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The Visual Blues of Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas and Romare Bearden

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The representation and contributions of African American culture through the arts had become very important in the first three decades of the twentieth century. African Americans have made major contributions in contemporary arts in the form of music, literature and visual arts during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. Many of these contributions are collaborations by various creative artists, in order to raise or increase cultural heritage and understanding within their own communities. These cultural collaborations were very apparent in relation to visual artists who were influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, and blues music.

The majority of “blues” music that we hear is a reflection of one’s everyday life, love and sorrows. There are many “blues” interpretations that are represented in music forms, literature, and visual arts. The vast part of these “blues” representations are the artists’ way of conveying their own “blues” through social comment.

The “blues” is a distinct form of cultural music that originated after the Civil War. The “blues” has been a great influence on American jazz, theatrical music, poetry, literature, and visual arts for decades. Also, for decades Harlem has been cultural capital of Black America, Harlem was where black writers, jazz musicians, blues musicians, visual artists flocked to from 1919-1929. This flowering period, as it is called, was the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance where many artistic collaborations took place to establish Harlem as the black cultural mecca of the world.

But from the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance until the present, many writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston and Jean Toomer had established themselves in Harlem and beyond. In contrast, many of the visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance remain virtually unknown to American art. Many art students in visual classes may be familiar with Black artist such as Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, but are not familiar with their representations.

As a visual arts teacher in the New Haven Public School system, I teach in a Middle School that is predominately Hispanic and African American. During the last twelve years that I have taught at this school, I have only been able to offer my students minimal information about any African American visual artists that have included the concept of “the blues” in their representations. This lack of knowledge of African American artists is the result of low interest of students and a dearth of information about these artists in our school-based and public libraries.

Therefore, in this unit, there will be two basic focal points. The first focus will be the various works of Aaron

Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, and how their art was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, and the literature of that time period. The second focus will center around how each of the above artists' works was influenced by various blues musicians in the Harlem era. The objectives of this unit are:

1. To explore the art of Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, and Romare Bearden.
2. To study and analyze artistic work that related to the form of blues music.

This unit is intended for grades seven through ten. It can also be adapted to include students who are in special education and bilingual education programs.

This unit will begin with a historical view of the artist Jacob Lawrence, who has produced a sequence of narrative paintings dealing with important figures in Black history. These figures include Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Toussant L'Ouverture. He also produced a sixty panel narrative called the "Migration Series." The unit will then give a brief view of Aaron Douglas' study of African aesthetics. Douglas is also known for this celebrated series of paintings called "God's Trombones," a collaboration with James Weldon Johnson. The final view will center around Romare Bearden and his visual representation of "the blues" in his art. Bearden uses everyday materials such as paper, photos and fabrics to create a definite blues mood similar to that of a blues musician.

Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence, an American artist, was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1917, during the time when his parents were migrating to New Jersey from the South. His parents, like most of the African Americans during this time period, were part of the great migration of black southerners. Lawrence was a child during the time of the depression in New York. He was schooled primarily in Harlem and began taking art lessons in an after-school program at the 135th Street Branch Library, which today is the Schomburg Gallery. He began taking classes under the direction of notable African American artists Charles Alston and James Lesene Wells, who were mentors of Lawrence. Charles Alston was a muralist, sculptor, painter, and graduate of Columbia University, who later organized the Utopia Neighborhood Center, of which Lawrence later became a member. The Utopia Neighborhood Center was an after school arts program where Lawrence was first given poster paints and other Arts materials. The other notable artist who had a great influence on Jacob Lawrence was James Lesene Wells. Wells was a painter and program director and later Professor of Art at Howard University. These classes were sponsored by the government through the Works Projects Administration, and helped Lawrence to win a scholarship to the American Artists in New York. While at this school, Lawrence studied for two years with other renowned artists such as Harry Gottlieb, Louis Lozowick and Anton Refregier.

