



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume V: The Blues Impulse

Visual Blues—On the Move: Visual Art Syntheses of the Blues Impulse

Curriculum Unit 97.05.09
by Martha Savage

Objectives

Through this unit, young students in the sixth grade at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet, will create art works informed by the blues. Along the way they will discover how artists working in a variety of art disciplines—visual art, music and writing—have done the same. They will see parallel roads—artists, whose work serve as complements of each other; and crossroads—artists whose works intersect. Students will be able to understand, interpret, and bring to the road their own contributions. At the end of the journey, students will have sampled from the blues experience both as observers and as creators. The blues will have come to life as both an aesthetic encounter as well as a lesson for living.

The unit is structured as a collection of journeys in which the blues impulse is examined in music, visual art, poetry and prose. The journeys consider a range of human movement—actual and metaphorical, voluntary and involuntary, long distance and short distance, outward and inward, historical and personal. People move from place to place as time and history evolve. A journey can be physical, spiritual and/or emotional. People move from a place or state of misery and pain, seeking something better. They are moved by force or circumstance. Sometimes the destination which may have held so much promise, is no better than the place of embarkation. The destination presents new problems, and some of the old problems. Blues relates and describes that state of being, that journey. Blues is a transformation—for survival, relief, joy, hope and understanding. Blues, as a transformative experience is useful and applicable to all people. Through this unit, the blues are seen in historical context, in an art context and are made accessible and relevant to young people.

Wynton Marsalis's oratorio, "Blood on the Fields", the art works of Tom Feelings in *The Middle Passage*, Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Horace Pippin, Bill Traylor, and selected written works of Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Langston Hughes and Albert Murray serve as the cornerstones of this unit. A varied selection of studio art projects synthesizes the artistic expression of artists and students.

The emphasis throughout this unit is on visual art. At each lesson juncture, students look at collage, paintings and drawings. The art work is punctuated by prose, poetry or music. Artists were selected for the unit based on one or more of three criteria: (a) There is documentation which demonstrates the artist was influenced by blues. (b) The art work's content is expressly blues or jazz. (c) The art work serves as a complement to a

written or musical work to be used in the unit. Visual artists such as Feelings and Bearden were selected because they wrote about the influence of blues on their art as well as used themes focused on in the unit. Artists such as Pippin and Johnson were chosen because the content in their art is relevant to the unit. Blues artists, jazz musicians and singers populate much of Bearden's work for example "Blues at Night" (1981), "Blues at the Crossroads" (1985) and "Blues Singer From the Delta" (1987). Pippin's "Harmonizing" (1944) shows four men singing gospel or jazz a cappella in a call and response manner. Pippin's "Domino Players" (1943) made an apt comparison to the use of gray in Brook's *Maud Martha*. Johnson painted musicians, "Street Musicians" (1940) and "String Band" (1940) as well as couples dancing "Jitterbugs" (I-V) (1940-2). Johnson's Honeymoon Series (1940-1) and Breakdown Series (1940-41) serve as complements of *Thomas and Beulah* by Dove. Lawrence's Migration Series (1940-1) is important to the theme of the unit because it so richly depicts movement from a place of hardship to a place of hopeful prosperity. Traylor's art and life have an unmistakable blues quality. The blues informs Marsalis work, "Blood on the Fields," which is a journey story of freedom. Murray's novel, *Train Whistle Guitar* defines the blues as well as offers a literary palette of the color blue. The blues poetry of Langston Hughes and his writing on rhythm and blues is indispensable. The title character in Brook's *Maud Martha* is the quintessential blues character who makes do, is flexible and colors her otherwise drab existence as a means of survival. One of the Thomas poems in Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* is beautifully manifested in the paintings of William H. Johnson.

The songs, stories and images created by this extraordinary collection of artists come together to instruct, enlighten, delight and inspire.

The unit revolves around a common theme: journeys. Listening to music, (blues in "Blood on the Fields"), viewing art in a variety of styles by a number of artists and reading poetry and other writings, children first begin to see how the arts tell the same story in different and similar ways. They see the art disciplines merge and boundaries blur. A painting can be a visual form of the blues such as in the work of Pippin. A Bearden collage can be seen as visual jazz created like an improvisational piece of music. Montage such as the work of Feelings is a kind of visual poem. The art of Johnson brings the poetry of Dove to visual form. Hughes and Bearden sing a homesick blues together in their art forms. Brooks's *Maud Martha* is "painted music." (Brooks 1) Marsalis and Feelings navigate the same ocean of pain.

One goal of the artist/musician/writer is to present for the viewer or audience a more acute understanding of the human experience. Of the many nuances of human experiences, tragedy is addressed in the blues. Art of the blues is a positive means for both the producer and viewer/audience to explore, confront difficulties, to express feelings and develop personal understanding,. It is a way to gain insight and is a means to lift the spirit. All people throughout the age spectrum, including children can experience and produce art in this manner. Presenting children, in a sensitively thoughtful, developmentally appropriate way, with the opportunity to see and experience human pain through uplifting art forms provides the basis for a lifetime lesson. Today, children have a range of concerns from what might be thought of as insignificant to overwhelmingly devastating. Through this unit, they have an opportunity to examine their own problems and that of their peers. Children will experience expressing personal feelings about these issues and locate the joy, humor and positive elements of a difficult and trying situation through visual art.

