do you think this relates to Latinos and other minorities in our society?

Amalia Mesa-Bains writes articles for books and magazines and serves on the San Francisco Art Commission. Her art gives new meaning to ancient traditions.

## **HOWARDENA PINDELL**

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is a painter, museum curator, and art professor who grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she was born in 1943. She always wanted to be an artist. When she was young, she took art classes on Saturdays. Then she studied art at Boston University and at the Yale School of Art here in New Haven. After college, she was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. A curator is a person who acquires art work for a museum and puts it on exhibit. Howardena now teaches at the State University of New York in Stony Brook.

Howardena Pindell fights for equal rights. An African-American, she has worked against racism and discrimination in the art world. When she first tried to show her work, she found that some people in the art

world did not want to show art by blacks. Her art is autobiographical, which means it is about her own life and experiences. It describes her travels. It tells about racist events that are painful or offensive. In her work she points out and protests racial prejudice.

In her collages, paintings, and collage-paintings, Howardena mixes different materials, combining photographs, drawings, paper, postcards, thick paint, colored paper dots, glitter, etc. She makes her work from cut, sewn, and pasted pieces.

Howardena writes and speaks out against racism, and tries to help other minority artists. Her own heritage is a mixture of African, Seminole, French, English, German, Christian, and Jewish. She has traveled to Egypt and Africa, Asia, Europe, Russia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and lived in Japan and India.

When she lived in Japan, she learned much from its culture. She saw that its ancient cities were built on plans which were like mazes. She saw many things shaped like triangles, such as temples, landscapes, and Mt. Fuji. That shape is repeated in sand mounds in Japanese gardens. After seeing these, she decided to try making art work that was not rectangular. Her works might be shaped like triangles, diamonds, circles, S-curves, or mazes. Triangles also remind her of pyramids, which are part of her African heritage; curves remind her of coiled snakes or flowing rivers in India; she likes circles because they are very simple and basic and remind her of nature—the sun, earth, stars, moon.

Howardena cuts out the various shapes she wants to make from canvas or paper, then adds on more cutout shapes and sews them together. Then she might paint the surface, or add collage elements such as postcards, magazine pictures, words, photographs, glitter, etc. Her work is like a quilt or a mosaic—made from many pieces.

In her art work, she explores her own cultural heritage. It is about her travels, personal experiences, and memories. She traces historical and personal references to racism and discrimination such as slavery. Have you ever felt discriminated against? How did it feel?

Howardena Pindell has won many awards for her work. Her art has been exhibited all over the world. You can see one of her paintings, entitled “Autobiography: Water/Ancestors, Middle Passage/ Family Ghosts” right here in Connecticut at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford.

“Autobiography: Water/Ancestors, Middle Passage/Family Ghosts” is a very large (nearly 10 feet by 6 feet) oval-shaped painting that tells a story about Africans’ forced journey to the Americas as slaves. The background is painted blue to represent the ocean they crossed. There is a shape of a slave ship, painted white, and pictures of Black people, symbols of African culture, and a picture of Howardena with her face painted white that was influenced by Michael Jackson’s face in his “Thriller” video. She seems to be floating, and is looking out at us. There are also many pictures of eyes looking out.

What do you think she is trying to say in the painting? Why is the ship white? What do the eyes represent? Why is her face painted white? How does the painting make you feel?

## FAITH RINGGOLD

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was born in Harlem in New York City in 1930, the youngest of three children. Because she had asthma, she was a sickly child. Often, she had to stay home from school and stay in bed. Her mother, Willi, helped her keep up with her schooling and also helped her become an artist. She was a fashion designer and showed Faith how to create things from fabric and sewing, crayons and paper. When Faith felt better, she took her to museums to look at art. Her father helped her too—he taught Faith to read, and bought her first easel.

After high school, Faith married a jazz musician and had two daughters. Because she had always wanted to be an artist, she tried to enroll in the liberal arts program at the City College of New York, but discovered the school would not allow women to study liberal arts. However, they did allow women in the education department, so Faith decided to become an art teacher. Teaching was a tradition in her family. She taught in the New York public schools for twenty years and did her art work on her own. Some years later she returned to City College to get her masters of fine arts degree.

