

# Lesson 1: A Study of Artist Aaron Douglas: Painting the Human Figure in the Tradition of Resistance

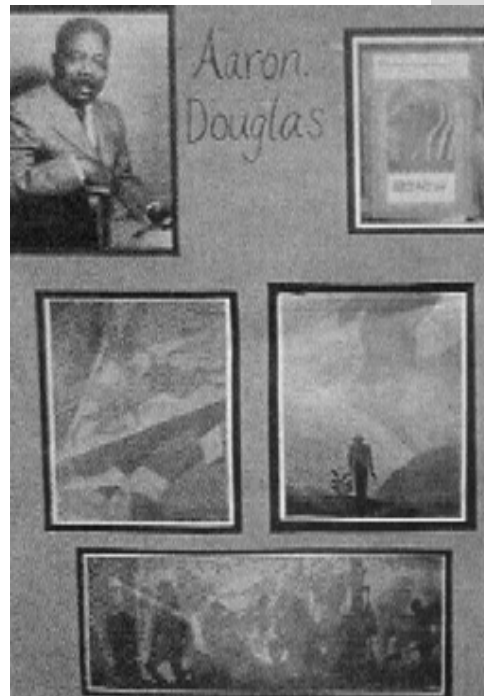
## Rationale

Providing students with an artist mentor is inspiring and motivating. The artwork and leadership of Aaron Douglas foreshadowed the Civil Rights era by setting the visual tone of the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Aaron Douglas was a leader in the Harlem Renaissance school of painting, and one of the first artists to document the history of the African-American experience through visual art. His style was innovative and intriguing and is still viewed as a powerful expression of the oppression and resistance of African Americans. He was an artist who pushed the boundaries established by previous artists, creating portrayals of the African-American experience that recognized its history and its African roots. In his 1936 painting, *Into Bondage*, Douglas depicts the perspective of the enslaved—African people in their native land chained and walking in a line to their horrifying fate. More prevalent in Douglas's work, however, were images of empowered African Americans. This innovation can be seen in many works, such as *Study for God's Trombones* (1926). Douglas portrays the harsh reality of slavery in this image, but depicts the person breaking free from the chains. His piece *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944) shows the achievements of African Americans throughout time by blending images from ancient Egypt and contemporary New York, while *Aspirations* (1936) contains symbols of musical accomplishment and achievement in scholarship and business. Although his work actually preceded the Civil Rights Movement, it is such a strong example of art documenting historical achievement and resistance that it makes sense as a place to start this lesson. Douglas was a well-established muralist and painter who regularly contributed illustrations and designs to publications including *Opportunity*, *The Crisis*, *Theater Arts*, *American Mercury*, and *Vanity Fair*. Called the "Father of African-American Art," Douglas founded the art department at Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee. He was also a social activist whose best-known mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934), was commissioned by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration and is displayed at the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library. Douglas was also the first president of the Harlem Artists Guild (1935). His contributions have had a lasting influence on the art world and are a testament to African-American history and pride. When students learn about such expression in the context of the art history of the 1920s and 1930s, it sets the stage for the study of the Civil Rights Movement.

## Objectives

- To learn about the historical context of Douglas's work
- To understand Douglas's creative expression and art techniques
- To introduce painting's color theory of tints and shades
- To study the human figure through gesture and design

Painting a Picture of the Movement: From Aaron Douglas to the Memphis Sanitation Workers



- To create a painted cut-out of a civil rights marcher that will later be applied to a mural that the whole class will complete

### **Guiding Questions**

- What do we know about the Harlem Renaissance?
- What do you notice in the Aaron Douglas paintings?
- What do you see in the paintings that you wonder about?
- How does Aaron Douglas give strength and character to his figures, despite the fact that they are silhouettes?
- How does Douglas use color in his paintings?
- What effect do the concentric circles and geometric lines that cut through the picture plane have on the image?
- How does he balance realism with abstraction?
- What stories do these images tell?

### **Materials**

- Flip chart
- Video: *Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*
- Examples of Aaron Douglas paintings (see Resources at the end of this article)
- Pencils
- Scissors
- 12" x 18" white oak tag
- Compasses
- Circle templates of various sizes (plastic lids are good for this, or you can make some out of oak tag)
- Tempera or acrylic paints
- Paintbrushes
- Mixing trays (empty cups or egg cartons for mixing paints)
- Plastic spoons

### **Procedure**

#### **Class Discussion and Motivation**

Start class discussion with the first guiding question: What do we know about the Harlem Renaissance? Make a list of student responses on large flip-chart paper. This both affirms their knowledge, as well as their questions, and also works as a kind of teacher's guide to check for any missing information that requires teacher and students to do further research. Many children have not learned about the Harlem Renaissance in school, so this lesson provides an opportunity to develop knowledge about the era's rich artistic expression and the social and political forces that propelled the African-American community to create the Harlem Renaissance movement. I always ask students to recall what information they have previously learned in school and in textbooks about United States history during this period and to think about the reasons that information about the Harlem Renaissance was omitted from that curriculum. I use this social context to help students understand that the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s did not spring up in a vacuum.