The studio projects which flow from the juxtaposition of the arts and blues focus on both the process and product; the becoming being as important as the end result. Process is important for it is the blues aesthetic which informs improvisational spirit of creating—working with what you have, making due, creating something out of nothing and being flexible. The pliant nature and uninhibited spirit of ten, eleven and twelve year old children is an essential ingredient. Children of this age are willing and eager to explore unknown territory

without a map and without fear. They simply need a vehicle, inspiration and opportunity. Students are encouraged to identify and then transpose the qualities, mood, tone, styles, techniques and methods found in diverse art forms and apply themes of tragedy, troubles and personal struggle to produce original visual displays of art.

Within a departmentalized structure, one of the most difficult, yet most rewarding challenges for the teacher is to develop and implement an interdisciplinary course. This unit meets two important goals: it brings art in relation to history and culture and makes connections between art and other disciplines. *Visual Blues* investigates works of art in different genres and brings that understanding to the middle school classroom. It fits well in our philosophy at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet that the arts are the core of education and share many characteristics which should be taught simultaneously. *Visual Blues* will make children read, look, articulate, examine, interpret, think, solve, invent, create, synthesize, judge and reflect.

Strategies

The unit is structured around two pre-journey lessons followed by five journeys. The pre-journey lessons are introductory. They acquaint the student with concepts and ideas which permeate and develop throughout the unit. They are meant to familiarize the students with each other, the teacher and sample some of what they will be experiencing further down the road.

Pre-journey lesson #1 is blue/blues. This lesson begins to address the question: what are the blues and what are its various forms by exploring the permutations of the color blue. There are as many variations and manifestations of the blues as there are the color blue. Albert Murray's 1974 novel, *Train Whistle Guitar* answers some of the questions. He provides an explanation for the blues as part of life and not the end of the world. A passage in the book reveals how Bea Ella Thornhill becomes known as Red Ella.

But Little Buddy and I knew that Papa Gumbo Willie Worthy had said red because what he was really talking about was the blues. Because he was responding to what Vanderbuilt Coleman had said was Bea Ella Thornhill's biggest mistake of all: Not knowing that bad luck and disappointment meant not the end of the world but only that being human you had to suffer like everybody else from time to time. (Murray 122)

Definitions and descriptions of the blues continue to be examined throughout the lessons.

The color blue, in its many guises, appear throughout Murray's novel. The shades of the color blue represent certain people. "The color you always remember when you remember Little Buddy is sky-blue. Because that shimmering summer sunshine blueness in which neighborhood hen used to cackle while distant yard dogs used to bark and mosquito hawks used to flit and float along nearby barbwire fences, was a boy's color." (Murray 6) Luzana Cholly is "steel blue, which is also the clean, oil smelling color of gunmetal and the gray-purple patina of freight train engines and railroad slag." (Murray 6-7) Murray describes places and times in shades of blue. "the tin silky almost-summer blueness of midmorning." (Murray 40) "There was a blueness that went with the odor of caulking tar and turpentine and which was to twine and tarpaulin what steel blue was to rawhide; and it went with Mobile because it was seaport blue . . ." (Murray 40) Blue is also seen as symbolic. "That was when he [Uncle Jerome] used to say that the color of freedom was blue. The Union Army came dressed in blue. The big hand that signed the freedom papers signed them in blue ink which was also blood. The very sky itself was blue, limitless . . ." (Murray 67) Murray shows that in literature, color can

symbolize many things from people, events, ideas, feelings, places and times. The idea is useful because color is symbolic in the visual art viewed in later lessons.

Pre-journey lesson #2 introduces movement and rhythm as it applies to everyday life, music, writing and visual art in particular. Rhythm and movement are key concepts for looking at blues in the arts. There is a rhythm in the art, music and poetry. And movement is essential to the understanding of blues as transformative. Rhythm in ourselves is an accessible idea. We inhale and exhale in a rhythm, the heart beats in a rhythm. Children skip rope to a rhythm and bounce a basketball to a rhythm. The sun rises and sets, school begins, ends, begins ends in a rhythm. Rhythm in visual art is produced by repeating certain elements of art, lines, colors, shapes, forms. How these elements are arranged or composed constitute visual movement.

These two pre-journey lessons set the tone of the unit and the thesis that the blues are part of the rhythm of life, the blues involve movement from one place to another, one state of being to another and that symbolism is important.

The following series of five journeys begins with the forced journey of many in the middle passage, and ends with a personal journey discovered and investigated through reflection and the preceding lessons. Lessons progress from *macro-* movement to *micro-* movement.