The classroom and students were a source of inspiration for Faith. Her students often helped her see new ways of doing things. One day a student introduced her to the work of the black writer James Baldwin. She was inspired by his writings and those of other African-American authors. These works gave Faith a powerful sense of pride in being black and helped her become more interested in her African heritage. The words she was reading soon gave her new ideas that she put into her art work.

Her new work was about racism, civil rights, and the struggles of black people. Her message was: inequality is wrong and must be stopped. She protested and worked hard to create more opportunities for blacks and women. She helped get museums to show more art work by black women artists and helped put African-Americans in more powerful positions. She began to strongly express her opinions about discrimination. In her work she was creating visual stories of black people's experiences.

In 1972, a big change occurred in Faith's life. She was teaching a class in African crafts at a college in New York, and one of her students who had gone to see an exhibit of her paintings asked Faith why she didn't use African crafts—especially beads, masks, and cloth—in her own art, since she loved working with them so much. Faith realized she was denying her African culture and own family heritage. All the women in her family had worked with cloth for generations; her mother designed clothing and had learned to sew from her own grandmother, who had made beautiful quilts.

After seeing an exhibit of paintings on cloth from Tibet, Faith decided to try painting on cloth herself. She began to combine painting, writing, and quilting as a way of telling stories about her people and her heritage. She called these works story quilts. Storytelling had always been very important in her family; it is also a very important way of handing down traditions in many cultures. Faith says that everyone was a storyteller when she was a child: women, men, and children. Her brother would tell her scary stories in the dark at night.

Traditional quilts are pieces of fabric sewn together and layered to create a warm cover for sleeping. But Faith's quilts are different. In them, she combines African crafts (such as beading and braiding), sewing, pattern (including Kuba designs—geometric African textiles), fabric, and painting to tell stories about family, heritage, and discrimination. She writes stories on them with a permanent marker; sometimes she tie-dyes the fabric. The quilts tell stories about city street life, slavery, jazz, families, neighborhoods, and more. They are a patchwork of people who are individuals but who are also part of a larger community.

In one of her story quilts, entitled, “The Dinner Quilt,” Faith shows adults and young people in Sunday-best clothes sitting around a dinner table laden with food. It looks like a holiday. The colors and patterns are rich reds, greens, and blues. The writing tells about a woman named Melody remembering past Christmas dinners with her family. She and other children would listen to the adults’ mysterious conversations and play games. She remembers her various relatives, like an aunt who sewed the names of famous black women, such as Harriet Tubman, Zora Neal Hurston, and Marian Anderson, on placemats. In the quilt you can see the names actually embroidered on each mat. The people in the quilt are looking at each other and at the place mats. The border is made of squares divided diagonally into four triangles, a pattern based on African textiles. What story is Faith trying to tell in this quilt? She is talking about heritage, history, and family. Why are these important? Why are the people looking at each other and the place mats? Why does she use a traditional African pattern for the quilt?

After a trip to Africa, Faith’s work changed again. She began to use different materials, such as feathers, in her work, and the faces of her masks and portraits became more simplified, like African masks. She also began to work together on quilts and other projects with her mother, Willi Posey. Together they made 3-dimensional, life-size, soft foam and cloth sculptures of black historical figures such as Martin Luther King, neighborhood people in Harlem like Lena, a homeless person, and family members like her Aunts Bessie and Edith. Willi fashioned the bodies and clothes for the figures. The faces were inspired by African masks.

Faith Ringgold’s work grew into performances in which singing, chanting, dancing, music, and theater are performed with her story quilts, paintings, and soft sculptures to tell stories about her family and heritage, or protest discrimination. She likes performing because she can communicate directly with the audience. Sometimes her daughters work with her, wearing Faith’s masks and soft sculptures. Wearing a mask can sometimes give a feeling of power or transform the way you feel. How do you feel when you wear a mask? How are traditions being handed down in Faith’s own family?

As a woman and an African-American, Faith Ringgold has often experienced discrimination. But her work, motivated by politics and her heritage, speaks out to many people. Faith has had many exhibitions, has become an art professor at the University of California at San Diego, and has won many awards. She continues to live in Harlem six months out of the year. Her art continues to protest discrimination and to tell stories about her personal experiences and the experiences of African-Americans.

