

## **The Harlem Renaissance**

***Richard P. Holmes***  
*Penn-Alexander School*

### **Contents**

- Overview
- Rationale
- Objective
- Strategies
- Lesson Plans
- Assessment
- Resources

### **Overview**

“One of the most exciting periods in American History, if not in the history of the world, is the Harlem Renaissance” (Hill 2). In my curriculum, I will explore and discuss The Harlem Renaissance, a phenomenon typically associated with the Great Migration, and the impact that it had on the Black culture, the United States and many of its major urban centers.

The Harlem Renaissance was a direct result of the mass migration of African Americans from the Southern regions of the United States to the Northern and Midwestern regions of the country. The Renaissance marked the “coming of age for African Americans” (Hill 5) this sudden but great movement or migration of such a large number of African Americans, resulted in an explosion of cultural activities in many of America’s northern urban centers. The Renaissance marked a vibrant time in America’s history. One filled with art, music, literature and dance.

In this unit I plan to do a variety of activities with my students. We will begin by researching the Renaissance via the internet and various other reference materials. We will use an interactive Venn diagram tool to create a museum-like exhibit that highlights the works of selected African American intellectuals. The major focus of this unit however, will be on Black visual artists such as Jacob Lawrence, William H. Johnson and Aaron Douglas. We will also listen to and interpret music by Duke Ellington.

Overall, the goal of this unit is to help students understand the Harlem Renaissance and the impact that it had on the United States, African American literature, art, music and dance. And lastly, students will understand how it assisted in empowering a race, giving blacks the power to fight for what they never sought before: equality.

## **Rationale**

In my opinion history and art go hand in hand. It is through examining art that we often begin to look at the time period from in which it was created the events surrounding its creation or the life of its creator. I chose to discuss the Harlem Renaissance for a variety of reasons but was influenced primarily by a statement I read written by Nathan Huggins:

The Harlem Renaissance stands for something more than the actual works of art produced. Like all symbols, its primary significance is the deep emotional force it embodies, both for those who experience it and for those of us who find in it an important moment in our past. It is a principal emotional source, verifying our manliness and womanliness. Through the impact of it, we re-experience the triumph of that time and emerge as sensitive, sophisticated, complicated and resourceful human beings who are capable of tolerance, co-operation, and love but who also have ample capacity for anger, hatred, resentment, and retaliation. The experience of the Harlem Renaissance tells us that we are to be taken seriously by ourselves as well as by others. (Huggins 4).

I am not targeting a specific group of students, but rather everyone that walks through my door. I want to show them that they need not be constrained by the hand that life has dealt them but rather that all things are possible—perhaps not immediately, but with time work and patience. African Americans began their fight for equality when the vessels that carried them across the seas to their new home touched land. It is a struggle that continued during the Harlem Renaissance and some would argue continues even today. African Americans believed whole heartedly in what they were fighting for. I want my students to know that it is important that they believe in themselves and allow nothing and nobody to stand in their way of achieving their goals. Because of the importance of this curriculum unit, I plan to adapt it to various grade levels, modifying the lesson plans as necessary.

I am an art teacher at the Penn Alexander School. Fitting The Harlem Renaissance into my regular curriculum won't be a hard task to undertake, because I have found my students to be dedicated workers. I plan to have students first research the Renaissance using the internet and other reference materials, thus allowing them to expand upon their computer skills while they learn the historical background of this important event. I also plan on having them use the data that they have compiled to help create art work that is

similar to what was produced during that era. And lastly I would also like them to create their own museum-like exhibit using an interactive Venn diagram.

Having students read a wide variety of both print and online text will help them gain an understanding of their own country, the United States, and its place in the larger world. Furthermore they will be utilizing a variety of technological and information resources to “gather and synthesize information.” (NCATE Standards-see appendix)

Through their research, my students will find out that the Harlem Renaissance is the name given to the period from the end of World War I to the Harlem Riot of 1935 (Hill 4). During this time a group of talented African American artist produced a sizeable body of visual art work, poetry, literature and music. This African American cultural movement, which was located in the neighborhood of Harlem, New York, marked the first time in the history of the United States that Americans as a whole began to look at and perhaps appreciate the intellectual works of African Americans. It is a “testament to Black people’s perseverance. It’s a sounding call of Black innovation, freedom, and creativity. In music the Harlem Renaissance brought together a gaggle of Blacks who sang their plantation songs and then made a variation called blues and then made a variation called jazz. The Spirituals and jazz are now considered American music.” (Hill 3)