View the video *Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*. This program provides the sociopolitical context of the Harlem Renaissance and emphasizes visual images of African Americans. It demonstrates the way visual culture colludes with political forces in acts of oppression and resistance. Various artists are discussed. Since the running time of the video is 60 minutes, teachers may want to choose excerpts to make the points they want to emphasize or clarify and to capture the attention of their students, depending on their developmental level.

After viewing the video, look closely at some of the paintings by Aaron Douglas in the books listed at the end of this lesson under Resources. Ask students, “What do you notice? What do you wonder about?” These two questions elicit open-ended responses from the most reluctant participants as well as the most vocal:

- They will notice figures walking away from an African landscape toward a ship. “Maybe it is a slave-trader’s ship.”
- They will notice images of magnificent engineering feats collaged into one scene: Egyptian pyramids, the Brooklyn Bridge, skyscrapers. “Maybe Mr. Douglas is showing all the work of African-American people throughout history.”
- They will notice that streams of light direct the viewer’s eye in each painting. “I wonder if that beam of light is the ray of hope for African Americans.”
- “I noticed that he always shows people looking up and forward.”
- “I wonder why he uses those circles going around and around in every painting?”

Then move on to the other guiding questions. By the end of the discussion, the class will have made a very sophisticated analysis of the paintings.

After listing students’ comments on the flip-chart paper, discuss the goal of making a mural. Teachers may choose one of the mural projects described in lesson 2, Remembering the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike or lesson 3, *Marching for Our Own Civil Rights*, or develop a longer unit of study to do both murals.

## Overview and Technique

For this activity, students will draw silhouettes of marchers, cut out the figures, and paint in Aaron Douglas’s style.

1. First students will observe each other walking. Then they will pose for each other in positions that would be made by protesters. Observe the bends in legs and arms as well as body proportions. If available, refer to a simple picture that illustrates human body proportions. Suggest that students consider what it looks like when someone holds a protest sign, steps with pride, and expresses strong resistance. While doing this, talk about gesture. Show students how gestures affect their thinking and reactions. Ask them to notice the difference in ability to communicate when they use strong or many gestures and when they use weak or no gestures. Explain to students that they will be making silhouettes of their figures, so their depiction of character relies on the gesture, or stance, of the figure, not facial expressions or clothing.
2. Students must decide on a gesture, or position, for their protester. Ask them to consider what they think would be more effective: drawing their figure from the side or from a frontal point of view. Have each student use a pencil to draw the outline of a person in a protest. Demonstrate that by drawing lightly and using basic shapes, students can make their figure by first drawing all body parts and then going over the outline with darker lines. It would probably be more difficult to draw only the outline of the body.
3. After drawing their figure, students then use scissors to cut it out.
4. Next, study Douglas’s use of design. The concentric circle and linear designs he uses

cut through the picture plane and add depth to his otherwise flat images. To replicate this technique, students can use circle templates and/or compasses. Remind them to draw lightly with their pencils, so their lines do not show dramatically on their final piece. Also, point out that parts of their circle or lines may be visible on the figure, then “disappear” off the edge of the figure and then reappear on the figure. For example, as one draws a large circle, it may be drawn on a leg, then go off the figure in the negative, or empty, space surrounding the figure, then reappear on a hand or arm. It is advisable for each student to draw at least four circles inside each other to have a repeated concentric affect. You may want to specify the number of lines or circles they must make depending on their age. Setting a maximum limit also ensures that a student will not have too many shapes to paint inside. Remember that it is easier to start with a larger circle, and then to trace a smaller circle inside it so that it can be centered inside the first one. If you start little, a bigger template will cover the drawn image, making it difficult to center the images.

5. Discuss Douglas’s use of limited color. Introduce the terms *tint* and *shade*. Explained simply, a tint is a color with white added to it, and a shade is a color with black or brown added to it. Students must choose a color to paint their figure and make different tints and shades of that color by adding varying amounts of black and white. (Egg cartons are useful for mixing: put some white in the last few egg cups, some black in the other end of the egg cups, and your color of choice in the middle, while leaving a few egg cups available for mixing.) Consider whether you want the colors of the figures to be similar to or different from the mural background. This is a good opportunity for the group to share the varying tints and shades they have mixed, so that everyone’s pieces connect nicely in the final mural; it also reinforces the sense of collaboration.
6. Students then fill in each shape with different colors. Colors may be repeated. Make sure to offer both large and thin brushes so students can most effectively approach each different shape.
7. When all of the spaces are painted and the pieces are dry, each student has a figure that can be applied to a large mural, as described in lesson 2, Remembering the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike and in lesson 3, Marching for Civil Rights. Keep figures in a safe place until ready for this step.