The most influential artist in the career of Lawrence was Aaron Douglas. For Lawrence, Aaron Douglas was most important because as a young artist in the 1930's during the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas set the framework for Lawrence and other young artists with his use of highly stylized aesthetic, space compositions, and subdued forms. This framework that was set by Aaron Douglas is the reason that Lawrence uses a unique way of telling the "Blues" visually. Many of the classes and lectures that Lawrence attended during his studies

of Aaron's work inspired him to focus more on the historical development and struggles of people of African American descent. He decided to become a modern day storyteller and create stories and narratives into expressive paintings that showed the historical happenings or "blues" of African Americans. These depictions can be seen through many of Lawrence's creative works, mostly through his acclaimed "Migration Series" and "Parade".

Jacob Lawrence paints mostly in tempera or gouache. This medium of paint demonstrates visually, the two-dimensional patterns that are represented in his subjects. In many of Lawrence's paintings including the "Migration Series" and "Parade", he makes little use of perspective. The colors that he uses in his paintings are rich and stunning. In "Parade" (1950), emphasis has been placed on elements of color and movement. This painting was influenced from an annual New Year's Day Parade in Philadelphia, and depicts what Lawrence portrays as visual "blues". The human subjects are so alive, rhythmically, that the "blues" music can be loudly heard, as the marchers move from foreground to background. He also tells the "blues" through the spectators who line the sidewalk, and complement the marchers in their bright colored uniforms.

The Migration Series is comprised of sixty tempera paintings and is marked by Lawrence's distinctive style and makes statements on Freedom, Struggle, Life, and Dignity among his people, transposed into statements that convey expressive moods with bold, bright color scenes. Lawrence uses a consistent palette of green, yellow, graybrown, blue, and orange. Each painting is also accompanied by a descriptive caption that has been revised by Lawrence for a national tour in 1994 and 1995. He also includes expression, cubism, and African art designs in his paintings.

The Migration Series begins and also ends with the image of the train station. Lawrence uses this action to simulate the train journey and progression from painting to painting and to tell the "blues" visually about African Americans journey to a place unknown to them and their daily struggle to exist. Each stopping point of this train is clearly defined by Lawrence. These panels also show examples of people reading letters of relatives who have already migrated to the North and images of others who are waiting for that passage to another and better life in the North.

The Migration Series concludes with the focus on the newly formed African American communities of the North. There is much contrast in through his paintings with the comparison of the newcomers at a church worship and the well-to-do people already in this area dressed in top hats and furs. The series ends as it began, "And the Migrants kept coming." Below are several suggested lessons.

Suggested Lessons:

Lesson Plan One:

The first part of the study of Jacob Lawrence covers the Migration Series of African American people from the South to the North.

Objective:

The objective of this plan is to have students focus on the mood of the people who are depicted in the Migration series, and to gain knowledge about the various techniques that are used by Lawrence.

Visual Aids:

Jacob Lawrence:

Migrations of the Negro, a group of 60 gouache panels, 1937-1938.

Toussaint L'Overture, 41 paintings in the series, 1938.

. . . And the Migrants Keep Coming, 60 panels in the Historical Migration Series of African-Americans from the South, 1940-1941.

Life of Harriet Tubman, 40 panels 1942.

This is Harlem, 30 paintings in the Harlem Series, 1942-1943.

Vocabulary:

Migration	Visual image	portrait
technique	pallet	mood
element	shapes	artist
composition	aesthetic	form
framework	space	painter
blues	tempora	paint gauche

Questions

These questions are designed for students to gain more understanding and knowledge about Jacob Lawrence and his artistic works:

1. When was Jacob Lawrence born?
2. What black artist had a influence on the artistic work of Jacob Lawrence?
3. What images did Lawrence use in his migration series that indicates that a migration of some sort was going on?
4. What mood has Lawrence created in his Migration series paintings?
5. What colors are used by the artist to create the mood in the migration series?
6. Describe the changes that are apparent about the life in the North according to the paintings.
7. Name the images that describes the struggles, and dreams of the people that migrated to the north.
8. What are the colors used by Lawrence in the painting "Parade"?
9. What are the spectators that line the sidewalk doing and what mood do they create?
10. How many lines of marchers are there in "Parade"?

