## **Interdisciplinary Harlem Renaissance: The Visual Artists**

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### Overview

In an effort to introduce other creative forms into the art classroom, this cross-curricular unit will focus on the Harlem Renaissance, an era that was rich with music, writing and art. This unit is primarily designed for a high school art course (at any level, intro-AP), however, these lessons can easily be adapted for other taught subjects or used as collaborations among multiple subjects. Ideally, in addition to their art course, students would also be learning about this period in their English, creative writing, poetry, American history, music and/or dance courses. Time-wise, this unit should stretch the length of one marking period (10-12 weeks) and is intended to be taught at any high school art course level.

"If after absorbing the new content of American life and experience, and after assimilating new patterns of art...then the Negro may well become what some have predicted, the artist of the American life."

-Alain Locke in "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," The New Negro, 1925

In addition to containing an abundance of excellent literature and music, the Harlem Renaissance also produced a considerable amount of art by African American artists. However, few visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance are known today or taught and many have been left out of the art history books altogether. This unit will include poetry, song and even looking at forms of dance; however, the primary focus will be identifying the visual artists. Using other creative forms will further support understanding these artists and the influential and powerful movement they were coming from.

Lessons will be structured around painters, sculptures and photographers such as:

- Aaron Douglas
- Meta Warrick Fuller
- William H. Johnson
- Palmer Hayden
- James Van Der Zee
- Jacob Lawrence
- Charles Alston
- Romare Bearden
- Archibald Motley
- Lois Mailou Jones

After introducing the general history of the Harlem Renaissance students will begin to look at the works of these selected artists and then find connections between their work and that of other (non-visual) influences of this period. While many of the lessons will be based on projects that require actual art production, lessons will all include reading, writing, research and the exploration of music, dance and style that is associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

Throughout art history there are many periods of art that can be grouped together by style, subject matter or influences. However, there are few time periods where art, literature, music, dance have so fiercely come together to define the cultural identity of a particular population. The Harlem Renaissance celebrated Black history and culture. And yet, while many of the musicians and authors of the Harlem Renaissance were immediately embraced and have stood the test of time, few visual artists have. In fact, critics have questioned the value of their work and consider it to be conventional and isolated. This unit will allow students the opportunity to talk about art and form their own opinions of its value and worth. Students will be confronted with questions like: what is "good" art, what makes a work of art valuable, how can art define culture and what makes art authentic?

#### Rationale

The School District of Philadelphia refers to the Pennsylvania "Academic Standards for Arts and Humanities" as far as a curriculum goes for art. It states: "The arts and humanities are interconnected through the inclusion of history, criticism and aesthetics." This curriculum unit will strive for this kind of integration of disciplines and other learned areas.

Another facet of teaching art is to create connections among students and their own communities. Students should find inspiration and appreciation from the local arts and culture that exists around them, as well as realize how the arts are used as a vehicle to comment on current social issues. The Harlem Renaissance is a great example of a community that was overflowing with creativity and where creative types were feeding

off each other. Most importantly, this movement demonstrates how creative reactions to social issues can evolve into a powerful voice.

Like the artists of the Harlem Renaissance when students can make artwork that is inspired by their community or the world around them the work has a deeper meaning and the students connect to something beyond aesthetics. Also, looking at works of art that were created by African Americans and that are slightly more current has some benefits: it provides students with a broader view of art history than the one that is all too often illustrated in art history books and because this art is a part of American history it has relevance and is, therefore, something they can hopefully identify with.

A key component of learning about the Harlem Renaissance is understanding the attitudes and defining characteristics of the people living in this community at the time and what they were paying attention to in the world that surround them. This will be helpful in connecting their culture to the one students see present day, in their own communities. Even, for example, comparing the swing dance style of dance that was popular at the time to that of contemporary dance styles (such as krumping and jerking).

## Brief History:

In the introduction to Nathan Irvin Higgins book, *Harlem Renaissance*, he writes "It is a rare and intriguing moment when a people decide that they are the instruments of history-making and race-building" (Higgins 3). I think this sentence perfectly articulates the necessity to learn and understand the history or this era.

