



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

Women of Color as Artists

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The New Haven public school system is a melting pot of many different cultures. The Fair Haven Middle school where I am one of two art teachers, is culturally very diverse. The student body is 65% Hispanic, 25% African American, and 10% White or other. I have observed that these students have little appreciation for visual arts. By offering lessons that center on various themes that are associated with their cultural heritage, I am able to gain and retain their attention. My lessons are taught in this particular manner in the hope that my students might better understand each others' cultural heritage through hands-on experience in art.

Despite my efforts to develop and teach art lessons that are not only culturally enriching but offer hands-on experience, I have had a tendency not to include information about the vast number of women artists. I have especially failed to include African American and Hispanic women artists who have contributed to our cultural experience.

Although women artists have made major contributions to the art world, the extent of their accomplishments have been overshadowed by male artists such as Pablo Picasso, Jacob Lawrence, and Henri Matisse. There is little information available concerning women artists of African American and Hispanic descents available in our art curriculum, so they have not been included in the visual art classes that I teach.

This unit is designed to introduce students to women artists of color, from both the past and present. The purpose is to show students the cultural diversity of these women artists and the ways in which their works of art may be about the same message but are realized differently in various media. This unit is aimed primarily at students in grade eight, but it could be easily adapted for grades six and seven.

This unit is divided into two different sections. The first section focuses on various African American women whose works of art mainly demonstrate their everyday struggles in life. I will discuss the art of Elizabeth Catlett who is an outstanding sculptor; Lorna Simpson an artist who was the first African American women artist to exhibit art work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City; Augusta Savage, a sculptor who worked primarily during the time of the Harlem Renaissance in New York; and Faith Ringgold, an artist, writer, and educator. The second section concerns Latino women artists. The focus begins with the work of Olga Albizu, a abstract painter; Yolanda Lopez, a Hispanic artist that resides in San Francisco; Amalia Mesa-Baines, an artist whose work focuses on statements about Chicano culture; and Judy Baca, one of the pioneers of the muralist movement in Los Angeles.

General Objectives of the Unit:

To teach students about various women artists of color.

To teach students how to analyze and critique various works of art.

To make students aware of and sensitive to the differences among the various art works by these women.

Section One

African American Women Artists

African American women are generally either acknowledged only in passing or are erased altogether by the “official” world of the visual arts. For the vast majority, the depth of their artistic commitment and the authenticity of their interest in art have been questioned. African American women artists have often been excluded due to the preconceived notions of what art is supposed to be and who is qualified to be an artist. Despite such discouragement, African American women artists not only exist but they possess strong artistic voices. These voices can be heard through a number of artists such as Elizabeth Catlett, Adrian Piper, Faith Ringgold and Augusta Savage. These women are making their voices heard through the form of sculpture, photography, lithographs, paintings, and other forms of visual media. Many of their works of art are interpretations by strong women who could serve as role models. Often they are depictions of sexuality or are about racism.

In the 1970’s African American women artists gained increasing recognition. There were various large exhibitions held at the Boston Museum of Fine Art and at the Lajolla Museum. The Studio Museum, which was founded in Harlem in 1968, became a major exhibition place for women artists after 1971. But even though these women enjoyed greater critical attention from the 1970’s onward, their works were generally shown in a separate fashion. Even today, they have yet to gain acceptance in the mainstream of contemporary art.

Artists:

Augusta Savage

Augusta Savage, an African American sculptor, encountered many injustices and political obstacles in the development of her art work. She was very young when she became interested in art while living with her parents on a farm. Most of her early work as a child was influenced by the things that surrounded her in her culture. These things included farm animals such as ducks, birds, etc. These were the beginnings of Savage’s first representations in sculpture. Eventually, she began to be commissioned to do various pieces for prominent people. Because she did not have much money to invest in expensive materials, most of her work was made out of sand and has now been reduced to dust.

Augusta Savage, like many artist during the Harlem Renaissance era, made sculpture related to things in the Black community and African American culture.