Lesson Plan Two:

examples of *The Migration Series* /Langston Hughes, “Po’ Boy Blues”

tempra paints

pencils

white drawing paper

newspaper

water cups, brushes

Procedure

1. Teacher will read Langston Hughes “Po’ Boy Blues” to students. While reading is taking place students will be viewing visually the “Migration Series” by Jacob Lawrence.
2. Student will develop a pencil drawing design on white paper that tells a story about a migration. This story can either stem from a personal migration or a simple migration that they have completed on their own. (Example, a migration from their home daily to school.)
3. Students will use tempra paint to paint their pencil designs.
4. Students will develop a written narrative that will tell about their design, that will be placed on the bottom of their drawing.

Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1899. He migrated to Harlem in 1924 where he began studying art with the German artist Winold Reiss. Reiss was responsible for Douglas influence of African art design elements in his art.

Douglas’s study of African aesthetics and use of Black subject matter brought the majority of his work to the attention of leading scholars and activists like W.E.B. Dubois and Alain Locke. Later, he became a frequent contributor to area monthly magazines in Harlem like *Opportunity* , *Vanity Fair* and *Theater Arts Monthly* . During this time, when Douglas continued to be a contributor to these area magazines, Alain Locke labeled Douglas as the father of Black American art. Douglas then became the most popular black visual artist around Harlem. He was later commissioned to paint murals and historical narratives relating to Black history and cultural pride.

Douglas, like many other black visual artist during the Harlem Renaissance, collaborated with various poets and writers. Douglas’s most celebrated series of paintings that demonstrates his artistic collaboration is a

collaboration with poet James Weldon Johnson in 1927. This collaboration was for Johnson's book of poems called *Gods Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. This book of poems was inspired by stories of the Bible, African American Spirituals, and Culture. In this collaboration, Douglas has included illustrations of "Judgement Day", "Let My People Go", "Go Down", "Death", "Noah's Ark", and "The crucifixion". As a result of the wide acknowledgement of *God's Trombones* he was asked often to illustrate other literary works.

During the time when Douglas collaborated with various poets, it was also his desire to capture the black expression through the use of paint. He spent a lot of time watching patrons of area nightclubs in Harlem. Douglas said that most of his paintings that were captured in these particular nightclubs, were mainly inspired through music that was played. According to Douglas the sounds of the music was heard everywhere, and were created mostly during the Harlem Renaissance by well trained artists. Douglas's work was looked upon by most critics as a breath of fresh air. His work symbolized geometric formulas, circles, triangles, rectangles, and squares became the dominant design motifs for Douglas. It was in Douglas's series of paintings called "God Trombones" that Douglas first expressed his commitment through the use of geometric shapes for Black artists. The faces and limbs in these series of paintings are carefully drawn to reveal African features and recognizable Black poses.

In "God's Trombones," Douglas achieved his mastery of hard-edge painting using symbolized features and lines. Through his use of these things he was able to bring to life the stiffness in the figures which symbolized Art Deco. But, unlike the decorative programs that exist in Art Deco, most of Douglas's work capitalized on the movement that was influenced by the rhythms of Art Nouveau. Each of the paintings in the "God's Trombone" series expresses the humanist concerns of Douglas. For example, in "Judgment Day," one of the seven Negro sermons Douglas illustrated for James Weldon Johnson, he planned to place emphasize on the positive appearance of Black power. In this painting, Gabriel, who represents the archangel, sounds the trumpet to awaken the dead from their spiritual rest. He is portrayed in this Painting as a lean Black man from whom the last earthly vocal sound is heard. The sound, which is perceived to travel across the world, is the inventive music of the Black man, and his blues. The music which is perceived to waken all nations, in the words of Johnson, is the song of a bluesman or famous trumpet player. The musician, who is consequently the artist, stands in the center of the universe sounding the loud horn on "Judgment Day". Douglas also has followed Johnson's chronicle and used simplified figures and forms to permit his interpretation of the Black man's place of position to dominate the theme. Below are suggested lessons:

Suggested Lessons:

Lesson Plan One:

The first part of the study will focus on the art of Aaron Douglas and his style.