## **Synthesize, Assess, Evaluate**

### ***Historical Concepts***

- What do we know about the Harlem Renaissance?
- How did the artistic expression of the Harlem Renaissance foreshadow the social action of the Civil Rights Movement?
- What do we know about Aaron Douglas? How did his leadership influence artists of the era and artists throughout the century?

### ***Art Content***

- Did each child understand the concept of drawing a silhouette?
- Did students strategically depict a gesture that gave their figure a sense of character or expression?
- Does each figure show that students understand the concept of concentric circles?
- Do the images have a balanced effect when grouped together?
- Did students mix both tints and shades that varied in gradation?

## Resources

*Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance.* Directed by Amber Edwards. 60 minutes. PBS Home Video, 1994. Videocassette. Provides an excellent overview of Harlem Renaissance and the artists involved; contains archival footage, interviews, more than 130 paintings.

Kirschke, Amy H. *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, & the Harlem Renaissance.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995. Gives a biography of Douglas and the sociopolitical context of Harlem Renaissance. Includes several black-and-white illustrations.

Miers, Charles, ed. *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994. Provides essential text on many Harlem Renaissance artists, as well as photos and color art reproductions of their work.

## Lesson 3: Marching for Civil Rights Today: A Collaborative Mural

### Rationale

Students frequently think of civil rights as an issue from the past. For many of them, the topic seems like ancient history. Raising their awareness of *current* civil rights issues helps them see the relevance of the Civil Rights Movement and gives them a deeper understanding of it. When students are encouraged to think about injustices that have meaning for them, their academic learning deepens and their artistic expression blossoms.

### Objectives

- To deepen understanding of the Civil Rights Movement
- To declare and display commitment to at least one contemporary civil rights issue
- To affirm the role of social action and resistance in our society
- To engage in social activist art
- To develop creative expression through mural-making
- To develop skills in collaborative work through mural design

### Guiding Questions

- What do we know about the Civil Rights Movement?
- How did the Civil Rights Movement create social change?
- Is institutionalized racism still an issue today?
- What other issues of oppression does our society face?
- What acts of resistance are likely to provoke our society to change?
- What struggles do we have a passion to support?
- Who are some contemporary artists who are making statements about social change in their work?

### Materials

- Index cards
- Artwork of a contemporary artist whose work focuses on social change
- Pencils
- 12" x 18" oak tag
- Large mural paper
- Tempera paint
- Brushes
- Cans of water
- Fabric scraps
- Drawing utensils
- Glue (or Velcro)
- Scissors

## Procedure

### Class Discussion and Motivation

Discuss civil rights issues that are important to students today. Be sure to talk about some of the unresolved issues from the Civil Rights era on the list begun with lesson 2, such as devastating inequality in schools, employment, and housing. Invite students to add issues to which they feel a deep commitment or concern. They may bring up ideas such as: “Women should get equal pay and not be harassed.” “Lesbian and gay people should be recognized in their marriages.” “We need to keep bilingual education in our school.” “College shouldn’t be so expensive; more kids should go.” “Doctor’s appointments should be affordable. What do we call that? Health-care coverage?” Take the initiative in talking about subjects that may be uncomfortable for some students. For example, I find that when I address Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) rights with clarity and forthright discussion, it gives students a safe place to ask questions and learn about sensitive issues. It also seems to calm any nervous giggling or teasing. If there are insults or laughter, first I explain very clearly that it is common to laugh or make a “put-down” when we have a lack of knowledge about a topic. So it is important to build our knowledge. I next explain that insulting or oppressing people because of their sexual orientation is a violation of their civil rights. We discuss using language that is accurate, such as the word *lesbian*, which is not a bad word or an insult, but is a word that describes a woman who has a homosexual orientation. I ask students why they think we as a society should care about the civil rights of the LGBT community. They are quick to point out that members of that community have been subject to violence (in some cases, murder) because of their sexual orientation. Some students know famous artists, pop stars, filmmakers, and writers who are gay; they discuss their contributions. This kind of discussion establishes a classroom tone that enables some students to share family stories of loved ones who do not have domestic partner recognition.

Other challenging discussions may arise if students make assertions such as “The Civil Rights era brought about the necessary changes, and if people are not making it in this society, then it is their own fault. All they have to do is work harder.” Comments like this invite discussion about institutionalized racism, which leads to conversations about “white privilege.” I draw on Peggy McIntosh’s work in these discussions as we examine her idea of the “knapsack of white privilege.” (See Resources at the end of this lesson.) To open students’ minds to the realities of this phenomenon, I start with issues of privilege that may be less threatening to some students, such as ability/disability. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act has advanced the rights of people with disabilities, our country still has a long way to go to assure inclusion and opportunity for these members of our society.

