



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

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## Women of Color as Artists

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.03.09  
by Val-Jean Belton

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% Caucasian or other. These students have little appreciation of visual arts. By offering lessons that center on various themes that are associated with their cultural heritage, I hope to gain their attention and retention. As a result my students might better understand each others cultural heritage through hands-on experience in art. This unit is designed primarily for students in grade eight, but can easily be adapted for grades six and seven.

Despite my efforts to teach art lessons that are culturally relevant, I have had a tendency to leave out information about women artists. I have especially failed to include African American and Hispanic women artists. As a result, their contributions to the artistic world, as well as to African American or Hispanic cultures, have not been adequately addressed. The extent of their accomplishments have been overshadowed by white male artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Little information concerning women artists of color has been available in our art curriculum, and so they have not been included in the visual art classes that I teach.

The focus of this unit is to introduce students to women artists of color. Its purpose is to show students the diversity of women artists and the ways in which their works of art may be about the same message but are realized differently in various media.

The first section focuses on various African American women whose works of art mainly demonstrate their everyday struggles. 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 of this unit will focus on Latino women artists. This focus will begin with the work of Olga Albizu, an abstract painter. I will then focus on the works of Yolanda Lopez, a Hispanic artist who now resides in San Francisco; Amalia Mesa-Baines, an artist who work focuses on statements about Chicano culture; and Judy Baca, one of the pioneers of the mural movement in Los Angeles.

(Recommended for Art, grades 6-8)

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