Elizabeth Catlett

Elizabeth Catlett, a renowned sculptor and printmaker, is considered the dean of women artists. Her art has been a part of the artistic world since around 1941. She is a dedicated and driven artist who has carved a niche for herself as the premiere female African American sculptor and printmaker. She has worked in cedar, mahogany, eucalyptus, marble, limestone, onyx, bronze and Mexican stone.

During the many years that Catlett has been an artist, recurring mother and child themes have been the trade mark of her work. She has stressed that she likes the challenge and the relationship that occurs with the two figures. Like many other artists, Catlett has addressed political issues and injustices in many of her works. Because of her depiction of injustices, Catlett was effectively banished from the United States. Her work has continued to exhibit African American qualities along with some Mexican influences.

Adrian Piper

Adrian Piper is a painter, collagist and teacher of philosophy. She is an artist who deals mostly with issues of racism and sexism as they confront the black woman in her everyday life. Many of her artworks in the past have been very successful due to a direct and personal approach. Piper has also been recognized for including typed print on her pieces. These remind the viewer of various artists during the pop era in the 1960's, when tied text or magazine articles were often part of artistic pieces.

Faith Ringgold

Faith Ringgold is an artist who uses the visual arts to express her experiences as an African American woman. Faith was born in Harlem and received a masters degree from New York's City College. She was one of the founders of the Women Students and Artists for Black Liberation. This group was established in order to ensure equal space for African American women artists at exhibitions.

Ringgold is also a writer and educator. She is very well known for her work in non-traditional materials such as quilts and soft sculpture. She started creating soft sculpture in 1973. In 1976, Ringgold began to include masks in her art work to commemorate her African heritage.

Finally, African American women artists are elbowing their way slowly into the spotlight of contemporary art. They are continuing to emerge as painters, sculptors, and printmakers. Many other upcoming women artists from African American culture, are being accepted into the world of visual arts. These include Shirley Woodson, Sonya Walker, Lakeeta J. Mayard, Arlene Burke Morgan, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Winnie R. Owens-Hart, and Joyce J. Scott. Like other renowned women artists, they are capturing various images of African American culture in bold and brilliant colors. They express certain moods and establish strong personalities.

Suggested Activities:

Activity One : Painting

Objectives

To have students create a painting that uses the focal points of African American women artists.
To introduce Elizabeth Catlett, Augusta Savage and Faith Ringgold.
To have students to discuss their own individual painting in a constructive manner with other students in the class.

Video Free Within Ourselves: American Artist in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art (Tapes 1, 2, and 3).

Materials Acrylic paint, brushes, canvas stretched or board, paper plates (for palettes), pencils, water cups, paper towel, rulers.

Motivation Students will read "Portrait of Women Artists for Children" and watch the video Free Ourselves: African American Artists in the Collection of National Museum of Art.

Teacher will show various examples of work by women artists.

Teacher will engage students in a discussion about the art of African American women.

Students will verbally convey what they have learned about African American women artists.

Students will brainstorm on paper about possible designs that they can create that reflect the art that they have observed about the art of African American women.

Teacher will demonstrate the proper care of art tools to the class.

Procedure

Students will develop a design on news print using pencil.

Students will transfer their final design on to canvas.

Students will use acrylic paints and paint their designs.

Closure All paintings will be matted. Students will critique each others paintings in order to discuss each other's ideas.

Modifications Modification may be needed for grades 6 and 7 and special needs students.

Suggestions

Write down the steps of the lesson on the board so that students may have a continuous reference.

Circulate, to provide individual help and attention.

Have available examples of works done by African American women artists.

Activity Two: Sculpture

Objectives To introduce Faith Ringgold. Have students learn about her particular style. Have them try to create a small sculpture that will relate to their culture.

Materials Fabric, crayons, white paper, pencils, muslim, cloth, foam squares, sewing needles, thread, matt board.

Video Faith Ringgold: The Last Quilt Story (30 min.)

Procedure

Students will view Faith Ringgold's video.

Students will draw a design on white paper.

Students will use fabric crayons to color their designs. (Design should be outlined with black crayon before it is colored totally).

