

Art as a Civic Language: Learning History through the Arts

Topic: Civil Rights, Art

Grade Level: Grades 9- 12

Subject Area: US History, Art History

Time required: 1 class period

Goals/ Rationale

Throughout history, the experiences of those who have struggled against oppression have been interpreted by artists through various media. These works of art can aid historical understanding, heighten historical empathy and enhance critical thinking skills. In the following lesson, students examine a painting to explore the experiences of those involved in the civil rights struggle during the 1950s and 60s.

Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze the painting, *Soldiers and Students*, by Jacob Lawrence.
- Use Visible Thinking Routines (<http://bit.ly/1kbgLFF>) developed by Harvard's Project Zero to gain a better understanding of how the artist was able to convey the emotions and experiences of individuals involved in the events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should have a working knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement.

Historical Background and Context

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was an internationally recognized artist who depicted the social and historical experiences of African Americans. His work, *Soldiers and Students*, painted in 1962, conveys both the terror and anger that many people felt during the process of school integration. Three armed guards accompany a group of African-American students, while a group of protesters attempt to block their entry into school. The figures in each group are roughly outlined and filled in with only patches of color, adding to the intensity and drama of the moment. Art historians suggest that it was inspired by the 1957 integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The same year that Lawrence created this painting, a mob attacked US Marshals who had been deployed to the University of Mississippi by the Kennedy administration to ensure that James Meredith, an African-American student, could safely enter the previously all-white college.

Materials

- Projected portrait photo of Jacob Lawrence (located at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/viewer/jacoblawrence-2219)

- 8"x11" copies of the painting, *Soldiers and Students* in clear plastic sleeves for each group of students (located at <https://artsy.net/artwork/jacoblawrence-soldiers-and-students>)
- Dry-erase markers for each group
- Notebook paper and pencils for each individual student

Procedure

1. Project photo of Jacob Lawrence onto screen and provide brief background on the artist's life and work.
2. Have students work in groups of three. Each group should have a reproduction of the painting, *Soldiers and Students*.
3. Ask students to share their initial observations about the colors and shapes that they see in the painting. Keep students in observation mode; they will have the opportunity for interpretation in their small groups and will be able to share their interpretations with the class later in the lesson. Note the depiction of an effigy in the upper right section of Lawrence's painting. Effigies were commonly used by angry mobs to taunt and intimidate African-American students entering schools.
4. Ask students to observe the painting more closely, and answer the first Visible Thinking Routine question: **What's going on?** Then ask students to record their responses directly on the plastic sleeve.
5. Next ask students to consider the second Visual Thinking Routine question: **What do you see that makes you say that?** As they discuss this, have them circle the things that help them understand what is going on in the painting.
6. Short reflection questions (have students write a paragraph for each): If you could extend the scope of the painting, what more might you see? Why do you think Jacob Lawrence chose this subject?
7. Ask students to share responses within their groups.
8. Facilitate a whole class discussion of the main themes that students have drawn from the work of art.