How did Harlem become this hub of art, music and literature in the 1920s and 1930s? Originally, in 1658 the neighborhood of Harlem was established by Dutch settlers but over time became more diversified with Germans, Irish and Jews. Then, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the neighborhood had become less rural and more accessible due to a real-estate crisis, African Americans began settling in.

This time period in America is known as the Great Migration, an exodus of some 3 million African Americans leaving the South to find more opportunities in the North. World War I and industrialization produced factory jobs in the north, especially in major cities. The more African Americans that moved into the neighborhood of Harlem, the more middle-class whites moved out and racial tensions (and riots) grew. Realtors were able to charge blacks more than whites because there were fewer neighborhood options for them.

Eventually, as the popularity of Harlem grew, black churches, newspapers, African-American social clubs and political organizations moved their locations to this expanding neighborhood. Hubert Harrison founded the first newspaper and organization of the "New Negro Movement", the Liberty League and The Voice, in 1917. This paper was both political and cultural, representing poets and writers. Blues and jazz music of the south had now reached the north and was played in the clubs and music halls. Also, as

"negro" culture was expanding, so was its interest among whites, this opened up more opportunities for black artists and writers as far as galleries and publishers.

### The Artists:

James Van Der Zee: (1886-1983) was a photographer whose work documented the life of African Americans, especially during the Harlem Renaissance that was uniquely rendered and a narrative of daily life. With his second wife, Gaynella Greenlee, he opened a photo studio in 1917 and immediately became Harlem's preeminent photographer even photographing many of the African American leaders living in the neighborhood at the time and the landmark buildings they lived among. He often manipulated his work (double printing, painting on the images and retouching) and most of his portraiture work was quite staged with elaborate costumes, props and backgrounds. This furthered the story these photos and their subjects told.

Aaron Douglas: (1899-1979) artist and educator whose work mainly consisted of paintings, illustrations, prints and murals. After receiving his BFA from the University of Nebraska and spending sometime teaching in Kansas City he decided to quit and pursue his dream of being a full-time artist. In 1925 he moved to Harlem and soon was hired by W.E.B. Du Bois to illustrate the magazine, the *Crisis*. Soon he was the most sought-after illustrator of the Harlem Renaissance and received many commissions for murals, magazines, book covers and other publications. His work linked an African past to the African American identity.

William Johnson: (1901-1970) painter who moved from South Carolina to Harlem, where there would be more opportunities to study and develop professionally as an artist. He was accepted into the National Academy of Design where he excelled in drawing. One instructor there, Charles Hawthorne, drastically changed Johnson's entire approach to art. The result: more vibrant colors, less attention to detail and form with more of an emphasis on the characterization of the subject. Like Gauguin or Picasso, Johnson found inspiration from traveling abroad to Africa and incorporated many of the images and styles he saw into his own work.

Palmer Hayden: (1890-1973) painter who also was born in the South but later migrated to the North during the "Great Migration of African Americans." He studied art in Washington D.C and also at the University of Columbia in New York. In 1912 he had enlisted in the United States Army, where he served in WWI and was also recognized for his map-making skills. Later, as his work developed and started to be recognized he was paid to travel to Paris to paint (he was there during most of the Harlem Renaissance, but kept in contact with the scene at the time). Much of the subjects of his work were about the Parisian lifestyle. When he returned to New York, he would paint the African American experience and social lifestyle in New York, especially Harlem. His *Ballad of John Henry* series would become his best known work.

Jacob Lawrence: (1917-2000) painter and printmaker Jacob Lawrence is one of the most celebrated and well known artists of the Harlem Renaissance and of African American

painters of the twentieth century. Born in New Jersey but lived in New York since the age of 13, where he studied art as a teenager at the Harlem Art Workshop and the Harlem Community Art Center. When he was only 20 when he began painting the "Migration Series", which made him internationally famous after being featured in *Fortune Magazine*. Other important figures he painted in his self-proclaimed style of "dynamic cubism" included Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman and other themes dealing with the struggle for freedom of blacks and the violence often occurred.