Harlem was the “Hotbed of intellectual, artistic, literary and political blossoming for Black people. In response to the Black codes that were designed to undo the progressive 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the constitution, the Black population started voting with its feet and walking away from the brutality of the South.” One can almost hear them ask, “Shall we gather by the river?” Before they marched up North” (Hill 2)

During this time period thousands of African Americans left their homes in the economically and socially oppressive South and began relocating to the industrial cities of the North. From this moment, an African American middle class appeared. There was a rise in the level of education attained by African Americans, leading in turn lead to greater employment opportunities.

Although primarily a literary movement, the Renaissance can also be linked to an overall change in attitude. It was a shift in attitude from “accommodating white domination to demanding equal status and recognition for blacks.” (Huggins 111) Critic W.E.B Du Bois heralded this new attitude when he first stated plainly, in the ground breaking book *The Souls of Black Folk* the conflict that was to define much of the twentieth century “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line--the relation of the darker races to the lighter races of men.” When Du Bois wrote these words in 1902, they were not simply controversial. They were as radical as any statement a black man ever made publicly, because Du Bois was saying clearly that blacks wouldn’t be ignored any longer.” (Huggins 111)

During this time period the sudden emergence of black pride was evident. Tired of the term Negro, which they felt described someone ignorant and unskilled America began to see a “New-Negro” evolve, one that was born free and educated. Blacks slowly began to create their own organizations, thus freeing themselves not only from “white expectations, but also from white control.” At the beginning of World War I W.E.B Du Bois called upon African Americans, in his famous editorial in the *Crisis*, to “forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder... We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.” (Huggins 111)

As a result of this new- found black pride, African Americans began to receive much more attention than they had in the past. Between the end of World War I and 1924, a variety of African American work was published. However, despite the many gains by African Americans of that time period prejudice still existed and was never more evident than when Carl Van Vechten published *Nigger Heaven*, in which he voiced his beliefs on “Squalor of Negro life, the vice of negro life.” In response to Vechten’s book African American writer Wallace Thurman composed *FIRE!!*, in which he confronted the establishment aggressively. His work inspired that of other African American writers and in turn added to the already numerous works of the Harlem Renaissance.

By the mid 1920’s everyone wanted to be in Harlem: from its all Black Broadway to its exciting nightlife, Harlem was the place to be. While whites controlled the legitimate theaters African Americans made a great deal of progress in musicals-- writing, producing and performing in them. The most important of these musicals was *Shuffle Along*, which opened off Broadway on May 23, 1921.

Just as Literature and theater began to flourish, African American Art became more recognized, thanks to the works of Aaron Douglas, a young man from Kansas City, who many labeled as the “emblem of the “New Negro (Hill, 118). Douglas, who was often referred to as the “official” artist of the Harlem Renaissance or the “Father of Black American Art,” had a profound impact on the Renaissance. His work embodied all that the Harlem Renaissance stood for.

There were many factors leading to the decline of the Harlem Renaissance, one being the Great Depression of the 1930s, which caused organizations that had previously supported African American interest to focus primarily on economic and social issues and no longer on the arts. The final blow was a 1935 riot which was sparked, after a Harlem youth attempted to steal a ten-cent pocket knife and was arrested. (Hill, 134)

However the importance of the Harlem Renaissance and the impact that it had on the United States, shall not easily be forgotten. Its writers and its music still inspire us today.

## Objectives

The goal of this curriculum unit is to help students better understand the Harlem Renaissance and the impact that it had on the United State both artistically and historically. In this unit I plan to focus primarily on the origin of the Harlem Renaissance and the sudden black pride that resulted from it. I also plan to look at artists and activists from this era, such as W.E.B Dubois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Jean Toomer.

I plan on looking briefly at the history of Jazz and the impact that African Americans had on the musicals of that era (focusing primarily on *Shuffle Along*). Lastly I plan to look at black artists of that period, such as Meta Warrick, Augusta Savage, Palmer Hayden, Jacob Lawrence, William Johnson and perhaps most importantly Aaron Douglas, who many claim embodied the Renaissance in his painting.