Journey #1 is the movement of African people from Africa to the United States. This involuntary movement of a large group of people is told in the Wynton Marsalis oratorio, "Blood on the Fields" and the black and white paintings of Tom Feelings in his book, *The Middle Passage*. The first painting in Feelings book shows the broad expanse of an African landscape, trees, a bird soaring upward, the sun and two noble heads, an African man and woman in profile. Painted along side, behind and above the heads are carved staffs, an antelope headdress and other carved wooden images. Subsequent paintings rage with violence, struggle, pain as the African people are taken captive by Europeans. Feelings layers images in a surreal fashion that emerge after viewing the work closely. An image found in the beginning of the book shows the pain and anguish of the African people. It is a symmetrical composition. A man's head is in the center, it is tilted upwards. Below the head is a man's torso bent forward, his wrists in chains. Above the central head is a screaming, naked infant, side view, looking down. Spearheads form a horizontal line, one pointing toward the infant's head and the other its feet. On either side of the central head are two faces in profile facing downward. Rows of chained figures move below the profiled heads. The loop of a whip can be detected among the chained line of figures. The paintings are colored in black and white only, in mists and shades, layers and veils suggesting a multi-faceted personal interpretation.

Feelings' paintings are of various sizes and shapes, each with a deep, emotional quality which must be viewed thoughtfully. The images do not emerge all at once, but are revealed, coming to the viewer's conscience and awareness like bubbles rising to the surface of body of water.

Feelings writes of his "journey" creating the paintings for *The Middle Passage*.

It is almost twenty years later. I have finished this long 'psychological and spiritual journey back in order to move forward' with the completion of the last painting of *The Middle Passage* —a story that has changed me forever. My struggle to tell this African story, to create this artwork as well as live creatively under any conditions and survive, as my ancestors did, embodies my particular heritage in this world. As the blues, jazz, and the spirituals teach, one must embrace all of life, both its pain and its joy, creatively. Knowing this, I, we, may be disappointed, but never destroyed. (Feelings. Introduction)

The works of Marsalis and Feelings describe a specific historical event from differing vantage points. Marsalis's music and Feelings's paintings can be experienced side by side. The evocative, almost dreamlike paintings which appear in the book deliberately without text or written narrative, lend themselves to interpretation through music as a powerful emotional experience. The pictures are detailed, triumphant, painful, moving.

Care should be taken when selecting paintings and music in this lesson because the material is so emotionally sensitive and powerful especially when presented together, as I suggest. Not all paintings will be appropriate and should be chosen with the particular students in mind. Introductory remarks are necessary to prepare children for what they are about to experience.

Journey #2 is the migration of African American people from the South to the North beginning around the time of World War I. Sixty casein painted, twelve inch by eighteen inch vertical and horizontal panels comprise Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series. Lawrence tells the story of ordinary people, like his parents, leaving the South in search of a better life. He painted all sixty panels simultaneously so that they share an identical palette of "ivory black, brown umber, yellow ochre, vermilion [red], ultramarine [blue], viridian [green], cadmium orange and cadmium yellow." (Turner 157) He intended the work to be viewed as one unit, the alternating vertical and horizontal panels creating a rhythmic flow. The journey to the North is described visually in the individual images as well as being suggested in the total composition. The first and final panels, as well as several panels in-between, depict railroad stations, waiting rooms and trains. The movement of the journey is visually reiterated in the repetition of the panel rectangles as well their strong vertical and horizontal design elements. The panels are like the cars on a train or the ties along the track and the station images are like stops along the way.

To me, migration means movement. While I was painting, I thought about trains and people walking to the stations. I thought about field hands leaving their farms to become factory workers, and about the families that sometimes go left behind. The choices made were hard ones, so I wanted to show what made the people get on those northbound trains. I wanted show just what it cost to ride them. Uprooting yourself from one way of life to make your way to another involves conflict and struggle. But out of the struggle comes a kind of power, and even beauty. (Lawrence. Introduction)

Migration brought joy and pain. Lawrence painted unhealthy labor camps (panel 46), some better and some very poor housing conditions (panels 47, 48), discrimination (panel 49), riots (panels 50, 51, 52), not being accepted by earlier migrants (panel 53), better education (panel 58) and the vote (panel 59).

Among the painful effects of migration was missing what had been home. Langston Hughes looks down the railroad track in the opposite direction—from the North toward the South in "Homesick Blues."

Homesick Blues

De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
Ever time de train pass

I wants to go somewhere.

I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth.
I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth.
Lookin' for a box car
To roll me to de South.

Homesick blues, Lawd.

'Sa terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth an laughs.

(From THE DREAM KEEPER AND OTHER POEMS by Langston Hughes, Copyright 1927 by Alfred Knopf Inc. and renewed 1955 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of the author.) Lawrence's Migration Series and Hughes's "Homesick Blues" both speak to the effects of migration on people. Both use the symbol of the train as the vehicle for change and the station as the place to initiate change, to bring hope and happiness. Lawrence painted a train engine speeding along in panel 5 of the Migration Series. The truncated locomotive is shown at night ivory black against an ultramarine sky, black smoke streaming back, its headlight beaming forward and cadmium yellow bell pulled back, tense, clanging in the still night air.