## **BETYE SAAR**

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was born in Pasadena, California in 1926. As a child she was fascinated by the Los Angeles Watts Towers, spiral towers she watched being built out of concrete and thousands of pieces of broken glass, pottery, bottle caps, mirrors, shells, and rocks by a local folk artist named Simon Rhodia. She found the towers as magical and curious as a place in a fairy tale. They inspired her to think about making art from found objects like the bits of colored glass, stones, and seashells she loved collecting during treasure hunts in her grandmother’s back yard. Because her parents worked outside the home, Betye often turned to art projects to amuse herself and her brothers and sisters. She loved making gifts for her family.

Betye’s parents helped her creativity grow. Her father liked to sketch and wrote plays, songs, and poetry. Her mother, a jewelry-maker and designer, taught her how to sew and paint. She sent Betye to art classes in the summer.

Betye attended Pasadena City College, where she excelled in art. But at that time, it wasn't recommended that black students study art. Betye felt she was as good as anyone, but she never got any praise. Each year, her class designed floats for the Rose Bowl Parade. One year her design won, but she was not given a prize and her design wasn't used once people found out she was black. This discrimination made her angry, but later she said it made her work harder than ever.

After she graduated from college, Betye worked as a social worker and a professional costume designer, got married, raised a family of three, and attended graduate school at California State University. She started out making prints, but an exhibit she saw by the artist Joseph Cornell inspired her. He made boxes that looked like small theatres, filled with particular objects arranged in a specific way. These works are called assemblages. Betye's desire to make art from her collections and found objects was reawakened.

Betye uses all sorts of objects in her work, including fabric, beads, mirrors, paintings, xerox prints, handkerchiefs, sequins, masks, family photographs, postcards, labels, and things from nature such as wood, fur, straw, feathers, bones, and even butterflies. She believes art can be made from anything.

To explore how cultures are viewed by others, she includes objects from various cultures—African, Mexican, and Native American. She wants people to look at stereotypes and question how and what they think about different cultures. She is challenging our values. Her work points out stereotypes to express her pain and anger about prejudice. At first she made only small boxes, then she expanded her ideas into shrine-like assemblages and room-size works called installations.

In her work Betye often includes "objects from her ancestral past." For example, she might use objects, symbols, or materials from Egyptian and African culture, because that is where some of her ancestors came from. She is connecting herself with her ancestry and culture. What do you think she is trying to tell us by using such objects? She also likes to include mirrors, sometimes broken, or shiny reflective surfaces in her work. Like Alice in "Through the Looking Glass," she believes a mirror can change the way a person thinks about something. It helps you see something in a new way. Why is this important?

Betye's work is influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1960's, African-American folk culture and myths, family history, magic and fortune-telling, African sculpture, and her feelings about discrimination she experienced. She also uses dreams and memories as her inspiration. Have you ever had a dream that you thought meant something important? Though the works speak of her own heritage (African, Irish, and Native American), they relate to people of all backgrounds who have experienced discrimination or sadness.

One of her assemblages, "Black Girl's Window," is a tall wooden frame divided in half. The top half is divided into smaller spaces like window panes, and in each window there is a picture. Below them a black silhouette of a person looks through the window. The person is like a shadow, flat and undefined, and only her eyes are visible—one opened and one closed. It's as if she is looking both outside and inside herself. The figure, with her hands pressed against the window, looks as if she is trying to get out. In the panes are pictures from fortune-telling cards such as suns, moons and stars, and in the center is a symbol of death, a skeleton. There is also a picture of an elderly white woman. Betye has both black and white ancestors, and says she understands what it feels like to be both black and white.

What feeling does "Black Girl's Window" give you? Why is the person undefined, like a shadow? How do you think the person feels? Why? What is Betye trying to say in this work?

Betye Saar's works often have feelings of mystery or memories of another time. Sometimes they feel haunted

or strange. Her assemblages are powerful because they are about family, heritage, ancestors, or ancient cultures; but also because they can help change a person's view or opinion. By placing certain objects together, she gives them new meaning.

Betye's art has been in many, many exhibitions. Sometimes she works on projects with her daughter Alison Saar, who is also an artist. In addition to her art-making, she teaches at the Otis Arts Institute in Los Angeles. As a teacher she says she often gets inspiration from her students.

## **PABLITA VELARDE**

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is a Tewa Indian painter who was born in Santa Clara Pueblo near Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1918. Her given name was Tse Tsan, which in the Tewa language means Golden Dawn. At age five she was sent to a school for Indian children where she was forced to learn English and forbidden to speak her native tongue. Here she was given a new name, Pablita.