We will research these individuals and the Renaissance using the internet and the library. Students will use data compiled from their research to produce studio work that takes inspiration from the art work that was produced during that era. For example they may study *Green Apples*, a sculpture done by Augusta Savage in 1930 or Edwin Augustus' portrait of Aaron Douglas in search of creative inspiration. Students will keep a journal to record all historical facts found. Lastly, students will have to present their artwork along with its historical significance to the class and submit their journals to me to be critiqued.

For younger grades, I plan on showing students my version of a work produced during that era and have them use it as inspiration for their creative endeavors. I shall also provide younger groups with a brief oral history of that time period. They will not be required to keep journals but rather at the end of the unit will be asked to stand in front of the class describe their art work and tell us briefly who their favorite artist was and why.

Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Research, evaluate and synthesize information about the Harlem Renaissance from varied resources (Example: The Art Encyclopedia)
- Highlight their understanding of the Harlem Renaissance through the creation of an exhibit or time line.
- Highlight connections across carried disciplines (i.e. art, music and poetry)

- Demonstrate an understanding, through oral presentations and reflective writing, of the effects of the Harlem renaissance on African Americans.
- Research, write and give oral presentations on Black artists, Black musicians and Black writers.

## **Strategies**

I plan on providing classroom assignments for all students and resources for them to utilize along with their internet references and those acquired from their local library. I will advise them to use various search engines such as Excite, Google, Dog Pile and perhaps Web Quest. They will be asked to look at artwork from the Renaissance, pick a piece that interests them, study it and use it as a tool for inspiration. Lastly, students will be asked to keep a journal of what they have researched and where information was acquired. They will be asked to critique and compare visual artist in their journals. I believe that in researching the Renaissance and reproducing art from that era, students will gain a better understanding of the Renaissance.

For younger groups, I plan on providing a brief oral presentation of all artists to be discussed and samples of their art work. We will discuss the lives of the artist and how they differ from ours today. In order to gain the attention of the younger children I plan on using posters and other visual aids.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **General Preparation for the Unit**

1. Preview the Harlem Renaissance websites to learn about the Renaissance as well conditions for black Americans in the last 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
2. Select background information to share with students. Perhaps spend some time reviewing the history of African Americans in the United States prior to the Harlem Renaissance.
3. Reserve computers in library for students use. Preview and add the following websites to lab computers:

Lindy Hop in Harlem  
Street Life, Harlem  
Jeunesse

Venn diagram: Harlem Renaissance

4. Use a bookmark if all of the websites listed under the heading “Websites related to Harlem Renaissance” on the Harlem Renaissance websites list. As students preview these sites, think about how they will utilize them. Also consider comfort level with the reading.
5. If possible, arrange use of LCD projector during sessions 1 and 4. If not locate copies of the paintings of *Street Life*, *Harlem* and *Jeunesse*. Create a blank Venn diagram with three circles labeled Art, Music and Poetry and make transparencies of these to share with students.
6. Visit PBS Biographies: Duke Ellington and listen to following songs:
  - *East St Louis Toodle-oo*
  - *The Mooche*
  - *Mood Indigo*

Visit and listen to the *Negro Speaks to Rivers* by Langston Hughes. Add these sites to favorites list on computers.

7. Students will create library or museum exhibits as part of this lesson; gather art material for them to use including poster paper, construction paper, glue, scissors, and markers. The museum exhibits will be created from the works of black artists.
8. Make copies of Harlem Renaissance Websites list, the Museum Exhibit Rubric and reflections on the Harlem Renaissance for each student in your class.

Materials needed for all three lessons

- Computers
- Pencils
- Journals (notebooks)
- Paper
- Construction paper
- Markers
- Crayons
- LCD projector

Lesson 1

Title: Harlem Renaissance, the Beginning

Estimated duration: One class period

Materials:

- Pencil
- Paper
- Computers
- Journals

Standards: Standards 1,2,3,4 & 5. See Appendix for all Standards addressed in lessons.

Lesson assessment: Will be conducted at the conclusion of lesson one, during which time students will be asked to briefly reflect and write about what they have learned. They will be asked to use specific names and dates in their essay. They may choose to write specifically on the origins of the Renaissance or instead on key figures within the movement.

Overall assessment: Will be given at the end of unit and based on oral presentation given by students.

Outcome: Upon completion of this lesson students will be familiar with the origins of the Harlem Renaissance.

