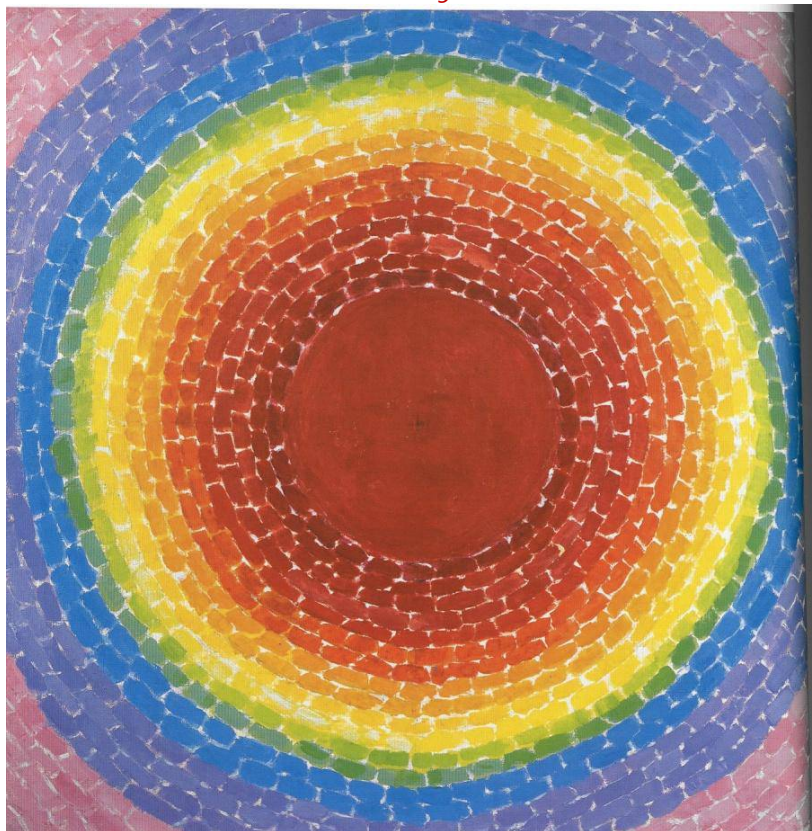




Smithsonian
National Museum of African Art

CONVERSATIONS:

*African and African American Artworks in Dialog from the
Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and the Camille O. and
William H. Cosby Collections*



Alma Woodsey Thomas
1891–1978, United States
A Fantastic Sunset (detail)
1970
Acrylic on canvas
120.8 x 120 cm (47 1/2 x 47 1/4 in.)
Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr.

Lesson Plans and Activities for the Classroom

Engaging Learners with *CONVERSATIONS*

This curriculum resource guide is designed to accompany the exhibition *CONVERSATIONS: African and African American Artworks in Dialog from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and the Camille O. and William H. Cosby Collections*. The units are designed around six themes in the exhibition developed for the purpose of teaching for content and at the same time encouraging self-expression. These classroom activities can be modified to align with **Common Core and/or state’s SOLs**. They can also be customized to integrate art with cross-disciplinary units in Language Arts, Social Studies, Arts, History and Culture.

- Through the investigation of works of art, students will see the visual arts in relation to history and culture from different times and different places.
- Through the lens of Africa and its diasporas, students will learn to appreciate the role the visual arts play in communicating historical and cultural beliefs and ideals.
- Students will reflect on and analyze their personal responses to the expressive and communicative qualities of works of art. They will understand that their background, knowledge, and experiences influence their feelings and emotions.
- Each noted work of art is followed by a list of questions to guide student discussion, interpretation, and study of the work of art.

Introductory Discussion: ARTISTS everywhere have stories to tell that speak to audiences across time, places, and cultures. Just like authors who tell tales with words, artists use visual language to invite us into a world of images, ideas, and imagination. Explore a variety of *styles, techniques, and materials* in *Conversations: African and African American Artworks in Dialogue from the Collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr.* Encounter some of the common threads that weave our stories together as part of the narrative of the human family.