Another comparison can be made with Romare Bearden's collage, "Moonlite Prelude" (1987) made a year before his death. It depicts a train crossing a railroad bridge at night. The train and bridge are angled upward, dark green and black against a deep blue sky. The beam of white light from the train head lamp points downward, directing our attention to the scene below. Beneath the bridge is an Eden-like scene, red hills, blue birds, a woman reclining on the ground, and the ubiquitous Bearden bluesman, sitting on a rock, playing the guitar. This train seems to be carrying Bearden "home."

Journey #3 is the movement between the rural landscape and the urban landscape. Images of the urban and rural landscape appear in the oeuvre of Romare Bearden as they do in the work of Jacob Lawrence and William H. Johnson. Since the migration of African Americans to the North and roots of African American culture in the South, the reason for this movement back and forth for artistic expression and inspiration is clear. Two very different artists who created images of the rural and urban scene using recycled materials, were Bearden and Traylor.

Bearden's collage images of city and rural life are considered both for the content as well as the materials from which the art was created. Bearden said his art was a result of improvisation. He drew, tore, cut, glued. He incorporated various colored papers, discarded papers, magazine images and the textures of everyday life in his work. He thought of his method of working, like the blues. Bearden stated in an article by Myron Schwartzman, "Romare Bearden Sees a Memory," "You must become a blues singer-only you sing on the canvas. You improvise—you find the rhythm and catch it good and structure as you go along-then the song is you." (ACA Galleries 50). From "Romare Bearden, I paint out of the blues," by Avis Berman, Bearden compares his work to the blues.

I paint out of the tradition of the blues, of call and recall. You start a theme and you call and recall For Bearden, 'art celebrates a victory,' and that victory is twofold. In general it involves conquering and redeeming both the beauty and sullenness of the past. In particular, it proclaims that black people have survived in spite of everything. This too, goes back to the blues. As a young boy I'd go to the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, and I'd hear Bessie Smith or some other singer. What they sang would usually go like this: 'I woke up this morning and my man left me a note. He said he was leaving, and I'm feeling so blue, so blue. I'm goin' down by the river and I feel as bad as I do now, I'm gonna jump in.' Here she's talking about a poignant personal event—her love is gone. But behind her the musicians are 'riffing,' changing something tragic into something positive and farcical. That is why I've gone back to the South and jazz. Even though you go through these terrible experiences, you come out feeling good. That's what the blues say and that's what I believe—life will prevail. (ACA 51)

A self-taught artist, Bill Traylor began drawing in his eighties. He was born into slavery in Benton, Alabama. He remained in Alabama most of his life, working as a farmer. At seventy-eight, after his wife died and children moved away, he left the small town of Benton and moved to Montgomery working briefly in a shoe factory. Unable to continue work because of rheumatism, Traylor quit his job and began sitting on a box in Montgomery's business district, watching the scenes of city life. One day he picked up a discarded piece of cardboard and a stub of a pencil and began to draw. Traylor's art and life are compared to the blues by Mary Lyons in *Deep Blues*. "At first the verses in the blues song seem unrelated, like the scattered figures in one of Bill's pictures. They don't tell a story with beginning, middle, and end. But the words, like Bill's images, do paint a picture of Black Belt life: men and women who love and leave, feeling broke and feeling bad, judges and jails, mules and moonshine whiskey." (Lyons 21) "Like two train rails, Bill's life and the blues ran side by side. Each was born in the nineteenth century and matured in the twentieth. There is a sweet sorrow in both, but the pain is balanced by spicy humor. And just as the blues moved from cabin porches to juke joints, Bill Traylor had to leave the familiar cow paths around Benton for the hard streets of the city." (Lyons 23)

Compare the similar ingredients found in Bearden and Traylor's rural landscapes. They both depict life in the rural south with symbols: cabins, roosters, birds, plows, people. Bearden's work is rich, colorful, dense, filled with texture, paint, papers, and complexity. Every space-positive and negative, foreground, middleground and background is occupied. Traylor, on the other hand, drew on old, used cardboard, using some colored pencils, lead pencils and crayon. Traylor's figures are cartoon-like, drawn with shoulders frontal, heads in profile and filled in like a silhouette. His figures float, twist, fall and are in disproportionate sizes in empty space. Both

artists create memories of rural life from the detritus of life but in vastly different manners. Each used commonplace materials, finding their aesthetic value. Bearden and Traylor show the transformative power of the ordinary in the hands of the artist. The blues teaches that sometimes one must make do with what is available, but that the common, everyday situation or circumstance can be remade into something else, into something magnificent, moving, humorous, beautiful, fulfilling.