#### Procedures

1. Begin by asking students to access prior knowledge about African American history between the end of the Civil War and early 20<sup>th</sup> century using information researched (see preparation 1). Provide students with an overview of the Harlem Renaissance.
2. Open PBS Biographies: Duke Ellington ([www.PBS/dukeellington](http://www.PBS/dukeellington)). Tell students that they are going to hear three jazz tunes by Duke Ellington, a famed musician and composer of the Harlem Renaissance. Click on Audio sampler next to each of the following songs:
  - *East Louis Toodle-oo*
  - *The Moche*
  - *Mood Indigo*

\*Have students describe the mood that each song evokes.

3. Ask students to listen for connections across varied disciplines as you read the fourth paragraph of “Lindy Hop in Harlem: The Role of Social Dancing.” Have Students brainstorm examples of today’s popular culture that show connections across music, dance, and art.
4. Show students the following paintings using LCD projector (or transparencies)  
  
*Street Life, Harlem* by William Johnson  
*Jeunesse* by: Palmer Hayde
5. Ask students to share responses to the paintings. These might include such things as colors mood, composition, and feelings the painting express.
6. Listen to Langston Hughes poem The Negro Speaks of Rivers Ask them to share responses to this poem
7. Have the class visit the websites related to the Harlem Renaissance that are listed on the Harlem renaissance Website to explore different aspects of this time period. As students to respond in writing to the following questions:

What were you able to learn about the Harlem Renaissance and jazz music...

- By listening to the essay?
  - By looking at paintings?
  - By listening to a poem?
  - By browsing a website?
8. Ask for student volunteers to share their thoughts with the entire class Focus the discussion on how different disciplines can enrich our understanding of a topic in different ways.
  9. Have students predict how the Harlem Renaissance may have influence life for African Americans both during and after the time. How and why do they think the Harlem Renaissance was important for the identity of black Americans then and now? What kind of impact did it have on American history?

## Lesson 2

Title: The Many Artists of the Harlem Renaissance

Estimated duration: two class periods

Materials:

- Pencil
- Paper
- Computers
- Journals

Lesson and Overall Assessment: Will be given at the end of the lesson and will ask students to write on their favorite renaissance artist.

### Procedures

1. Divide the class into groups to conduct research on selected artists, musicians and poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Advise students that they will utilize the information they collect to create an exhibit for our classroom.
2. Ask students to share thoughts and ideas on what constitutes a good exhibit. For example, some students might like exhibits that utilize images, others prefer to read text. Encourage diverse responses and remind students to think about different perspectives as they create their exhibits.
3. Tell students that each exhibit should include (but is not limited to) the following elements:
  - Examples of artist's, musician or poet's work
  - Background information on the artist's, musicians or poets' life
  - A visually interesting backdrop for the exhibit that captures the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance
  - A written or recorded viewing guide.

**Note:** Students should design the guide to enhance the viewer's experience and summarize key elements. Tell them to think of it as a road map to guide viewers as they move through the exhibit. For example, students may choose to select a group member to act as a tour guide for their classmates or create an audiotape that highlights salient features of the exhibit.

4. Distribute the Harlem Renaissance artist list and specify an artist, musician or poet for each group.

Group one: Artist Jacob Lawrence

Group two: Artist William Johnson

Group three: Musician Duke Ellington

Group four: Musician Bessie Smith

Group five: Poet Langston Hughes

Group six: Poet Countee Cullen

*Remind students that in addition to the resources for specific artist, they should look at the general websites—many of these contain information about the artist as well.*

5. Have students use remainder of the session to conduct their online research. Tell them to look for information that they think they might want to use. They should also download relevant audio or video files or write down URLs if this is not possible.

**Note:** Students may need more than class period to complete this work. You can choose to allow them more class time or have them complete their research at home.

6. By the conclusion of this lesson students should have chosen an artist and two pieces of the artist's artwork that they would like to feature in their exhibit and use as inspiration for a piece of their own.

### Lesson 3

Title: Exhibiting the works of the Harlem Renaissance

Estimated duration: One class period

Materials:

- Pencil
- Paper
- Computers
- Journals
- Glue
- Project board
- CREATIVITY!

Standards: Standards 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 (see appendix for details).

Lesson and Overall Assessment: Will require student to write a paragraph summarizing their exhibit, why they choose the artist and the impact that he/she had on artist today.