Help students sharpen their visual awareness by encouraging looking closely at, thinking about, and making meaning from art with the questions provided throughout this guide.

For use in the classroom and home school environment.



This curriculum resource unit is conceived as a model for strengthening art and humanities learning in K-12 classrooms. Thematic units follow the interpretive framework of the CONVERSATIONS exhibition. *Art and the Human Presence; Art and Spiritualities; Art: Power and Politics; Art: Memory, Family, and the Domestic Sphere; Art and Nature as Metaphor; Art, Music and Urban Culture.* Each unit begins with a Unit Overview and teachers are advised to begin their respective unit or lesson with this more general introduction.

Lessons encourage active learning, analytical thinking, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural comparisons, and visual and cultural literacy. Explore selected individual objects with broader humanities comparisons.

Some key ideas that inform this study

Certain themes are interlaced throughout the lessons and can be introduced into your own classroom topics.

The artist as a key cultural player in society. The makers of works of art were often pioneers, breaking new ground and pushing the boundaries of the artistic and social worlds.

Objects can reveal a range of encounters that have defined their lives and histories. Differing belief systems, historical and cultural influences, and the movements of people and ideas can **shape a work's form and iconography.** These encounters remind us of the ways artistic production is constantly evolving and responding to contemporary realities.

Beauty and purpose. Even the humblest of objects may be embellished and enhanced in ways that elevate everyday work and imbue it with special significance and value. For example, a chair may be used for sitting but may also serve as a symbol of authority, thus fulfilling several roles at once.

Efficacy. Works of art **can play active roles in peoples' lives**, created for both sacred and secular use and as a mnemonic (memory) device.

Interconnection. Points of interconnection, synchronicity, convergence, and divergence can be identified in universal themes expressed in and between African and African American works of art.

- Note to teachers: A work of art can reflect a multitude of influences and encounters leading to layers of meaning and inspiring diverse interpretations. The thematic units in this guide are not intended to reduce the artworks to a set of rigid categories. Rather, people throughout history have created visually meaningful forms and expressions. Works by African-American and African artists in *Conversations* can be used to explore broad and often intersecting areas of meaning from the sacred to

Works in this guide reflect ideas from the sacred to the secular.

UNIT 1:

Art and the Human Presence

The human form has long been a major source of inspiration for artists when thinking about ways to express ideas of identity, gender, status, spirituality, history and memory. To achieve this, artists communicate through a visual language of line, form, color, texture, and material to create images and reflect ideas.

A **portrait** represents a particular person and displays his or her personality and character. The artist often frames the sitter from head to waist and includes clues about the person's social position or status.

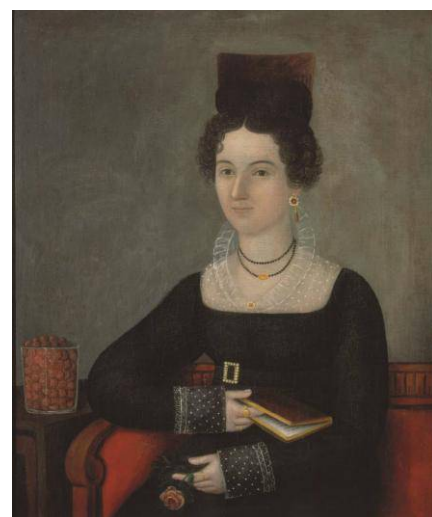
GOALS

Students will be able to:

- Identify ways artists convey the identity, social position, and status of the subject of the portrait
- Communicate their values as a member of a particular culture or society



Joshua Johnston (c. 1765-. 1830, Baltimore, MD)
Mrs. Thomas Donovan and Elinor Donovan, c. 1799
Oil on canvas



Joshua Johnston (c. 1765–c. 1830, Baltimore, MD)
Lady on a Red Sofa, c. 1825 Oil on canvas

National Learning Standards

Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-12.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas

NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

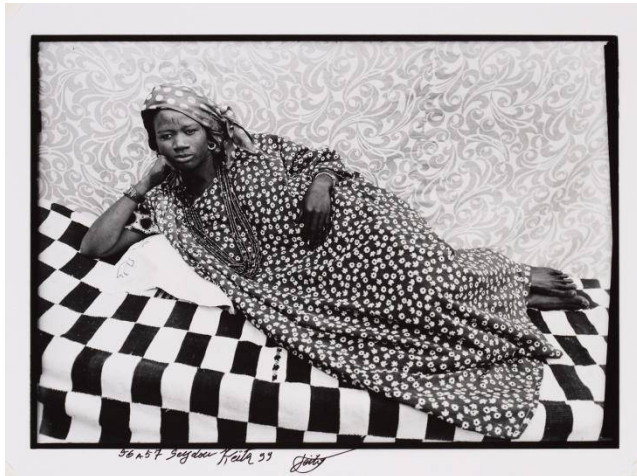
NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

Questions for Viewing

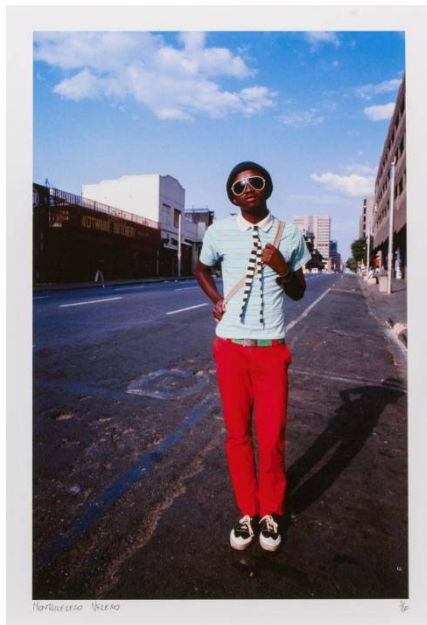
Joshua Johnston (1765-1830) painted these portraits more than 200 years ago. The artist was born a slave but records in Baltimore, Maryland confirm that he was manumitted on July 15, 1792 at the age of nineteen. Because of his extraordinary self-taught talent, he was commissioned by many patrons – local merchants, captains, seamen, and businessmen, mostly white – to paint individual portraits and family members. Family portraits were indispensable to aristocrats living in Baltimore during the period 1789 to 1825.

- Look closely at the faces of Mrs. Donovan and her child. What do you notice? What direction are they looking?
- How would you describe their gaze?
- What is each person holding? Fruit was often used by artists as a symbol of kindness, abundance, humility, and modesty. What would a book symbolize?
- What are they wearing? Does their jewelry represent a high status in society?
- What would you be holding in your portrait? What would you be wearing? What would it say about you?

Artworks in the Museum's Collection Related to this Lesson



Seydou Keita (1923–2001, Mali)
Untitled (Odalisque), 1956–57, printed 1999
Gelatin silver print



Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko; South Africa; 2006;
Digital print with pigment dyes on cotton paper;
Sheet: 42 x 29 cm (16 9/16 x 11 7/16 in.);
Purchased with funds provided by the Annie Laurie Aitken Endowment

UNIT 2:

Art and Spiritualities

Faith and ritual practices serve as sources of strength and resiliency for communities, and artists have played an important role in creating artworks with specific religious themes and functions. Artists around the world have always been engaged in helping societies to envision, honor, and communicate with the sacred invisible world.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- Identify artistic methods and symbols that convey a spiritual presence.
- Consider how artists create works to secure a relationship with unknown forces.



Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937, United States)
The Thankful Poor, 1894
Oil on canvas

National Learning Standards

Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-12.1 Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes

NA-VA.K-12.2 Using Knowledge of Structures and Functions

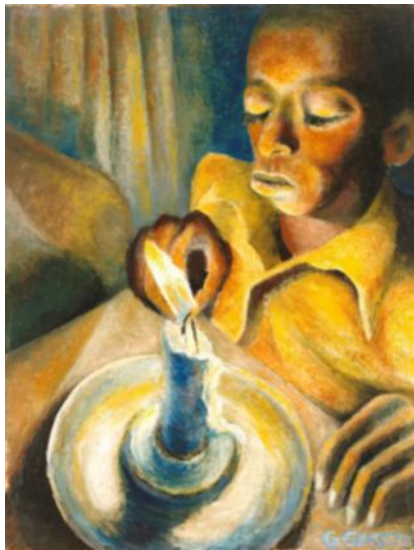
NA-VA.K-12.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas
NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

Questions for Viewing

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) was raised in a religious household where his father was a devout African Methodist Episcopal Bishop. A student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he sailed to Paris France at age 31 where he would spend most of his career, focusing on biblical themes. He was the first African American artist to gain international acclaim for his realism and expressive technique.

- Notice the older man and the boy are not looking at the viewer. What are they doing? Where does the artist situate the viewer?
- What time of day might the soft light depict in this painting? What might it symbolize?
- Describe the mood of this scene.
- What words describe how you feel when looking at this scene?

Artworks in the Museum's Collection Related to this Lesson



Gerard Sekoto (1913–1993, South Africa)
Boy and the Candle, 1943
Oil on canvas



Kongo artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo
Crucifix, 17th century
Copper alloy



Baule artist, Côte d'Ivoire
Female figure, early to mid-20th century
Wood, glass beads, gold-alloy beads, plant fiber



Kongo Artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Late 19th – mid-20th century
Wood, glass, iron, pigment, cloth, plant fiber horn,
nails

UNIT 3: Art: Power and Politics

Power and politics can be expressed through poses and gestures denoting individual or collective strength, or its absence—in the explorations of power and its social and political implications.

The image of the individual in the form of a **commemorative** sculpture has been used by Senegalese artist, Ousman Sow. He has chosen as his subject the legendary Haitian leader, **Toussaint L’Ouverture**. By constructing an artwork larger than life (Height: 7’ ¼”) the artist recognizes the important role of this historical figure and asks the viewer to look up to see the commanding and dignified gaze of the figure towering above us – a symbol of bravery standing tall.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- Identify ways artists' choices (i.e., composition, scale, pose and facial expressions, and lighting) convey point of view
- Analyze the physical and emotional impact of scale in works of art
- Identify the way that sculpture has been used to commemorate an important leader or a political event
- Use composition, pose, and gesture to convey power and leadership in a work of art

National Learning Standards

Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-4.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas

NA-VA.K-4.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

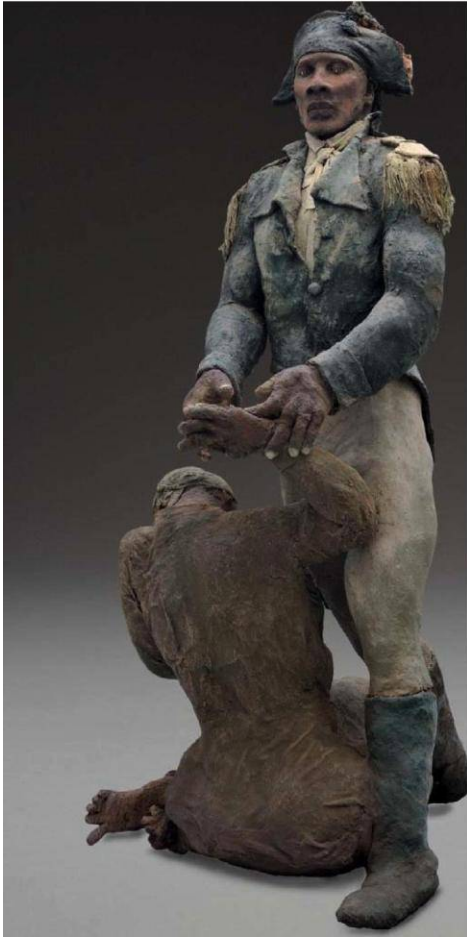
NA-VA.5-8.6 Making Connections between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

English Language Arts

NL-ENG.K-12.4 Communication Skills

NL-ENG.K-12.5 Communication Strategies

NL-ENG.K-12.6 Applying Knowledge



Ousmane Sow

born 1935, Senegal

Toussaint Louverture et la vieille esclave (Toussaint Louverture and the Elderly Slave)