After listing students’ concerns about civil rights issues, discuss the relationship between the earlier Civil Rights era and our contemporary era. Think about strategies that worked well in the Civil Rights Movement; think about what might work well in today’s struggles. Students will inevitably notice that organized acts of mass resistance were essential to effecting change in the past. Discuss what students can do today. Have students list the struggles in which they are most interested on one side of an index card, and on the other side have them name one that will be the subject of their marching figure for the mural.

Study the artwork of a contemporary artist whose work is a vehicle for statements for social change. *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*, edited by Susan Cahan and Zoya Kocur, contains many excellent examples. An artist such as Juan Sanchez, for example, depicts the Puerto Rican experience in the United States. Jean LaMarr makes statements about nuclear waste on Native American land, and Yong Soon Min comments on Korean-American identity. This book contains narratives by the artists, written in both Spanish and English, and concludes with 43 lesson plans. It will serve as a stimulus for students’ reflection on the role of artists in social action.

## Overview and Technique

Students draw figures of marchers. The teacher may use lesson 1 and employ the Aaron Douglas style, or if the class already did that in lesson 2, the teacher may want to encourage students to draw in more detail by depicting the figure in the clothes and styles of today. Drawing more detailed figures is very engaging for teens, who are particularly interested in expressing themselves through fashion and hairstyle. It also reinforces the notion of a new contemporary era of civil rights and of their engagement in this new era.

1. Each student draws a human figure in the act of walking or marching while holding a protest sign. Show images of the antiwar movement of 2003, as well as images of the Civil Rights Movement, that feature protesters using many creative signs. Look at paintings by Faith Ringgold and Malcah Zeldis mentioned in lesson 2. Color or paint the marcher. Collage may be used to add detail. Fabric scraps may be glued to suggest clothing, hair, etc. It is worthwhile taking considerable time on each figure. Students begin to care deeply about their marcher and the civil rights issue they have chosen.
2. After students have drawn their figure, they create a sign for their marcher. Each sign should be different, since each student has a personal topic of concern. The sign may be a simple rectangle, or it may be a creative symbolic shape. The sign may be a simple statement, or it may be a poetic proverb. A brainstorming exercise may be helpful in composing phrases.
3. Cut out marching figures and signs. Attach signs to marchers with craft sticks.
4. Roll out large mural paper. Students work together to design the scenery for the mural. Since this mural emphasizes contemporary issues, painting a familiar scene will be especially meaningful for students. For example, they might include the downtown area of their community with familiar storefronts, favorite pizza and ice cream shops, the schoolyard showing the doors they walk through every day, their favorite hangout area in the school lot, neighborhood areas, town halls, etc.
5. Draw and paint the scenery.
6. Glue every marcher and sign on the scenery (or attach with Velcro so students may take their marcher home later).
7. Create a sign that tells viewers the meaning of the mural. Explain the process of creating it and invite viewers to make comments about their own commitment to civil rights issues.
8. Display the mural in a prominent public place such as the school cafeteria or lobby, town hall, or in a local business.





## Extensions

This lesson may be integrated with both social studies and language arts; it is an excellent precursor to the launch of a social action project.

## Synthesize, Assess, Evaluate

Revisit the guiding questions and the initial brainstorm. Make a list of the contemporary civil rights issues that the members of the class addressed. Then brainstorm a new list of particular actions that will lead to change in current civil rights issues.

Ask students about the role of the arts in social action. Reflect on how song, poetry, performance, and visual art were used in the Civil Rights era. Reflect on the role of art and the artist in social change today. Have students choose a contemporary artist from the community, a website, or the book *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*. Then, encourage them to think about how this artist might represent the civil rights issue they chose. Have students begin a sketch for a new art piece that will represent the issue and stimulate a contemporary viewer to think about social change.

## Resources

Cahan, Susan, and Zoya Kocur. *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

McIntosh, Peggy. *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies*. Working Paper no. 189. Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1988. Available for \$4 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181.

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) “strives to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.” [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

Speak Out, the Institute for Democratic Education and Culture, “is the country’s only national not-for-profit organization that promotes progressive speakers and artists on campuses and in communities. Committed to social, political, cultural, and economic justice, Speak Out encourages critical and imaginative thinking about domestic and international issues through artistic and educational forums nationwide.” [www.speakoutnow.org](http://www.speakoutnow.org).

The Freechild Project “seeks to build active democracy by engaging young people in social change, particularly those who have been historically denied participation.” [www.freechild.org/Arts/](http://www.freechild.org/Arts/).