Journey #4 is moving from one home to another. *Maud Martha*, a novel by Gwendolyn Brooks vividly illustrates the transformation of the ordinary “gray” of life into brilliant color as the protagonist moves in her life journey from her parent’s home to her own home and married life. Chapter One is titled: “description of Maud Martha.” She is described in terms of her preferences. Maud Martha stands on her porch, looking out upon the path ahead of her which she sees in bright and rich hues. “What she liked was candy buttons, and books, and painted music (deep blue, or delicate silver) and the west sky, so altering, viewed from the steps of the back porch; and dandelions.” (Brooks 1) By contrast, many things in the novel are described as gray: apartment buildings (Brooks 5, 60), the blanket on the body of Maud Martha’s deceased grandmother (Brooks 12), Maud Martha (Brooks 25), apartment building fumes (Brooks 64) and her newborn baby (Brooks 97). Maud Martha’s surroundings, her physical and psychic space are described in gray and in color. “She [Maud Martha] was becoming aware of the oddness in color and sound and smell about her, the color and the sound and smell of the kitchenette building. The color was gray, and the smell and sound had taken on a suggestion of the properties of the color, and impressed one as gray, too. The sobbings, the frustrations, the small hates, the large and ugly hates, the little pushing-through love, the boredom, that came to her from behind those walls (some of them beaverboard) via speech and scream and sigh—all these were gray. . . . There was a whole lot of grayness here.” (Brooks 63-4) In Maud Martha’s imagination, she saw her apartment transformed, for this, color, mostly green, symbolically the color of life and “go” on traffic lights, takes the place of gray. “She would have the janitor move the bed and dresser out, tell Paul to buy a studio couch, a desk chest, a screen, a novelty chair, a white Venetian blind for the first room, and a green one for the kitchen, since the wallpaper there was green (with little red fishes swimming about). Perhaps they could even get a rug. A green one. And green drapes for the windows. Why, this *might* even turn out to be a dream apartment.” (Brooks 61) Domestic interiors play an important part in describing the emotional changes which Maud Martha experiences. Living spaces are re-colored in her mind from gray to green as she tries to see her life transform.

Horace Pippin painted eight domestic interiors. They show scenes of everyday family life within a multipurpose room. Pippin’s “The Domino Players” (1943) is a scene from his childhood. (Stein 143) It depicts a gray kitchen. The walls are gray, the plaster is cracked and broken, the window trim is gray. A shelf holds a lamp, which rests on a white cloth. Three figures sit around a brown table. Two women are playing dominoes while a child, Pippin, watches. One puffs on a white clay pipe. A third woman sits in the background quilting by a pot bellied stove. There is a gray bucket. The women all wear white, black or gray. Pippin accents the composition with red. Red fire in the stove, red fabric in the quilt and red flame in the lamp, red in the head wrap of the pipe smoking domino player. The white dots on the black dominoes echo the black dots on the white blouse of one of the women. Despite the broken down appearance of the room, and the lack of color, the scene is full of life, warmth, peace and love. The accents of red and the dots turn a somber scene into a cheerful scene something like the process used by Maud Martha to create her *dream* apartment. Instead of adding green-life to the room as Maud Martha does, Pippin adds touches of red-warmth.

William H. Johnson used brilliant color to transform the ordinary. He painted many domestic portraits in interior and exterior spaces. Johnson, a skilled artist, was capable of realistic rendering which is demonstrated in the work of his early career. However, in his mature work, that for which he is known, he chose to portray his subjects in an almost child-like manner, with exaggerated features. His portraits of children and adults

show the subject in a frontal pose, gazing directly at the viewer. They are painted in vivid, flatly applied hues. He charged the ordinary portrait in an ordinary setting, with the vibrancy of color.

A theme which appears in Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* was also created in a number of paintings by Johnson before her. These paintings are among the Breakdown Series and Honeymoon Series. Dove's poem in the Thomas section is titled, "Nothing Down." Thomas and Beulah go for a drive and the car breaks down.

Eight miles outside Murfreesboro
the burn of stripped rubber,
soft mud of a ditch.
A carload of white men
halloo past them on Route 231.
"You and your South!" she shouts
above the radiator hiss.
"Don't tell me this ain't what
you were hoping for." (Dove 23)

In the poem the breakdown refers to the car. Beulah says Thomas was probably hoping this would happen. In the Breakdown and Honeymoon Series paintings by Johnson, the family: mother, father and children or newlyweds surround the stalled car. However it is not so much about the broken car as it is about the people, and how they will cope with problems encountered along the road of life. The people are broken down and in need of healing. "In black English, the term 'to break down' means to suffer utter despair and discontinuity." (Powell 165) The paintings are colored in brilliant, cheerful hues. The figures kneel, as if praying, the hood ornaments are crosses reflecting the theme of faith and spiritual repair. Perhaps the breakdown that Thomas and Beulah experience is also a metaphor for the hardships that are ahead.

Journey #5 is a personal journey. Each individual has a personal journey waiting to be expressed. The visual manifestation of that journey is yet to be revealed.