Langston Hughes: (1902-1967) Poet, novelist, playwright, columnist and short story writer. He was born in Missouri but lived all over, eventually moving to New York to attend Columbia University. However, after one year he dropped out to pursue his long love of writing, especially poetry. Eventually Hughes did receive a degree from Lincoln University in 1929. New York, especially Harlem, would be his home throughout the rest of his life and career as one of the most influential American Poets. His unique style of poetry evoked jazz music and was inspired by many social issues affecting most blacks during that time (like racism).

## **Objectives**

This Unit is intended for students in Grades 10-12 and can be shared across various subject curriculums. Art teachers are encouraged to collaborate with music, writing (poetry) and history teachers to cover the subject of the Harlem Renaissance. Lesson plans will mainly be designed for the art classroom, but there will be overlaps with other disciplines and could be interchangeable.

The Objectives of the unit will include the following:

- Identifying the origins of the Harlem Renaissance and the impact it had on African Americans and the culture of America.
- Defining the culture that was associated with this era, especially how it was illustrated through the visual arts.
- Exposure to key visual artists, musicians, writers and poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance
- To inspire students to create their own work (visual, written and/or musical) that reflects on the idea of the Harlem Renaissance.
- To incorporate the teaching of elements and principles of design by using the works the visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

# **Strategies**

*Introduction*: Students will be introduced to the history and origins of the Harlem Renaissance throughout their classes. This can be done with handouts, worksheets and using books, the Internet and even documentaries on the Harlem Renaissance (see teacher resources). Within the art classroom, I think the most effective way to introduce a topic

is through power point presentation (using lots of visuals). Also, by having students research specific aspects of a topic on their own is also an effective strategy to introduce a topic. Students will utilize the school library and computer labs for online research. Afterwards, I will have them share their findings with their peers.

A Timeline of the Harlem Renaissance: Another strategy that could be used within the art classroom or among all subjects dealing with this topic as an introduction to the topic of the Harlem Renaissance would be to have students make a giant timeline that illustrates and defines this era. Each subtopic (art, music, writing) would be assigned to their respective classrooms and then individual students could be responsible for one person or aspect of that subtopic.

For example, in an art class a student would be assigned to research an artist (Jacob Lawrence), while in a music class a student would be assigned to research a musician (Louis Armstrong). They would then create a poster-board of facts and visuals of that specific person or subtopic to be placed on the "giant timeline". This would be an excellent strategy to bring together the different departments studying the Harlem Renaissance, while also creating an excellent visual of information for all students to see and reference. This project could also stretch the entire length of the unit as a continually evolving visual. It should be placed in a "common" area and could also incorporate student artwork that is produced as part of this unit (see lesson plans).

Neighborhoods and Communities: I mentioned before in my Rationale a need for students to connect with the arts and culture of their own neighborhoods/communities. As another strategy, it will be the job of the teacher(s) presenting this unit to help students realize how and where these aspects exist around them. By brining in local artists/musicians, touring community centers or local galleries and arts foundations or even visiting the murals painted in their own neighborhoods and discussing the themes will further emphasize the value of having creativity and culture surrounding us where we live.

Philadelphia's mural arts program would also be a great resource for looking within the surrounding neighbor hoods for art and culture. Often, the murals within a community reflect local artists, historical events and important people that have helped with the development of a community. Along with the fact that it is citywide it truly is a great resource and example of a collective of artists connecting people.

### **Activities and Lesson Plans:**

## Warm Up Lesson Plan: Drawing with Jazz

Goal: To get students excited to learn about the Harlem Renaissance by playing them some fun jazz music that was written during that time and to get them loosened up artistically. There is no need for any previously acquired artistic skill to successfully participate in this activity, therefore no one should be apprehensive. There is no right or

wrong way and the end result is not as nearly as important as the act of drawing in this warm up.