Pablita began painting when she was a child, then studied art at the Santa Fe Indian School, where she was exposed by her teacher to the art of the great Indian civilizations. Native American painting began hundreds of years before Europeans came to the New World and has always been a vital means of expression.

She was the only girl in her art class. By the time she was 15 years old, she was already becoming well-known because of two murals about Pueblo Indian life she painted which were exhibited at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. In her painting, she worked steadily and seriously, paying careful attention to detail. After she graduated from school she taught drawing for young people, traveled to the Midwest and the East, and got married. She then returned to her native village and continued to paint in a studio she built there. She had a son and a daughter, who also became artists. Later, she moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Pablita has devoted her life to recording scenes of daily Indian life in the Southwest. Through painting, she records the traditions, culture, religion, and politics of her Pueblo people. The paintings show everyday aspects of Indian life such as corn grinding, basketmaking, planting, making pottery, and ritual life including ceremonies, costumes, and dances. Her paintings show moments frozen in time.

Because her paintings document, which means to prove or show examples of, they are called documentary paintings. They show exceptional detail and color, and include rituals, customs, symbols, folklore, and ceremonies that have been handed down through many, many generations. In her work, colors and designs on clothing, details about houses, pottery shapes, and methods of doing things are exact. Paintings are often used as a source of information about cultures. By telling stories about her culture, Pablita Velarde's paintings help preserve her people's traditions and heritage. Because they also show Tewa mythology and legends, they can be called mythic paintings.

But there is something that is not traditional about Pablita Velarde. At the time she started painting, only Tewa men made paintings. Tradition said that women were expected to make pottery and attend to the home and family. In this way she broke from tradition and did something very new, even though her paintings show traditions which are very old. Because she became a painter, some of her people were very angry with her. The traditions that said that only men could paint were ancient and sacred.

Do you think it's a good idea to change old traditions or create new ones? Do you think it's OK for young

people to do some things differently from the way their parents or grandparents did them? Do you think it's OK for people from a culture to change something about their own culture? Why/Why not?

Pablita paints in oils and casein, a water-based paint like tempera. She also makes her own paint in the traditional Indian way by grinding natural pigments from rocks, minerals, and wood to produce earth colors (red, brown, white, yellow, black). She grinds colors with a "metate," a grinding stone traditionally used by Pueblo women to grind corn.

Besides her many paintings, Pablita created large murals at the Museum of New Mexico and the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. She has exhibited her work all over the U.S. and is also a very popular speaker. She has won many prizes, including the New Mexico Governor's Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts. In 1988, she was honored in New Mexico as a "Living Treasure." In addition, she has written and illustrated a book on tribal legends entitled, "Old Father Story-Teller." Pablita Velarde is considered the leading Indian woman painter of the Southwest.

One of the paintings from her book, a picture called "Old Father," shows an old man sitting outdoors telling stories to many young people surrounding him. They seem enchanted by his story and also by the night sky above them, which is full of constellations and stars. Also in the sky are ancestors walking across the heavens. The Old Father is pointing upward. In the background are geometric Pueblo designs which looks like steps, and various animals including a spider, turtle and an eagle. The Old Father is painted in neutral browns, tans, and grays and the night sky in black, but the Indian designs are shades of soft red, yellow, and blue. Pablita says the colors symbolize the directions: white is north, yellow is west, blue is east, and red is south. The step designs represent sacred mountains near her people's homeland. Atop each step design is an evergreen tree, a symbol for life. Long, long ago, the stars and the animals led her ancestors to the beautiful land in New Mexico where they now live.

What story does this painting tell? What do you think the old man and the young people represent? Why is Old Father pointing upward? Why are there ancestors walking in the sky? Why do the stars tell or show? What feelings does this painting give you?

## GLOSSARY

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*ancestor*— a person from whom a person descends; such as a mother, father, grandparent, etc. Ancestors came before you.

*assemblage*— a work of art made from a collection of particular things put together in a certain way; a sculpture that has many parts.

*autobiography*— the story of one's own life shown, told, written, painted, etc. by oneself.

*ceremony*— a special occasion established by custom. It can be religious or non-religious; for example, a wedding, birthday party, funeral.