Outcome: Upon completion of this lesson students will be familiar with various artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

Procedures

1. Remind students that their goal is to synthesize what they have learned from their research into an exhibit.
2. Students should work in their groups on their exhibits. Circulate and offer support while they are working

*Note:* It may take more than one session to complete work on the group exhibits

3. By the close of this lesson, students should have gathered a significant amount of information on their artist of choice. This information should now be neatly typed and ready for exhibition. It should be mounted either on a poster board or project board. Pictures of two pieces of the artist's work that inspired the student's own artwork should also be featured on the board along with any facts that they could gather on the pieces. Lastly their work should be placed neatly in front.

#### Completion of Units

##### Possible Extensions

1. Share the following statement with the students and ask them to respond in writing:  
  
"Harlem was not so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself."  
--Langston Hughes
2. Ask groups to create a mock interview with the artist, musician, or poet they researched.
3. Ask students to choose one of the artists from the lessons, and respond in writing to the following questions:
  - How can I find personal relevance in this artist's work?
  - Are there any current artists that remind me of the work of this Harlem Renaissance artist?

#### Student Assessment/Reflections

There will be a brief exam, given at the conclusion of each lesson. There will also be an overall exam given upon completion of the unit in which students will be asked to complete a final written assessment. The assessment will ask them to write briefly on

the artist that they have chosen to research. In their writing, students must be able to recall important milestones in the artist's life, including date of birth and if applicable.

*\*Remind students that even if they don't do well on the lesson exams, they still have a chance to redeem themselves during the overall exam, which is based primarily on their knowledge of the artist that they choose to research and during their oral presentation.*

### Oral Presentation Requirements

When presenting exhibits, students must have all information clearly displayed on a project or poster board. They should have pictures of the artist, relevant facts and two pieces of his/her artwork posted. In front of or to the side of their exhibit, they must place a piece of art that they designed. All reports must be three to five minutes in length and a typed copy of their speech must be given to instructor before they are permitted to begin.

### Closing Statements

*To be read after the assessment of activities.*

I hope that you all enjoyed this unit on The Harlem Renaissance, as much as I enjoyed teaching it. I think that in studying this time period we were not only able to learn about brilliant African American Artists but also get a glimpse into a small portion of United States history.

Possible questions to the class:

- I have read all of your essays; would anyone choose to share with the class the name of their favorite Renaissance artist and why they enjoy his/her work?
- When Looking at the work of the Renaissance artist can you see the effect that they have had on current African American artists?
- What was your overall opinion of this unit? Do you think that the Renaissance truly had an effect on the United States?

### Annotated Resources

*African American Almanac.* Detroit: Gale Research, 1994.

- Against the odds: The Artist of the Harlem Renaissance.* Alexandria, Va.: PBS Video, 1993. Videocassette
- Baker, H. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.* Chicago Illinois Chicago Press, 1987.
- Bardolph, Richard. *The Negro Vanguard.* New York: Vintage, 1961.
- Bloom, H. *Major Black American Writers Through the Harlem Renaissance.* Maine, Chealsea House, 1995.
- Bontemps, Arna. *A Black man talks of reaping.* New York, Harold Ober Associates Incorporated, 1934.
- Davin, Tom. *Conversation with James P. Johnson.* New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1964
- Douglas, Ann. *Terrible honesty; Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s.* New York: Noonday, 1995.
- Fenton, Johnson. *The Banjo Player.* New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1922
- Fishel, Leslie. *The Black Americans: A Documentary History.* Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1970.
- Hill, Carrick. *Harlem Stomp! A Cultural History of The Harlem Renaissance.* New York, Harlem, Labin Carrick, 2003.
- Huggins, N. *Voices From The Harlem Renaissance.* New York, Oxford Press, 1995.
- Regans,R. *Exploring Art,* Chicago, Illinois, Chicago Press, 1998.
- Schoener, Allon. *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968.* New York: Random House, 1968.
- Wall, C. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance.* New York, Frank Music Corp, 1995
- Waring, Cuney. *Conception.* New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1931.
- Watson,Steven. *Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African American Culture. 1920-1930.* New York: Panthon, 1995.

Wintz, Cary. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. Houston, Tex.: Rice University Press, 1988.

## **Appendix**

### IRA/NCTE Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the World; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classical and contemporary works.
2. Students adjust their use of spoken written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
3. Students enjoy a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
4. Students conduct research on issues by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems, they gather, evaluate and synthesize data from a variety of sources (i.e. print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purposes and audience.
5. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.