## Objectives:

- 9.1.12 A Know and use the elements and principles of each art form to create works in the arts and humanities. (In particular working with line...remember every line has length, thickness, and direction. There are curve, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, zigzag, wavy, parallel, dash, and dotted lines.)
- 9.1.12 E Demonstrate the ability to define objects, express emotions, illustrate an action or relate an experience through creation of works in the arts.

Required Materials: Large sheets of newsprint drawing paper and anything to draw with (crayons, markers or pencils). Jazz music to play for students of musicians from the Harlem Renaissance or who inspired jazz/blues of that time (Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Willie Smith).

Introduce Lesson: Review with students different types of line and how lines can create a rhythm, feeling and mood. Demonstrate for students different types of line and how line can relate to music (lines can appear fast/slow, soft/loud, smooth/rough etc....which are also words we could use to describe music). Even playing a piece of music that you have distributed the sheet music for could be helpful. Students should find that by following along with the notes and connecting them they create different types of line.

Now, explain that you are going to play for them a piece of jazz music and that they are to follow along by drawing lines. Essentially, students are to attempt to translate what they are hearing into a visual illustration of lines that relate to notes, tempo, volume etc. Jazz music is often continuous and meanders all over the place. One could even describe it as quite busy. The student's drawing should be continuous and they should keep in time with the music and never stop making marks on their paper!

Procedures: 1<sup>st</sup> Play for 1-2 minutes of the piece they are going to hear before they begin. Then distribute at least 5 sheets of newsprint to each student and have them select their drawing utensil.

- $2^{nd}$  Begin! Play the selected piece again while students follow along with their mark making. When they run out of room on a sheet, turn it over or move onto the next.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Repeat if desired. Have several different styles of jazz/blues music selected to produce drawings with different lines and feeling.

Assessment: Have students hang their drawings around the room and replay the music. See if they can follow along with the music by looking at another classmate's lines.

## **Lesson Plan 1: James Van Der Zee/Social Documentation**

Goal: Students will look at the work and legacy of the great photographer of the Harlem Renaissance, James Van Der Zee, and begin to document/compile images of people and places in their community to share with each other and their school. Students will examine these images through writing and group critiques.

Objectives: 9.1.12 D. Demonstrate specific styles in combination through the production or performance of a unique work of art (e.g., a dance composition that combines jazz dance and African dance).

- 9.1.12 E Demonstrate the ability to define objects, express emotions, illustrate an action or relate an experience through creation of works in the arts.
- 9.1.12 F. Analyze works of arts influenced by experiences or historical and cultural events through production, performance or exhibition.
- 9.2.12 D. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.
- 9.2.12 L Identify, explain and analyze common themes, forms and techniques from works in the arts

Required Materials: Printed images of Van Der Zee's work (books, posters, laminated photos, digital etc.), digital cameras/phones/anything that will take a picture and access to computers/computer lab.

Introduce lesson: Many students at my school come from the same neighborhoods/areas of the city. They share communities. Through digital documentation students will begin to see their own communities through an artistic lens and compare their images to that of Van Der Zee's work.

Even prior to looking at the work of Van Der Zee, students should research and have a brief understanding of the history of photography. This lesson is a great way to compare the differences in process and results of traditional photography (which is being used less and less) versus that of digital.

Procedures: 1<sup>st</sup> introduce the life and work of James Van Der Zee (through power point presentation) and hand out books/visuals of his work. Discuss the photo *Wedding Portrait with Superimposed Image of Little Girl* (which appears in the SDP art history text: *Discovering Art History* on pg 485). Read aloud with the class the provided text, I find it quite useful, in particular:

A favorite of Van Der Zee's was to produce photographs that give us not only a physical record of the sitters, but also include a symbolic vision of their hopes and aspiration. <u>Future Expectations</u> (fig.14-52), taken about 1915, is one of those pictures. The young bridal couple is depicted with great and loving detail. The bouquet, the veil, the

scalloped hem of the groom's starched white shirt are striking. The living room with its fireplace represents the household of their dreams. Van Der Zee even places at their feet the daughter they hope to have.