*civil rights*— basic human rights guaranteed to each individual, especially equal treatment of all people.

*collage*— a work of art made from various objects pasted together.

*culture*— the habits, skills, art of a given people in a given period of time; civilization.

*customs*— habits and practices which are commonly used in a society and carried on by tradition. For example, it's our custom to bring a present to a birthday party.

*discrimination*— a difference in treatment of persons, usually unfair treatment.

*document*— to prove or show something.

*folklore*— the traditions, beliefs, customs, etc. of a people. Folk tales, legends, and fairy tales are folklore.

*heritage*— things handed down from one's ancestors or the past. Do your grandparents tell you stories or show you special ways of doing things? Do you have something that belonged to one of your ancestors? Do your parents make special foods they learned about from their parents?

*heroine or hero*— a person who displays great courage; someone admired for qualities or achievements and regarded as a role model. Who is your heroine or hero? Why?

*installation*— a work of art made up of things, arranged in a space; an environment created by an artist. You can walk into an installation—it's usually a room filled with things.

*myth*— a traditional story, with an unknown author, based on history or nature and containing religious beliefs. Myths explain some phenomenon of nature, such as how the first people started. Myths usually tell about gods and goddesses.

*prejudice*— suspicion, unfavorable judgment, or hatred of other races, religions, etc.

*pueblo*— a Spanish word for village

*racism*— discrimination based on race. This is against the law.

*ritual*— acts, words, gestures determined by tradition that are part of a ceremony. For example, making a wish and blowing out candles on a birthday cake.

*sexism*— discrimination based on male or female gender. This is against the law.

*shrine*— a place that is sacred, by association or religious belief.

*stereotype*— a fixed idea that has no individuality; for example, girls can't be mechanics, or boys can't be nurses.

*symbol*— something that stands for or represents something else. A feather is a symbol for flying.

*tradition*— long-established customs, beliefs, and practices handed down from generation to generation. What are some of your family traditions?

AMALIA MESA-BAINS. Create a shrine to honor someone you admire or who is very important to you.

### **Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- define/describe shrine, altar, and installation;
- design and create 3-D art work that pays homage to someone;
- evaluate and discuss works of art.

### **Materials**

assorted scrap cardboard, cardboard boxes, paper towel tubes, etc.  
acrylic or tempera paint  
glue, hot glue, or masking tape  
scissors  
pencils, markers, or crayons  
assorted objects such as: photos, memorabilia, cutout pictures, fabric, beads, fringe, shells, feathers, leaves, flowers, wood scraps, foil, bric-a-brac, etc.

### **Overview**

A shrine can be any size or shape. It can be painted, covered with fabric or foil, etc. and/or made up of various objects like an installation. Work individually or in groups.

### **Strategies**

1. Read about Amalia Mesa-Bains' life and look at her shrines. What are some basic elements of a shrine? What makes them unique? What are they for? Have you ever seen one? Who do you want to honor, and what can you include in the shrine that relates to him/her? What colors and materials will you use—what mood or feeling are you trying to create? What aspect(s) of her/his life do you want to highlight? Example: If you made a shrine to Michael Jordan, what would it look like/include? How can you create a shrine for him which is not stereotypical? How do you think Michael feels about being a gifted athlete? What other aspects of his life can you show?
2. Experiment with materials for the size and shape of your shrine. What will it look like? How do the size and shape relate to the admired person?
3. Construct your shrine from cardboard, tape, glue, etc.
4. Paint the shrine and decorate it; or cover it with foil, fabric, etc. Use objects and colors that relate to the person as well as the mood, emotion, and information you want to convey.

5. Glue/arrange objects and pictures on, inside, or around the shrine.
6. Once it's completed, look at your work and decide on a title for it.
7. When completed, evaluate the shrines as a group. In what way does each shrine honor a person? What do various objects or pictures tell you? Why were certain colors used? How do the shrines make you feel?

HOWARDENA PINDELL. Create a non-rectangular collage-painting that is autobiographical.

### **Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- define/describe autobiography, heritage, symbol;
- design/create a non-rectangular painting-collage that is autobiographical;
- evaluate and discuss art work.

### **Materials**

paper, cardboard, or canvas

acrylic or tempera paint

glue, scissors, tape

collage materials such as: photographs, postcards, memorabilia, magazine pictures, colored paper, stickers, glitter, beads, fringe, shells, bottle caps, feathers, leaves, flowers, buttons, foil, etc.