This is a time to summarize and universalize the journeys in the previous lessons and examine how other groups, including ones one have shared similar experiences. Many Southeast Asian students' families in New Haven have fled their homes in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam for political and economic reasons. Families have emigrated from Europe looking for opportunities and to escape persecution. Families have migrated to New Haven from the Carolinas during the "great" migration described by Lawrence. Families in the school community have moved as jobs, education and other opportunities have impacted on lives. Children move from house to house, and families change. On rare occasions a student finds him/herself in

foster care or temporary shelter. Historically and presently, New Haven school children and all children have been and are “on the move” and have a story to tell and blues to relate about the joy, pain, hardship and changes associated with that part of life.

Each journey lesson utilizes a complement of artistic vehicles which are explored and inform the student art work which is made in response. Students will work in a variety of media: black and white mixed media, vivid, colorful tempera paintings, collage using everyday materials, three dimensional construction and assemblage. They look at recognized and established artists and writers as well as a self-taught artist. In addition, students’ family narratives and their own stories will serve as inspiration.

Classroom Activities

Getting Ready #1: Blues/Blue

Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #3 Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas. Content Standard #6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Goal

Acquire a beginning understanding of the definition of the blues and the symbolic nature of the color blue.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

Write a definition of the blues.

Identify various shades of the color blue and their symbolic meaning.

Use a limited palette.

Use collage techniques—cut, tear, compose.

Materials

Train Whistle Guitar , Albert Murray

- a variety of definitions of the blues
- magazines
- a variety of blue colored papers
- blue collage material other than paper
- scissors
- deckle edge Fiskars
- glue
- blues selection on tape

Activities

Students write a definition of the blues by: listening to a blues recording, reading a variety of definitions by artists and musicians, discussing in small groups.

Students create a color dictionary of “blue” by: listing things that are blue, feelings that are blue, associations with the color blue.

Students create a blue collage. Select blue materials of various hues and textures. Cut, tear, compose and glue while listening to a blues selection on tape.

Evaluation

Participation in discussion.

Written definition of the blues.

Contributions to the blue dictionary.

Blue collage.

Getting Ready #2: Movement and Rhythm

Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #2 Using knowledge of structures and functions. Content Standard #6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Goal

Acquire a beginning understanding of movement and rhythm.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

Define movement and rhythm in art, music and everyday life.

Apply movement and rhythm to art.

Materials

Hughes, Langston. “The Voice of Langston Hughes, Selected Poetry and Prose Read by the Author.”

“Max Roach: Rhythm.”

oil pastels

colored construction paper

Exploring Art or any middle school art text book

Activities

Students listen to Hughes describe rhythm. Brainstorm rhythms in everyday life.

Students watch Max Roach on video. Complete a worksheet while viewing the video. Define rhythm in music.

Students read about rhythm and movement in art in *Exploring Art* and answer questions in the text.

Students create a pastel drawings demonstrating an understanding of rhythm and movement.

Evaluation

Brainstorming participation.

Max Roach worksheet.

Questions and answers from *Exploring Art* .

Pastel rhythm and movement drawings.

Journey #1 Middle Passage: Africa—United States: Wynton Marsalis, “Blood on the Fields” and Tom Feelings, *The Middle Passage* -Black and White Mixed Media Collage Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #2 Using knowledge of structures and functions. Content Standard #3 Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas. Content Standard #4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures. Content Standard #5 Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others. Content Standard #6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Goal

Create a collage synthesis of “Blood on the Fields,” *The Middle Passage* and personal interpretation.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

View and articulate observations about complex paintings.

Create abstract and realistic interpretation from music.

Select mixed media collage materials.

Use a limited color scheme.

Use collage techniques—cut, tear, vary, layer, texture, compose.

Materials

“Blood on the Fields”

The Middle Passage

cardboard

black and white collage materials

scissors

deckle edge Fiskars

glue

pencil

white paper

black construction paper

white oil pastels

Activities

Teacher introduces book, describing the middle passage and preparing students for the experience. Students look at selected illustration in *The Middle Passage*. List everything in the composition. Answer questions—What is the story? How did the artist compose the picture? How do the people feel? How does it make you feel? Students sketch a diagram of one of the paintings.

Teacher introduces “Blood on the Fields” by giving a synopsis of the story. Students listen to selections from “Blood on the Fields.” Students draw in white pastel, filling black paper with doodles, abstractions and drawings while listening.

Students cut shapes, figures and objects from the pastel drawings, not looking at the drawings by holding the paper upside down. On cardboard, students arrange black and white collage material, recalling Feelings strong use of composition. Cut outs are added to the composition. Collage techniques such as overlapping, creation of texture, using a variety of materials, cut and torn edges are demonstrated by teacher and students apply. Composition is glued.

Students reflect in writing about the lesson.

Evaluation

Participation in discussion.

Sketch.

Collage using techniques demonstrated.

Written reflection.

