



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume I: Multiculturalism and the Law

Artistic Justice: The Artist as Historian and Social Critic

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.01.02
by Medria J. Blue

The objectives of this unit are to teach students: multicultural perspectives on race and law; how to use the pen as a weapon of justice through examining the poetry of Langston Hughes; and to develop an appreciation for art based on aesthetic and educational significance.

Traditionally, students have been taught history from textbooks or text based material. As a result, most people are not aware of the wide array of exposures that the arts can provide. Most often art exhibits, music concerts, and poetry readings are often sought only for aesthetic enlightenment. The historical time frame in which a painting or composition was made is usually discussed. However, seldom do we rely solely on a poem, painting or exhibit to teach events in history. This unit allows the artistic product to be the primary teaching tool; the text, the secondary.

The unit is centered mainly around the poetry of Langston Hughes. His poetry will be a vehicle by which students are exposed to the African-American experience in the United States of the 1920s through the 1960s. During these four decades, Hughes takes up pen to battle injustice both in house and globally. In doing so, he unveils LAW. Stripped and naked, LAW is exposed. Concealed no more is her true identity during this time: "a blind goddess with bandages hiding festering sores that were once eyes".

Correlations to the artist's use of a variety of media to teach history is provided in the second part of the unit. Specifically featured are: Billy Holiday's "Strange Fruit" which is a musical composition about lynching, the south's unwritten law; Jacob Lawrence's "The Great Migration," an art history book about the black migration from south to north; Shelia Hamanaka's "The Journey," an art history book about the Japanese experience in American; and Dorthea Lange's "American Photographs," photographs capturing the American experience during the Great Depression.

(Recommended for U.S. History, African-American History, English/Langston Hughes, and Japanese-American History, grades 6-8)

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