Optional: needle and thread or sewing machine to sew your work

### **Overview**

A collage-painting incorporates painting and collage. Yours can be any size or shape you want, except rectangular. It will be autobiographical—all about you!

### **Strategies**

1. Read about Howardena Pindell's life and look at examples of her collage-paintings. Define and discuss autobiography. Have you ever written an autobiography? How can you tell about yourself in visual language? Will you tell your whole life story or one experience? Which experiences have been positive and which negative? Have you traveled to or lived in other places? What were they like? What is your heritage? How can you show this visually? What materials and colors will you use? How do they relate to you? What mood are you trying to create? Remember that Howardena often uses shapes other than rectangles—what shapes will you use in your collage-painting? Why?
2. What experience(s) will you depict? Think about how they made you feel.
3. To begin your work, start with one shape, a picture of yourself, or a personal symbol. Cut this out of fabric or paper. You'll add to this.
4. Add collage elements—pictures and objects—onto your picture. Use things that appeal to you or are about you. Glue, tape, staple, or sew them on or around your picture. You can paint and decorate them if you wish; or create small separate paintings and attach them.
5. Continue to build your collage-painting until you are satisfied. Is it a maze, spiral, coil, triangle, diamond, or irregular?
6. Once completed, look at your work and decide on a title for it.
7. Evaluate works as a group. What can you tell about each person from his/her collage-painting? What patterns and shapes were used instead of rectangles? How do they relate to the subject matter? What is each collage-painting about?

FAITH RINGGOLD: Create a story quilt that tells a story about your heritage, family, a heroine/hero, or discrimination.

### **Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- define/describe heritage, discrimination, heroine/hero;
- create art work that tells a story about an aspect of their heritage and/or a heroine/hero;
- evaluate and discuss art work.

### **Materials**

plain and decorated paper, canvas, scrap fabric, felt, patterned wallpaper acrylic or tempera paint  
hot glue or white glue  
stapler  
scissors  
pencils or crayons  
permanent or cloth marker (black or other dark color)  
OPTIONAL: collage items such as: photographs, magazine, cutout pictures, sequins, beads, fringe, glitter, shells, feathers, buttons, etc. tie-dying materials: fabric dye, rubber bands, bucket, sink.  
NOTE: if you are making a functional quilt you will also need: cotton batting and backing fabric, needle and thread or sewing machine

### **Overview**

A story quilt can be small or large, individual or group-oriented, and made in a variety of ways. It can be made from collage and paint or crayons, or incorporate fabric, sewing, and found, natural, and decorative objects. It can be made from uniform squares sewn or joined together, OR it can be pieced from irregular shapes.

This is a good project for integrating other subject areas such as social studies, writing, math, etc. You might create a story quilt about Black Historical figures; Women's Herstory; feature poetry or other writing forms, etc.

Each story quilt has three parts: pictures, writing, and a border. For your story quilt pick a theme, such as heritage, discrimination, family, Black History, heroines/heroes, ethnic foods, etc. Each student can make one section to be put all together with a common border OR each can make a complete story quilt. Sections/quilts can be any size.

NOTE: If you are working in fabric and wish to create an actual quilt, you will need to sew the pieces. When the front is completed, you will need another piece of fabric slightly larger than it to back it, and a piece of cotton batting the same size for the inside layer. Sew the three layers together inside-out, turn, then close (sew) the opening.

### **Strategies**

1. Read about Faith Ringgold's life and look at examples of her story quilts and other works. What is heritage? Why is it important? What can you learn from it? What are some of the best things about your own heritage? How can you tell Faith's heritage from her work? What patterns,

objects, or designs would you use to illustrate your own heritage? What is discrimination? What are some examples you may have noticed or experienced? What is a heroine/hero? What story do you want to tell about your heritage, family, discrimination, or your heroine/hero?

2. You might want to start your story quilt by painting a picture (yourself, family, role model, heroine/hero, etc.) on plain paper, fabric, or canvas. Other subjects related to heritage include important cultural, historical, or sports figures. What emotion are you trying to convey? Realism is not important.

3. Paint a background for your picture; or create one from collage: pasted papers, photographs, cut-out pictures and words from calendars, old greeting cards, magazines, newspapers, etc.