In particular discuss: the story this photo is telling, who this young couple was and why show this little girl/how is she symbolic? Also, mention the style of Van Der Zee's work (beyond subject matter). His work was inspired by the work of the impressionists and aimed to imitate the effects of nature ("atmospheric effects, soft-focus techniques and diffused light") (The Studio Museum in Harlem 1987,155).

2<sup>nd</sup> Explain that students will have several days to take pictures of people/places/things or even local artwork around their communities, in their school, at home or in their neighborhoods. These photos should be inspired by the style of Van Der Zee's work and aim to capture a similar feel (portraits, group portraits, soft light, atmospheric, etc.) Later, if students will be able to further enhance their photos using Photoshop or similar programs.

3rd Assign each student with a Van Der Zee photo. They are to research this photo (using books/computers to try and find any background info), and then write a description and interpretation of the photo. When they are done students will present the photo and their writing to the class. This should extend several days, which will provide students several days to complete their assignment (of taking photos) that extends beyond the classroom.

4<sup>th</sup> Have students print out their photos in the computer lab. They are to select one to submit along with a written description of the image (where, what and why they took that particular photo). Hang student's photos along with their written descriptions.

Closure: Have a group discussion/critique while viewing the displayed images. Have students select a peer's image and discuss things like subject matter, composition and mood.

Assessment: Before work is hung, have students edit each other's written responses, mostly for grammatical errors. Once students see each other's work have them grade themselves, giving a reason for that chosen grade. What did they like best about this project? What would they do differently next time?

Time: Can be used over a two-week period or less depending on how long you want to give students to take pictures outside of school.

# **Lesson Plan 2: Illustrating Langston Hughes**

Goal: Students will create a work of art in the style of an artist from the Harlem Renaissance (Aaron Douglas would be an excellent choice) that illustrates a Langston Hughes poem, which they have selected.

- Objectives: 9.1.12 A Know and use the elements and principles of each art form to create works in the arts and humanities.
- 9.1.12 B Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.
- 9.1.12 C Recognize and use fundamental vocabulary within each of the arts forms.
- 9.1.12 E Demonstrate the ability to define objects, express emotions, illustrate an action or relate an experience through creation of works in the arts.
- 9.2.12 C Relate works in the arts to varying styles and genre and to the periods in which they were created
- 9.2.12 D Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.
- 9.2.12 L Identify, explain and analyze common themes, forms and techniques from works in the arts
- 9.3.12 A Recognize critical processes used in the examination of works in the arts and humanities.
- Compare and contrast
- Analyze
- Interpret
- Form and test hypotheses
- Evaluate/form judgments
- 9.3.12 B Know that works in the arts can be described by using the arts elements, principles and concepts
- 9.3.12 D Explain meanings in the arts and humanities through individual works and the works of others using a fundamental vocabulary of critical response.
- 9.4.12 B Know how to communicate an informed individual opinion about the meaning of works in the arts
- 9.4.12 D. Recognize that choices made by artists regarding subject matter and themes communicate ideas through works in the arts and humanities

Required Materials: Students will need access to a computer lab to search on **poemhunter.com** or other websites for their Langston Hughes poem of choice, which once selected they should print. For the visual portion, students do not necessarily need to use the same material of the artists they are trying to "mimic", rather, they should use materials they are familiar with. Images should begin as pencil sketches on paper an then evolve into using paint, colored pencils, cut paper/collage etc.

Introduce Lesson: Many artists of the Harlem Renaissance artwork illustrates a narrative or story. For example, Jacob Lawrence illustrated historical events such as the Great Migration. Show examples of images by these artists (Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, William Johnson, Palmer Hayden, Romare Bearden etc.) and have students describe what kind of story they think they are telling. It is important to emphasize in this lesson that many of the things artists were painting about were the same things writers, like Hughes, were writing about. Such as, the history, culture and social life of African Americans. But more importantly the struggles that African American's dealt with, from slavery to other social injustices. Next, read a Langston Hughes poem aloud. This would be a good one to start with (as it is one of his most famous):

## **Dream Deferred**

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Procedures: 1<sup>st</sup> Spend a class allowing students to explore the Langston Hughes poems online. By the end of class they should have selected and printed one to use for their illustration.