Journey #2 South-North-South: Jacob Lawrence, Migration Series and Langston Hughes, “Homesick Blues”—6

Panel Tempera Painting Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #2 Using knowledge of structures and functions. Content Standard #3 Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas. Content Standard #4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures. Content Standard #5 Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others. Content Standard #6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Goal

Understand and use metaphors and symbols in to tell a story in art.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

Define and describe metaphors and symbols in a work of art.

Use metaphors and symbols in art.

Use tempera paint.

Create a series of six panels which “read” as one.

Use a family story in art.

Materials

The Great Migration

“Homesick Blues”

“The Voice of Langston Hughes”

cardboard panels

gesso

tempera paint

brushes

pencils

paper

blues selection on tape

Activities

Students listen to Hughes on tape reciting “Homesick Blues.” Discuss. Why is he homesick? What does he miss? Have you ever been homesick or missed someone? Draw someone or something you miss.

Teacher read to students *The Great Migration* . Students identify and list symbols and metaphors that repeat such as trains, bare, leafless trees, suitcases, packages, people seen from the back, stairs, train tracks. Also

list colors.

Students and Teacher discuss why people in the book moved. List the pros and cons of moving. Students write a realistic story of their family moving, either in their lifetime or their parents, grandparents or ancestors.

Students divide story into six scenes and make sketches. Students identify and use symbols and metaphors their sketches.

Teacher describes how Lawrence work simultaneously on 60 panels using the same palette for all paintings. Students prepare cardboard panels with a gesso ground. Number panels. Sketch scene on each panel. Choose six tempera colors with black and white. Color to be mixed only with black or white. Paint.

Write a final draft of family story and present painting series and story to the class.

Evaluation

Listening skills.

Sketches

Painting Series

Written story.

Presentation.

Journey #3 Rural-Urban Landscape: Romare Bearden and Bill Traylor—Landscape Figure Construction Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #2 Using knowledge of structures and functions. Content Standard #3 Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas. Content Standard #4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures. Content Standard #5 Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others. Content Standard #6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Goal

Transform everyday materials, endowing them with an aesthetic quality and importance.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

Use found objects.

Construct a three dimensional landscape and figure.

Materials

Bearden reproductions

Traylor reproductions

“Romare Bearden, Visual Jazz” video tape.

found objects

cool melt glue sticks

cool melt glue guns

cardboard

blues section on tape

brown paper bags

red, yellow and blue pencils

pencils

Activities

Students look at and compare Bearden collages and Traylor drawings of rural scenes. What do they have in common, what is different? Make lists.

Students use three colored pencils and lead pencils on brown paper bags to draw a scene at school observed while sitting at a chosen location.

Students view and complete a worksheet on "Romare Bearden, Visual Blues." What materials does Bearden use in the video tape? How does he work? How does Bearden describe his method of working? What are his influences?

Students collect found objects, materials not considered traditional art materials. They may bring materials from home. From that collection, and with no other additions, students construct a landscape with figure. Materials can be cut, torn, bent, folded and glued. A blues selection provides background music.

In writing, students reflect on the landscape figure project. What can be learned from this lesson? What was easy, what was difficult? What was the end result?

Evaluation

Participation in discussion.

List.

Drawing.

Bearden worksheet.

Construction.

Written reflection.

Journey #4 Horace Pippin "Domino Players," and Gwendolyn Brooks *Maud Martha* ; William H. Johnson's Breakdown and Honeymoon Series and Rita Dove *Thomas and Beulah* "Nothing Down": Transforming Home-Three Dimensional Room Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #2 Using knowledge of structures and functions. Content Standard #3 Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas. Content Standard #4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to

history and cultures. Content Standard #5 Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others. Content Standard #6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Goal

Endow the mundane with individuality and vibrancy.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

Transform identical rooms into individualized spaces.

Construct a cardboard architectural model with furniture.

Select and choose materials.

Materials

“Domino Players” reproduction

Maud Martha

Breakdown and Honeymoon Series reproductions

Thomas and Beulah “Nothing Down”:

cardboard

cool met glue sticks

cool melt glue

fabric

carpet scrapes

wall paper scrapes

yarn, fringe, buttons

found objects

oil pastels

black construction paper

blues selection on tape

Activities

Teacher leads students in a comparison of selections from *Maud Martha* and “Domino Players.” What does kind of things does Maud Martha see a gray? What does she do to “get rid” of the gray? What does Pippin do to “get rid” of the gray?

Students construct identical architectural spaces. They decide what kind of a room it should be and what should be in it. Students paint identical models all the same shade of gray.

Students read how *Maud Martha* transforms her dull apartment into her “dream” apartment. Students individualize their rooms using a variety of materials making it a “dream” room. Blues selection on tape.

Display together. Students write about how they changed the gray room. What was the most important addition?

Juxtapose “Nothing Down” with the Breakdown and Honeymoon Series. Students discuss what the breakdown meant to Thomas and Beulah and what it meant to the people in Johnson’s painting. Is the car or the people “broken down”? Is Johnson’s painting cheerful or sad? Why?