4. On a separate sheet of paper, write several lines about the person you are featuring. Who is she/he? Why is she/he important to you? What does he/she dress or look like? What are some things she/he told or showed you? TELL A STORY ABOUT THE PERSON OR EVENTS.

5. Arrange and glue, tape, or staple the painting onto a larger piece(s) of painted or decorated paper, canvas, or fabric (you can also tie-dye fabric if you wish). The backing can be made of one piece or several sections. 6. Arrange the written information on the backing along with the painting OR write directly on the paper/canvas/fabric with a marker.

7. Create a border around your picture from decorated papers or fabric cut and pasted in certain patterns; or by painting various patterns, cultural artifacts, symbols, designs. You can also use tie-dyed fabric for the border. Faith Ringgold often uses patterns based on traditional African textile designs.

8. Enhance your “story quilt” further, if desired, by adding objects such as feathers, buttons, beads, glitter, shells, fringe, etc. as well as embroidery, weaving, and stitchery. Attach objects with glue or sewing.

9. Once completed, look at your work and title it.

10. Evaluate and discuss the works as a group. What story does each quilt tell? How did each student depict heritage, discrimination, or a heroine/hero? What do the various patterns, colors, objects tell you?

BETYE SAAR. Create a box assemblage that tells about your heritage and/or points out discrimination or stereotypes.

### **Objectives**

Students will be able to:

-define/describe assemblage, discrimination, heritage, stereotype;

- create art work about discrimination, heritage, and/or stereotype;
- evaluate and discuss art work.

## **Materials**

cardboard, wood, or plastic box of any size (e.g. shoe or cigar box)  
acrylic or tempera paint  
assorted paint brushes  
glue or hot glue  
scissors  
objects for assemblage such as: photos, memorabilia, bric-a-brac, cutout pictures, pebbles, food labels, glitter, shells, wood, feathers, leaves, flowers, buttons, foil.

## **Overview**

Your box assemblage can be any size. Its theme can be heritage, discrimination, and/or stereotype. Collect objects and pictures that relate to your theme. What your assemblage will look like depends on what you want to say: it might be covered with feathers to represent a bird, or filled with news clippings about apartheid in South Africa.

## **Strategies**

1. Read about Betye Saar's life and look at examples of her assemblages. How can you show heritage? discrimination? How do stereotypes about certain cultures make you feel? Can you think of stereotypes on TV commercials, programs or movies? Do you feel insulted by certain images? What are some symbols that make you think of your ancestors?
2. Look at the shape and size of your box. How will it be displayed—open to show what's inside, or closed? Will it be seen only from the front or from all sides?
3. Gather the objects and images you are going to use. How will you arrange them in order to transform the box into an assemblage? What do you want to say? You might want to base your work on a dream. What emotions are you trying to convey—sadness, surprise, anger, etc. How can you create texture? You can also use letters and words.
4. Glue or staple things onto/inside/around your box.
5. You can also paint your assemblage. Use colors that have personal meaning or are related to your theme. Do you want to use bright colors? earth colors? all one color? What are you trying to

say? You can also incorporate foil, fabric, feathers, fake fur, etc.

6. Once completed, look at your assemblage and decide on a title for it.

7. Evaluate the box assemblages as a group. What can you tell from each one? What feelings do they give you? Etc.

PABLITA VELARDE. Create a painting that documents, in detail, aspects of your neighborhood, environment, family, etc.

### **Objectives**

Students will be able to:

-define/describe documentary;

-create a painting that documents details and aspects of their world;

-evaluate and discuss art work.

### **Materials**

paper, canvas, or cardboard

paint (watercolor, gouache, acrylic or tempera)

pencils and erasers

variety of round and flat brushes

palettes, plates, or pans for mixing colors

### **Overview**

Your documentary painting can be any size you want. Imagine that some aspect of your world is being destroyed. You have been chosen to paint it in order to preserve it or tell about it. What will you include?

NOTE: This can also be a mural project. Work in teams and sections. Decide on the theme (neighborhood, fashion, architecture, food, etc.) and plan/sketch sections. Paint on heavy paper or fabric and mount it on the wall OR paint directly onto clean, dry walls. For walls, use acrylic paint because it is waterproof once dry.