Objective:

The objective of this plan is to have students focus on the stylistic way of painting that was used by Aaron Douglas.

Visual Aids:

Aaron Douglas:

Study for Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction. (1934)
Tempra on Paper, 11x26.
Study for Aspects of Negro Life: An IDYLL of the Deep South. (1934) Tempra on Paper 11x26.
Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in An African Setting. (1934)
Oil on Canvas 6x6.
Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers. (1934)
Oil on Canvas 9x9.
Study for "God's Trombones." (1926)
Tempra on Board 21_x17_
The Crucifixion. (1927)
Oil on Board 48x36
Go Down Death. (1927)
Oil in Masonite 48x36.
"Rise, Shine for thy Light Has Come." (1930)
Gouache on Paper 12x9.

Vocabulary:

stylistic interpretation imbalance
design composition mood
image balance overlapping

Questions:

1. When was Aaron Douglas born?
2. How did the Harlem Renaissance influence his works?
3. What design element did Douglas use in most of his paintings?
4. Who was the poet that Douglas collaborated with in "God's Trombones?"

5. What were the symbolized features that Douglas used in the paintings of God's Trombones?"
6. In "God's Trombones", what was Douglas trying to express?
7. What musical interpretation does Douglas use in "Judgment Day?"

Lesson Plan Two:

To conclude the study of Aaron Douglas, students will experiment with imbalanced and balanced shapes.

Objective:

Students will demonstrate visually their understanding of Aaron Douglas's work.

A. Balanced Shapes:

Materials:

Construction Paper—four shapes (5x6) contrasting colors

one sheet (12x18)

Glue

Scissors

Procedure:

1. The teacher will define the word balance. Teacher will then show students various works done by Aaron Douglas, (Aaron Douglas, "Play De Blues," for "Misery" by Langston Hughes. 1926) that demonstrate a balanced design.
2. To illustrate balance, distribute four sheets of contrasting color construction paper. Students will fold two sheets in half and cut a design (free form or geometric) on the fold. Students will repeat this with the other two sheets.
3. Students will make balanced designs with the four shapes; glue these on the 12x18 paper. Open areas (negative space) that surround the shapes may be decorated with geometric or free-form cutouts. Students need to be reminded to make sure designs are balanced, both sides must be the same.

Examples:

(figure available in print form)

B. Imbalanced Shapes:

Materials:

Construction Paper—two sheets (9x12) contrasting colors

one sheet (12x18)

Glue

Scissors

Procedure:

1. Teacher will define the word imbalance. Teacher will then show students various works done by Aaron Douglas, (Aaron Douglas, “Weary As I Can Be,” for “Lonesome Place” by Langston Hughes, 1926) that demonstrates an imbalanced design.
2. To illustrate imbalance, distribute two (9x12) sheets of contrasting construction paper. Students will cut one shape beginning at one end of the paper and finishing at the other.
3. Students will then arrange and glue these two color cutouts on the large sheet of construction paper. Additional shapes of the same color may be cut and overlapped. Shapes can be cut into thick and thin lines, or a hole puncher can be used.

Examples:

(figure available in print form)

Other Lessons:

Painting or Printing Lines to Blues Music:

While students are listening to “blues music”, have students make a line painting. This can be done without discussion for the sake of spontaneity. Student can be asked while they are painting if tempo, mood, pitch, or the instrument used influenced their line treatment.

Romare Bearden

Romare Bearden is an African American artist whose powerful works represent his life experiences. Bearden grew up in Harlem, but spent most of his early childhood in North Carolina where he was born in 1912. As a young man, Bearden had a flair for drawing and painting. He attended Boston University and later transferred to New York University. He studied at Art's Student League in New York. Many of the influences in Bearden's work came from artists that he met in New York and later in Paris. Among the artists that were influential to Bearden's work were Brancusi, Leger, and Braque.