1989

Mixed media (iron, earth, jute, straw)

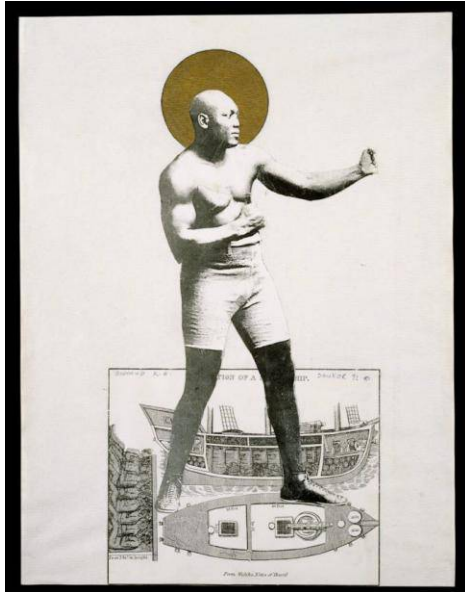
220 x 100 x 110 cm (86 5/8 x 39 3/8 x 43 5/16 in.)

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, museum purchase, through exchange from Emil Eisenberg, and Mr. and Mrs. Norman Robbins, and with funds from Stuart Bohart and Barbara Portman, 2009-8-1

Questions for Viewing

- Take a moment to look closely. What appears to be happening in this sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How would you describe the mood? Why?
- Select one figure and take a closer look. What do you notice about the facial expression and posture? What might they be thinking or feeling?

Artworks in the Museum's Collection Related to this Lesson



Godfried Donkor (born 1964, Ghana)
From Slave to Champ I, 1992
Mixed media on paper



William Kentridge (born 1955, South Africa)
Head, 1994
Charcoal, pastel, and tempera on paper



Edo artist, Benin Kingdom Court style
Commemorative head of a king, 18th century
Copper alloy, iron

UNIT 4: Art: Memory, Family, and the Domestic Sphere

Artists have long shaped expressions of the family, memories, the cultural value and dignity of work, celebrations, and domestic interiors. African and African American artists use domestic objects and environments to define distinct aspects of personal and cultural identity. The home is comprised of spaces where we live and nurture, and where we can become our most authentic selves. Domestic spaces define a social place that engages the inner world of family and the outer public world.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- Consider how artworks can link to individual and family life histories
- Identify objects that reflect ideas about status, spirituality, aesthetic excellence, and the desire to beautify personal space
- How the cultural value and dignity of work are explored through art
- How objects reveal the hand of talented artists and reflect specific knowledge, skills, and aesthetic systems
- Understand through discussion that works of art reflect a multitude of influences and encounters

National Learning Standards:

Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-12.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas

NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

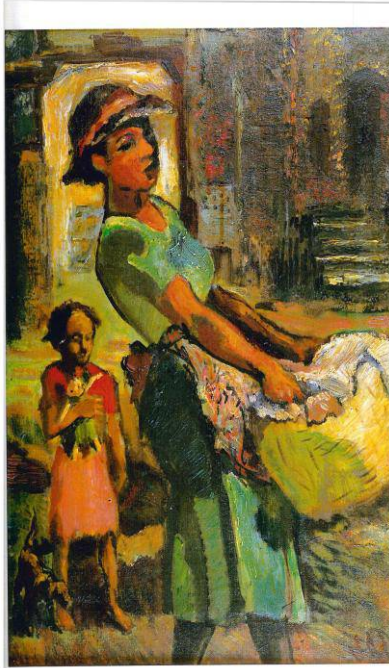
A **genre** (ZHAN – rah) painting is one that depicts scenes or events from everyday life.

James Amos Porter (1905-1970) is considered the "**father of African American art history**", as he was the first scholar to publish a comprehensive, systematic, and critical analysis of African-American artists and their works of art. He published *Modern Negro Art* in 1943 and decisively placed African-American artists within the framework of American art.