Students identify colors and style used by Johnson. Using these colors and style, students draw in pastel on black paper, a scene in which something is broken down. Blues selection on tape.

Students reflect in writing on breakdown drawings. What can be learned?

Evaluation

Participation in discussion.

Room construction.

Written reflections.

Pastel drawing.

Journey #5 Inner Journey/ Personal Growth Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media and processes. Content Standard #2 Using knowledge of structures and functions. Content Standard #3 Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas.

Goal

Summarize and universalize journeys; and explore an inner and personal journey

Objectives

The student will be able to:

Select a method of creating from the projects done in previous lesson.

Identify journeys of class, historical and present.

Select an inner and personal theme to explore in art.

Use selected materials appropriately.

Materials

materials from previous lessons

blues selections on tape

Activities

Teacher leads students in identifying historical and present journeys of the families in the class. How and why did families come to the United States? How and why have families moved to New Haven? How and why have families moved while living in New Haven? Draw, map, illustrate these journeys.

Students begin the process of selecting a theme of personal growth by completing the statement several times: I used to be _____, now I am _____. (Writing exercise adapted from Kenneth Koch in *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, 1980.) From the written exercise, students select one dyad which seems to have the most promise for an art work. Now I am _____ becomes the theme for a work of art.

Students select from the methods of work in previous lessons (black and white mixed media, series paintings, found object construction, drawings on paper bags, individualized identical rooms, pastel drawings) which will best illustrate the art work's theme.

Students work independently with teacher as consultant.

Students explain in writing why they made their selections.

Evaluation

Statements.

Selections and rationale.

Independent work.

Final project.

Assessment and Reflection

Following each lesson, students exhibit their artwork, prepare statements about their work, present their work to classmates and others and answer probing and reflective questions from the teacher and classmates.

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Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Maud Martha*. Third World Press: Chicago, 1953, 1993. This novel tells the story of a young woman's journey to adulthood in vignette-like chapters, finding the beauty in bleak situations.

Dove, Rita. *Thomas and Beulah*. Carnegie-Mellon University Press: Pittsburgh, 1986. These poems chronicle the lives of the poet's grandparents.

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"Folk Art, Special Feature on Horace Pippin." *Scholastic Art*. Vol. 19 No. 3. Dec 1988/Jan 1989. Written for students, this edition features Pippin and includes his historical works and images of childhood memories. The Masterpiece of the Month features a two

page reproduction of “Domino Players.”

Howard, Nancy Shroyer. *Jacob Lawrence, American Scenes, American Struggles* . Davis Publications, Inc.: Worcester, Massachusetts, 1996. A lively biography of Lawrence, this book is intended to spark the curiosity of children. It includes activities.

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“Jacob Lawrence, Working with Shapes.” *Scholastic Art* . Vol. 25 No. 6, Ap/May 1995. Student art magazine on aspects of Lawrence’s work, it features themes of America, protest (includes images from Harriet Tubman Series and Migration Series) and sport.

Jazz at Lincoln Center, Teacher’s Guide and Teacher’s Guide Supplement: Blood on the Fields, Music and Libretto by Wynton Marsalis . This guide features resources and lessons on jazz, including Lesson #4 The Blues. It also includes a student activity book and supplemental information and libretto of “Blood on the Fields” with two cassettes, one with excerpts from “Blood on the Fields” and the other various jazz selections.

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Lyons. Mary. *Deep Blues, Bill Traylor, Self-Taught Artists* . Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 1994. Written for middle school readers, this informative biography of little known, self-taught artist, Traylor, born into slavery, is told though historical references and interesting anecdotes with reproductions of his work and photographs.

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Student Bibliography

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Materials

Books and Written Material

Train Whistle Guitar , Albert Murray

a variety of definitions of the blues

Hughes, Langston. "The Voice of Langston Hughes, Selected Poetry and Prose Read by the Author."

Exploring Art or any middle school art text book

"Homesick Blues"

Maud Martha

Thomas and Beulah "Nothing Down"

Art

The Middle Passage

The Great Migration

Bearden reproductions

Traylor reproductions

"Domino Players" reproduction

Breakdown and Honeymoon Series reproductions

Collage Material

magazines

a variety of blue colored papers

blue collage material other than paper

black and white collage materials

found objects

fabric

carpet scrapes

wall paper scrapes

yarn, fringe, buttons

Cutting and Gluing

scissors

deckle edge Fiskars-(Scissors which cut wavy, zigzag and in other patterns, available in a variety of brands.)

glue

cool melt glue sticks

cool melt glue guns

Music

“Blood on the Fields”

blues selections on tape

Videotapes

“Max Roach: Rhythm.”

Romare Bearden, Visual Jazz.”

Drawing Materials

oil pastels

pencil

red, yellow and blue pencils

Paper

colored construction paper

cardboard

white paper

black construction paper

cardboard panels

brown paper bags

Paint and Brushes

gesso

tempera paint

brushes

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