2<sup>nd</sup> The next day students should explore the Harlem Renaissance artists on their own and then also choose which one they will be working in the "style" of. In the end, they could even combine several artistic styles if they so desire. For example, by using magazines and paper for collage combined with thick, boldly applied paint a student is borrowing and combining the techniques of Romare Bearden (collage) and William H. Johnson (paint). Students should have images and books of their chosen artist to continuously reference throughout the project. Once they have decided they should immediately begin making sketches to plan their poem illustration.

3<sup>rd</sup> After students have received approval from the teacher on their selected poem, artist and proposed sketch, then they can begin to create their illustration. Size, materials and time limit requirements are up to the teacher to decide. I imagine it will take at least a week for students to re-sketch their image and paint of color it to their desire.

4<sup>th</sup> Once students are done, have them complete the assessment and then have them display their illustrations along with their Hughes poem and partner's poem!

Assessment: Once students have completed their visual component they should swap their artwork with another student. Then, students will have to write a 10+ line poem in response to their partners work. The poem they write can describe what they feel, what they see, what they think the image is about, etc. Lastly, have students read the Langston Hughes poems they selected to their partners and then the ones they wrote. Have them discuss similarities and differences and ultimately what they think the poem is about and why they chose the artist they did for their interpretation.

# Annotated Bibliography Unit Works Sited:

Chambers, Veronica. <u>The Harlem Renaissance.</u> Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998. High school level book that is an overview of the Harlem Renaissance, found in SDP libraries.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, Brooks Higginbotham, Evelyn, ed. <u>Harlem Renaissance Lives</u>. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. This book offers up-to date, authoritative biographies of some 600 noteworthy African Americans.

Locke, Alain. "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," The New Negro, 1925. New York: Atheneum, 1968. Locke is often referred to as the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance" and this anthology is a collection of fiction, poetry and essays by African Americans that he edited.

The Studio Museum of Harlem. <u>Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America.</u> New York: Abradeale Press Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1987. (1994 Edition).

# **Reading List Suggestions:**

Hughes, Langston, "The Big Sea: An Autobiography (American Century Series)." Hill and Wang. 1993.

Hughes, Langston, Poems. www.poemhunter.com. (not sited correctly) ???

Hurston, Zora Neale, "Their Eyes Were Watching God." J.B. Lippincott, 1937.

## **Teacher Resources:**

Federal Resources for Educational Excellence <a href="http://free.ed.gov">http://free.ed.gov</a>

ARTstor~images of art by visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, etc.

## **Student Resources:**

www.poemhunter.com

Watson, Steven. <u>The Harlem Renaissance</u>, <u>Hub of African-American Culture</u>, 1920-1930. Circles of the Twentieth Century. 1995.

# **Appendices-Standards**

According to the PAEA website this curriculum will cover the following state standards (that also comply with the School District of Philadelphia art curriculum):

- 9.1.12 A. Know and use the elements and principles of each art form to create works in the arts and humanities.
- 9.1.12 B. Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.
- 9.1.12 D. Demonstrate specific styles in combination through the production or performance of a unique work of art (e.g., a dance composition that combines jazz dance and African dance).
- 9.1.12 E. Delineate a unifying theme through the production of a work of art that reflects skills in media processes and techniques.
- 9.1.12 F. Analyze works of arts influenced by experiences or historical and cultural events through production, performance or exhibition.
- 9.2.12 A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.
- 9.2.12 C. Relate works in the arts to varying styles and genre and to the periods in which they were created
- 9.2.12 D. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.
- 9.2.12 E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts (e.g., Gilbert and Sullivan operettas)
- 9.2.12. F. Know and apply appropriate vocabulary used between social studies and the arts and humanities.
- 9.2.12. G. Relate works in the arts to geographic regions

9.4.12. B. Describe and analyze the effects that works in the arts have on groups, individuals and the culture (e.g., Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast, *War of the Worlds*).