Bearden was not only gifted artistically but he was also a gifted athlete and star pitcher for Boston University's baseball team. As a student, he studied his art under the renowned painter and cartoonist, George Grosz. For over a half of a century, Bearden did a majority of works in pen and ink, paintbrushes, paints, scraps of paper, and old photographs. These materials of scrap were used in order to deliver powerful messages concerning the African American life. Bearden used collage not only to express his own social issues but also to express the conflicts, barriers, and hardships faced by most African American in Harlem and everywhere.

Bearden's deep feelings about African American people, family and memories of his childhood are reflected in his works. For the artist, creating collages was his very personal form of artistic expression. An example of a collage that Bearden created which represents his past is "Showtime" (1974). In this collage Bearden places great attention on the shiny trumpets that form an arch over the performer. This gesture or emphasis that is placed on the performer is Bearden's way of showing his interest in jazz music and showing the passion that he has had since he was a boy growing up in New York.

If Romare Bearden had not become an artist, he might have been a musician. For a short time in 1950's, he was a songwriter. He eventually went back to art, but music has always been important in his work. Bearden uses music themes in many of his collages. Bearden said that making collages is like making music. Bearden makes his collages with the use of everyday materials such as fabric scraps, and photos, arranging them as a musician would arrange notes. Bearden uses these very day materials to create a mood like a musician.

Bearden's first collages were done around the 1960's. This was during the time of the first Civil Rights movements. These movements were a result of African Americans being angry for having been treated as second class citizens. During this time, Bearden created "Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism" (1964). This work was done to not only reflect Bearden's childhood in North Carolina but also to reflect many of the social and political issues of the 1960's.

Bearden is best known for his creative collages and for him creating a collage is like making music. One of his most notable collaborations of visual art and music is the collage, "Blues at the Crossroads?" Bearden uses complex images and textures such as wallpaper, fabric, photos, sheet music to create this asymmetrical composition balance. He also uses enlarged details of fingers, mouths, trumpet parts, piano keys to suggest how all of these subjects are woven together.

Bearden traveled a long, road before becoming a well-known artist. He had his first show in 1965 in Washington, D.C. at the Corcoran Gallery. In 1967, Bearden was able to retire from his job and spent the majority of his time creating the collage for which he was best known. Bearden continued doing the creative collages that he is known for and lived up until his death in 1988.

Suggested Lessons:

Lesson Plan One:

The first part of this lesson will focus on Romare Bearden and his work.

Objective:

The objective of this plan is to have students focus on the mood and interpretations in the works of Romare Bearden.

Visual Aids:

Romare Bearden:

Showtime, mixed media 50x40, 1974.

Blues at the Crossroads, 1985.

Encore, Collage, 1980.

Three Folk Musicians, 1967.

The Woodshed, 1970.

Solo Flight, 1970.

Vocabulary:

mood	focal point	shifting perspectives
images	rough textures	simplified shapes
asymmetrical composition	dislocation	negative space
bright colors	diagonals	distortion
	curves	

Questions:

1. What kind of artist was Romare Bearden?
2. What kind of materials do Romare Bearden use in his collages?
3. How many difference materials can you find in "Blues at theCrossroad?"
4. What mood does Bearden create in "Blues at the Crossroad?"
5. What kind of faces are in Bearden's "Three Folk Musicians?"
6. What quality do the masklike faces in "Three Folk Musicians" convey?
7. What does the Collage by Bearden called "Encore", suggest?
8. What do the images in "Showtime" suggest about Romare Bearden?
9. How does Romare Bearden convey his interest in jazz music?
10. When did Romare Bearden develop his passion for "blues" music?

Lesson Plan Two:

Students will be looking at the work of Roman Bearden, and how his using juxtaposition works point out the conflicts and hardship of life in the African American community.

Objective:

Students will use photos, and other materials to create their own photomontage.

Materials:

Tag Board 12x18

Glue

Scissors

Construction paper (assorted colors)

Fabric Scrapes

Felt

Personal photos

Procedure:

1. Teacher will have students collect various photos. Students will also observe various works by Romare Bearden on collage. Students will select photos that best express them.
2. Students will coordinate their chosen photos with various fabric and felt pieces.
3. Photos and fabrics will be arranged into a design using juxtaposition, overlapping, and repeating images.
4. Design will be glued to Oak tag.

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