Design will be transferred to muslin cloth by placing the design face down and ironing.

Ironed design will be placed on a foam square

Students will sew the outline of their design onto the square foam with a needle and thread.

Once design is finished, design will be mounted on board.

Section II

Hispanic Women Artists

Introduction

Hispanic American art is an art that is produced by American artists who are from the Hispanic culture. "Hispanic" refers to persons or individuals whose ancestors are from Latin America; most of the people speak Spanish, a language that is related to their own culture. Many have received recognition for their work through regional, national, and international exhibitions, which have focused on their background as Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, or Hispanics.

There are numerous Hispanic American women artists working today. Many live in California, Texas and other states where there are large Hispanic populations.

During the 1960's and even earlier, the art of Mexican American and other Hispanic American women artists reflected the current styles of art from figurative to abstract, to pop, op, and funk. Many of the Hispanic women artists who painted murals in the 1930's and 1940's later turn to abstract painting, as was the case

with Olga Albizu.

Artists:

Olga Albizu

Olga Albizu is an abstract painter who is widely known for her many paintings on record covers for companies such as RCA records, during the late 1950's. She painted these covers mainly for the musical artist Stan Getz. Olga, a student of abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman, was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1924 and has lived in the United States since 1956. She arrived in New York City in 1948 on a fellowship for post graduate study with the University of California. She also studied in Paris and Florence in 1951. Her studies are evident in her work.

Yolanda Lopez

Yolanda Lopez, is a painter whose work emphasizes Chicano culture and identity. She was born in San Diego, California in 1942. She earned a Masters degree in Fine Arts from University of California in 1978. She is currently a visiting lecturer in painting at the California College of Arts and Crafts.

Amalia Mesa-Baines

Amalia Mesa-Baines is a sculptor whose altar installations incorporate Mexican historical figures in the arts, religion, the cinema. She uses symbols in her work such as skulls, hearts, crosses and images of the Virgin.

One of her major works, "Altar for San Juana Ines de la Cruz" (1982), is a mixed media of wood, paper and cloth. She has exhibited at the Galeria, and also at the Museum of Art in San Francisco.

Ester Hernandez.

Ester Hernandez is a painter and graphic artist who uses her work to make statements about Chicano culture and the negative impact of economic forces on it. Her art especially looks at rural farm communities in California.

Hernandez was born in Dinuba California, in 1944. She is very involved with the Women Muralists in California. She teaches at an art center for the disabled in San Francisco.

Patricia Rodriguez

Patricia Rodriguez was one of the leading muralists in the San Francisco area during the 1970's. In 1972 she was instrumental in developing the group called Mujeres Muralists. They painted murals in the California area from 1972 until 1977. Rodriguez was born in Marfa, Texas in 1944. She taught at the University of California from 1975 until 1978.

Judy Baca

Judy Baca is one of the pioneers of the muralist movement in Los Angeles. She founded the first movement program that addresses the issues of war, peace, cooperation, interdependence, and spiritual growth.

Suggested Activities:

Activity Three: Mural Painting

Objectives

To introduce students to Hispanic muralists.

To have students design and develop a class mural.

Motivation

Teacher will introduce students to various Chicano, Mexican, and Hispanic artists who are involved in the muralist movement.

Students will be engaged in discussion about various muralists.

Students will be asked to think about cultural issues in their communities that are part of their cultural heritage.

Students will be asked what they have learned about the muralist movement.

Students will be asked to choose a topic and develop an idea for a mural design.

Teacher will demonstrate the mixing of colors and different painting techniques.

Materials white paper, pencils, acrylic paint (various colors) brushes, water cups, paint palettes, large painting board, rulers.

Procedure

Students will sketch their own designs on white paper.

Students will combine their ideas together on a large canvas board

Students will paint together as a group using colors that will show the mood and message that they want to convey.

Unit Vocabulary:

Mural

Sculpture

Design

Print-maker

Critique

Secondary colors

Primary colors

Chicano artist

Hispanic artist

African American

Collagist

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Videos

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