### **Strategies**

1. Read about Pablita Velarde's life and look at examples of her work. What can you learn about her people from her paintings? (Dress, customs, food, transportation, landscape, etc.) In order to tell about your world, what details will you document in your painting? How do you get food; what do you eat; wear? What styles, jewelry, hairstyles, music, etc. are popular? What transportation do you use? What does your house or neighborhood look like? What leisure activities do you enjoy? Where do you hang out?
2. Sketch/plan your painting first, if desired. Plan out areas. What's most important to you? What figures or areas do you want to emphasize? What will be in the foreground, middleground, background? You can simplify shapes and also include symbols, patterns, and words if you like.
3. Determine which colors you will use for various aspects of your picture. What mood are you trying to create? What do you want to emphasize—which areas do you want dark and which light?
4. Paint large flat areas first, then add details. Example: exactly what kind of baseball hats and sneakers are your figures wearing? Where are they standing? What type of foods are they eating? Detail the colors, shapes, sizes, etc.
5. Once completed, look at your painting and decide on a title for it.
6. Evaluate the paintings as a group. What can we tell from each one? What do the details tell us? How can we tell what's important to each artist? Etc.

## **ART LESSONS AND ACTIVITIES**

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### **SUGGESTED RELATED ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS:**

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1. Research, write, and illustrate stories, poems, or biographies of one of the artists, based on the enclosed bios and reading list, or your own research.
2. Give an oral report on one of the artists. Accompany it with examples of the artist's work.
3. Read the enclosed biographies or suggested books, and write and illustrate together as a group. Which aspect(s) of the artist will you focus on?
4. Discuss aspects of each artist's life including discrimination she experienced and difficulties each overcame in order to become an artist.
5. Discuss themes in each artist's work and related issues such as heritage, prejudice, discrimination, racism, sexism, and stereotype. Share personal experiences, heroines/heroes, and role models. Discuss how to translate themes to our own lives and into art work.
6. Pick one of the artists. Design and create your own art activities, such as games, puzzles, or art

work, based on her life and work.

7. Create a bulletin board about one or all of the artists. Xerox examples of their art work from books or draw illustrations. Write some things about their lives and related issues. Decorate the bulletin board with the materials, colors, patterns, objects, and symbols that the artists use in their work.

8. Create a montage or collage with one of these themes: discrimination, racism, sexism, heritage, family, travel. Use cutout pictures from magazines and newspapers.

9. These five artists are contemporary, which means they are working right now. All live in the U.S. Send them questions, pictures, slides or examples of art work you have made based on their work. Let them know what you are doing. You can send things c/o the galleries where they show their work.

10. Visit exhibitions that include work by the artists. Write and/or draw your responses.

11. Imagine the styles of the artists switched around. What if Faith Ringgold worked in the style of Pablita Velarde? What if Howardena Pindell worked in the style of Amalia Mesa-Bains? Etc.

## READING LIST FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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“Art & Man.” V. 22, No. 2 (November 1991), Scholastic, Inc., Monroe, OH, “All in the Family: Betye and Alison Saar:” p. 16. Concise information about their work; color reproduction of one of Betye’s assemblages.

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Ringgold, Faith, “Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky.” Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1992. The story of Harriet Tubman beautifully illustrated with paintings in color by the artist.

———, “Tar Beach.” Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1991. Autobiographical story; expressive paintings and patterns in color; reproduction of the “Tar Beach” quilt.

Sills, Leslie, “Inspirations, Stories About Women Artists.” Albert Whitman & Company, Niles, Illinois, 1989. Excellent and informative; contains bios and color reproductions.

Sills, Leslie, "Visions: Stories about Women Artists." Albert Whitman & Company, Niles, Illinois, 1993. Excellent and informative ; contains bios and color reproductions.

"The Last Story Quilt." Video about Faith Ringgold, Home Vision Portrait of An Artist Series, 1993. Available at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Features the artist in her studio.

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Mesa-Bains, Amalia. "El Mundo Femenino: Chicana Artists of the Movement—A Commentary on Development and Production," in "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985." Wight Art Gallery, University of California, 1991. Informative writings on Chicana art and culture.

Miller, Lynn F./Swenson, Sally S. "Lives and Works, Talks with Women Artists." Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ, 1981. In-depth interviews.

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“Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of African-American Art.” Bucknell University, Lewisburg Center Gallery, 1985. Informative essays; interviews; color reproductions.

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