Porter was also an artist and art teacher. Notice in the composition, *Washerwoman*, how he directs **our eye to the mother's face by** framing her head in the bright doorway. Where does your eye go next? Porter chose to place the elements in his painting in a triangular **composition**. Can you see it? Follow the **mother's arms down to the laundry basket and then to her daughter in the background**.

- The mother is carrying something heavy. How can you tell?
- Her child is helping by carrying a small bag in one hand—notice what is in the other.
- What do you see at her feet?

Does this remind you of something in your everyday life? Describe it.



James Amos Porter (1905-1970) United States
Washerwoman (n.d.)
Oil on canvas
45.8 x 33 cm (18 x 13 in.)

Questions for Viewing

- Take a moment to look closely. What appears to be happening in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How would you describe the mood? Why?
- Select one figure in the scene and take a closer look. What do you notice about their facial expression and posture? What might they be thinking or feeling?
- Scan the two figures in the scene. What are some things they have in common? What differences stand out?

QUILTS and Story Cloth

Textile artists use **cloth** and **fibers** as materials to construct both useful and artistic works. Some artists combine **painting** techniques with **quilted fabric** materials.



Catherine Hanks
born 1922, United States
Quilt
1996 Cotton fabric
122 x 210.8 cm (48 x 83 in.)
Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr.

Artworks in the Museum's Collection Related to this Lesson



Maker: Sara-Nar peoples, Chad
Bowl, ca. 1970-1973
Gourd
H x W x D: 10.3 x 21.9 x 21.4 cm (4 1/16 x 8 5/8 x 8 7/16 in.)
Gift of Ellen Patterson Brown
94-2-13



Olowe of Ise

ca. 1875-ca. 1938

Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

Bowl with figures, Early 20th century

Wood, paint

H x W x D: 53.8 x 25 x 35 cm (21 3/16 x 9 13/16 x 13 3/4 in.)

Gift of Walt Disney World Co., a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company
2005-6-34



Zwelethu Mthethwa,

born 1960, Durban, South Africa

Untitled, 2002

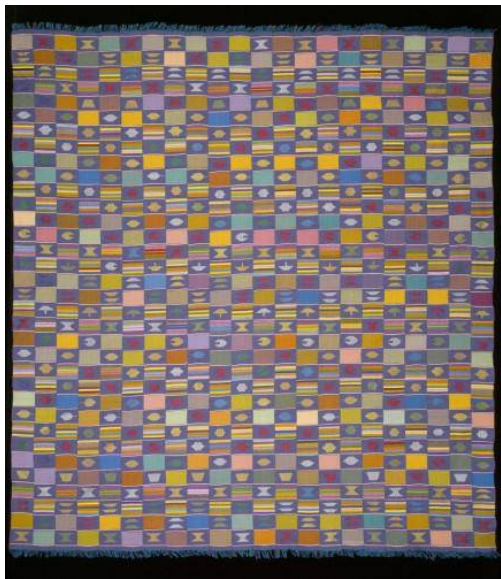
Chromogenic print mounted on plexiglass

H x W: 96.5 x 129.5 cm (38 x 51 in.)

Museum purchase

Edition of 3

2003-11-1



Gilbert "Bobbo" Ahiagble

1944–2012, Ewe artist, Ghana

Man's wrapper, Late 20th century

Cotton, dyes

243.8 x 274.3 cm (96 x 108 in.)

Museum purchase

98-17-1

UNIT 5: Art: Nature as Metaphor

Many artists demonstrate a keen observation of and appreciation for the natural world through their art.

A **landscape** is a scenic view depicting natural features like the sky, mountains, trees, deserts, and rivers. A **cityscape** is a view depicting features made by humans such as skyscrapers, roads, and houses.



Walter Williams (1920–1998, United States)
Roots, Southern Landscape, 1978
Oil, sand, enamel, collage
121.3 x 149.3 cm (47 3/4 x 58 3/4 in.)

