



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

Introduction

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Minority art sometimes feels like a subject without a country. Though artists from America's many minority groups have been producing art for centuries, their art has no home within the public school curriculum. It is tucked into the larger surveys of American or Western literature; or it is confined to special weeks within the calendar year when we celebrate ethnic and racial histories; or it is taught informally, at the instigation of teachers who wish to supplement the curriculum with little official help or guidance.

This volume of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute is designed to help teachers bring minority art, in its many different forms, directly into the classroom. The eleven units contained within the volume grew from a seminar that focused on the art and literature of three minority cultures in America: African Americans, Chicanos (Mexican Americans) and Native Americans. Because it is impossible to cover all the art forms, let alone the artists, of each culture, we worked selectively to look at representative figures. The largest amount of the time was devoted to writers and painters within the African American tradition. When we turned to Chicano and Indian artists, we concentrated on contemporary artists, many of them still living and producing art today.

What unites the work of virtually all artists of color within the United States is double consciousness, a notion first spelled out by the black writer, critic and educator W.E.B. Dubois at the turn of the century. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois described the manner in which African Americans experience their identity in a predominantly white and frequently hostile environment. He noted the way that blacks, and by implication, other minority figures, see life through a dual filter: both as members of the society at large and as black members of that society. Dubois felt that this capacity of double vision, to see as mainstream society sees and also to see with the detachment, and the insight, that the mainstream society lacks, was both a gift and a burden.

During the seminar, we went back to the literature of colonial America to the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. There we saw Dubois's thesis already at play almost a century before Dubois was even born. Wheatley's poetry is written from a dual perspective: it presents both the language and beliefs of her enlightenment culture, and it also aspires to record the special dilemmas facing blacks in eighteenth century Boston. Her poetry, in other words, is double coded; it speaks both to a white audience and at second level not necessarily visible to that white audience, it also addresses its black readers. In so doing, Wheatley's poetry sets a pattern for how minority literature, and later painting, would operate over the next two hundred years.

This question of double consciousness persists in the nineteenth century in the writings of Frederick Douglass

and Charles Chestnutt, and it can be found at work also in the paintings of black artists like Henry Ossawa Tanner and his many distinguished successors in the twentieth century.

In a contemporary writer like Toni Morrison, whose *Tar Baby* we read in seminar, the question of two cultures shifts. The issue is not how whites and blacks see differently, but how the black community itself is split between its own myths of a black folk-consciousness, a peasant-like vitality, on the one hand, and its aspirations for middle class status on the other. A parallel division occurs in the writings and paintings of Indian and Chicano artists. N. Scott Momaday writes in his autobiography, *The Names*, of growing up as an Indian child and feeling torn between his native inheritance and the middle class values he witnessed in the films and popular culture of his day. So too in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*, the characters of Chicano culture find themselves sometimes empowered and sometimes divided by the question of heritage: Spanish-speaking, Mexican and folkloristic, or English-speaking, Anglo and middle class.

In the volume, the units divide into three groups: those that focus on different art forms and media (murals, photography, jewelry and music); those that concentrate on a comparative look at different ethnic groups (African American, Chicano, Native American, Israeli, and Greek); and those that survey a broad range of individual writers and painters of color, from established artists like Jacob Lawrence to folk figures like Pablita Velarde and James Hampton. The units are arranged in alphabetical order within each of the three categories above.

I. ART FORMS AND MEDIA

1. Margaret Andrews has put together a comprehensive account of African American photography in her unit, *Photography: The Art and Science*. The unit provides the reader with a wealth of information on the intersection of the history of photography with the history of blacks in America. The lesson plans at the end teach the students the fundamentals of photography, including two different exercises in making actual cameras.
2. In *The Jewelry of America*, Lucille Camera introduces elementary school children to the three major types of jewelry production in Africa. Her unit looks at the different sorts of jewelry produced in the different sections of Africa, relates the jewelry to the life and culture of the people who make it, and then teaches children how to make their own African-influenced jewelry.
3. Diane Platt tackles a very different art form: mural-making. In *Our Images Make History*, she introduces her middle school children to the history of murals in Mexico and the United States, including WPA murals in her own school and contemporary Chicano murals in the southwest. She then provides her students with the skills and preparation necessary for creating their own murals on available walls at their school.
4. Henry Rhodes turns to the history of rap music in *The Evolution of Rap Music in the United States*. He gives the reader a detailed account of the rise of rap music from its origins in the Bronx after World War II to its present proliferation throughout the entertainment industry. Henry provides a set of useful suggestions on how to teach rap to students who know how to rap, but know little of rap's history or cultural significance.

II. COMPARATIVE CULTURES

1. Ida Hickerson creates a comparative unit on the Civil Rights movement in three different communities: Blacks, Chicanos and Indians. In *Mosaic America Through Literary Art: The Civil Rights Movement Via African Americans, Chicanos and Native Americans*, she takes the reader through the history of the Civil Rights movement from the 1960s until the present. She watches how the black Civil Rights movement of the 1960s set the pattern for the subsequent efforts by Chicanos and Indians, and she provides a series of lesson plans that help personalize this history for her students.
2. Kenneth Hilliard creates an interdisciplinary unit that looks at the visual and performing arts, as well as the literature, of three different groups. In *Visual Arts, Literary Arts, and Performing Arts: Their Connection and Place in America's Minority Culture*, he examines the music of a pueblo Indian tribe, the Zunis; the writing of Chicano author Sandra Cisneros; and the painting of African American artist Henry Tanner. His lesson plans help bring students into the different worlds of the figures or groups he explores through the use of art.
3. Cynthia Roberts' unit, *Bridging the Gap Between Cultures*, continues a unit she wrote in the previous year for high school special education students. The goal of this unit, like the earlier one, is to help make her students aware of the virtues of multiculturalism. She focuses in the current unit on the culture, cuisine and customs of people from Israel and Greece.

III. SURVEYS OF MINORITY ARTISTS

1. In *Jacob Lawrence's Freedom Trail*, Casey Cassidy cleverly brings together the appealing images of a major black artist of the twentieth century with the lives of two nineteenth century freedom fighters, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Casey uses Lawrence's painted series on the lives of Douglass and Tubman as a way to explore African American history and art of the past two centuries.
2. Maxine Davis provides her middle school students with an excellent introduction to the history of African American painting in *Seven Famous African-American Masters of American Art*. By focusing on individual painters from the years after the American revolution up until the present, she introduces her students to the excitement of a visual tradition that they probably know little of.
3. In *The Folks of Folk Art*, Lynn Marmitt looks at seven folk artists, including minority and white figures. Their untutored styles and vivid imaginations provide students with a model for art that draws directly on everyday experience. The works of these artists are quite striking, and the lesson plans that Lynn includes help the students express themselves by exploring their own inner resources in making art.
4. Eva Scopino looks directly at women artists in *Points of View: Looking at Five Contemporary Female Artists of Color*. Her unit explores the life and art of minority women who have established themselves as major contributors to American culture. She looks at painters who are African American, Chicano and Native American, and her lesson plans help her students to

recreate the sorts of art that each of her artists produce, from quilts to collages and assemblages.

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