Goals

Students will be able to:

- identify ways works of art reflect and engage the natural environment
- analyze the relationship between the human and natural worlds through a work of art
- understand the multiple components of masquerades and their performance outside of a museum setting
- identify ways artists use viewpoint, scale, and detail to communicate ideas

National Learning Standards

Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-12.1 Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes

NA-VA.K-12.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas

NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

Geography

NSS-G.K-12.2 Places and Regions

NSS-G.K-12.5 Environment and Society

Science

NS.K-12.6 Personal and Social Perspectives

Questions for Viewing

- Take a moment to look at the painting from a distance. What do you notice? Now look closely. What do you notice?
- Describe some of the details in the landscape. Do they make you feel haunted, sad, or happy?
- Can you tell what time of day is it?
- Do you think this painting represents a real or an imagined landscape? Which details make you think so?
- Describe the relationship between humans and the natural world in this scene.

Artworks in the Museum's Collection Related to this Lesson



Nuna artist, Burkina Faso
Mask, mid-20th century
Wood, pigment, metal



Alexander "Skunder" Boghossian

1937-2003, born Ethiopia

Devil Descending, 1972

Oil and mixed media on canvas

H x W: 152.7 x 122.4 cm (60 1/8 x 48 3/16 in.)

Gift of Basilio F. Ciocchi in memory of Raimondo Ciocchi and Elvira Maone Ciocchi

99-22-1

UNIT 6: Art, Music and Urban Culture

As a universal language, music serves as inspiration to artists from the beginning of time. Transcending race, nationality, and culture, artists can evoke the rhythmic and improvisational qualities of music through form, color, and other visual cues in their work.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- identify ways artists convey sound through composition, form, color and line.
- recognize similarities and differences in visual and musical expression
- Explore ways that artists use music as a springboard for art making

National Learning Standards

English Language Arts

NL-ENG.K-12.4 Communication Skills

NL-ENG.K-12.5 Communication Strategies

NL-ENG.K-12.12 Applying Language Skills

Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-12.3 Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas

NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

Questions for Viewing

A **collage** (ko-LAAHj), from the French *to glue*, is an artistic technique combining paint with various materials such as magazine and newspaper clippings, color paper, cloth, or other found objects that are then glued to the paper or canvas.

Romare Bearden (1911- 1988) was a master of the *collage* technique and improvised ways of combining different materials and inventing new textures and surfaces. In ***Sitting In at Barron's***, the subject is music. The artist invites us into the frame by directing the musician's eyes toward the viewer. He energizes the visual space through a composition of lively angles, colors, patterns and bold forms to convey an illusion of sound and movement.



- Bearden was inspired by music, especially the blues and jazz. What sounds do you imagine hearing when you look at this work of art?
- **What is the first thing** (focal point) you see when you look at the painting and why?
- How many shapes, textures, diagonals, curves and colors can you find?
- **Why do you think the artist chose to make the musician's face green?**
- What mood does this work communicate to you? Upbeat or downbeat?

[Artworks in the Museum's Collection Related to this Lesson](#)



Malick Sidibé
born 1935, Mali
Nuit de Noël (Happy-Club)
1963, printed 2008
Gelatin silver print
61 x 50 cm (24 x 19 11/16 in.)
42.5 x 43 cm (16 3/4 x 16 15/16 in.)
Museum purchase
2009-12-3



Solomon Irein Wangboje
1930-1998, Nigerian
The Music Maker - Mood V, 1965
Linocut on paper
H x W: 36.2 x 29.8 cm (14 1/4 x 11 3/4 in.)
Gift of Amb. and Mrs. Benjamin Hill Brown Jr.
2/12
76-3-18



Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

Staff (ogo Elegba)

Mid-20th century

Wood, indigo

H x W x D: 41.5 x 8.7 x 21.7 cm (16 5/16 x 3 7/16 x 8 9/16 in.)

Gift of Walt Disney World Co., a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company

Object Number

VOCABULARY

Abstraction	Iconography
Citiscapc	Landscape
Collage	Manumission
Genre painting	Naturalism
Harlem Renaissance	Pattern
Portrait	Still life
Realism	Symbol
Sculpture	Textile arts

