

THE ARTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A Lesson on Civil Rights

Grades 9–12

Standards covered in this lesson:

National Standards: Fine Arts

- NA-VA.9-12.4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
- NA-VA.9-12.5 Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others
- NA-VA.9-12.6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Sheboygan Area School Art Standards

- J1-Students will reflect and talk about works of art in basic and advanced terms

National Standards: U.S. History

- NSS-USH.5-12.9 Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties

Sheboygan Area School Social Studies Standards

- E.12.18 Explain the history of slavery, racial, and ethnic discrimination, and efforts to eliminate discrimination in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

Introduction: The Arts as a Tool for Social Change

Charles Smith has been on the battlefield for many years, never shying away from conflict, averting his gaze from trouble, or taking the path of least resistance. His battles have been aimed at exposing the harsh realities of racism. The art environment he began in 1985 in Aurora, Illinois, “The African American Heritage Museum & Black Veterans Archive”, has been the primary front of his soldiering¹.

Begin this lesson by watching a short film on Dr. Charles Smith and his art environment in Aurora, IL. This film can be found and downloaded from the Internet at www.jmkac.org (to be installed)

Discussion Questions:

Dr. Smith believes he was divinely inspired to create art that could bolster the self-esteem of African Americans and other minorities.

- How might art create self-esteem, not only in African Americans, but also in all people?
- How might art play a role in the healing and survival of a culture?

Dr. Smith said that his sculptural works “...educate the mind through the eye and educate and enlarge the heart as you read about the pieces and what they mean.”

- Explain how an image or sculpture might educate or change a person’s perspective.
- How might further reading or research enhance or change your view of a particular work of art?

Curator Lisa Stone² writes, “The African American Heritage Museum & Black Veterans Archive is equal parts memorial and mirror.”³

- What do you think this statement means?
- How is this site a mirror for viewers outside of the African American community?

¹ Derived from gallery handout. Portions of the handout were excerpted from: *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (John Michael Kohler Arts Center and Princeton Architectural Press; 2007)

² Lisa Stone is curator of the Roger Brown Study Collection, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

³ Derived from gallery handout. Portions of the handout were excerpted from: *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (John Michael Kohler Arts Center and Princeton Architectural Press; 2007)

In Dr. Smith's view, making art is not something one learns in school, but rather through personal experience and vision. He took the title "Dr." to suggest that life itself is the most powerful educator.

- Dr. Smith is considered a "self-taught artist" because he had no formal art education. How do you think he was able to create the works of art that he did despite having had no formal art training?
- Do you agree with Smith's statements that personal experience and life are the most powerful educators? Explain why or why not.
- What benefit or value does formal education provide?
- Give an example of one of your most memorable learning moments. What role did formal education play? What role did your life experiences play?

Taking a philosophical stand on the dismantling of his environment, Smith saw opportunity: "Each piece, to me, is like a seed planted and every place it goes it will tell the story of what I tried to share."

- Discuss the advantages and disadvantage of keeping an art environment together in one place for the public to visit versus splitting it up amongst different public venues. Why might it be better kept together as a whole? Why might it be beneficial to dismantle it?

Student Connection

Dr. Charles Smith used the arts as a tool to educate and bring about social change in his community and world. Research the following arts-based organizations to see how they are using the arts to transform their neighborhoods and cities. Identify the organization's target audience, goals, programs and partners involved.

http://www.jmkac.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21&Itemid=92

<http://www.tribesproject.org/>

<http://www.citykids.com/index.php>

http://www.redcross.org/article/0,1072,0_312_5003,00.html

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901020930-353521,00.html>

Work together in small groups to develop program proposals that could meet specific needs in your community or school. In your proposal, include a list of goals, statement of purpose, target audience, program plan, partners involved, budget, and research notes.

The World of Dr. Charles Smith (Provide full-page image)

Born in New Orleans, Charles Smith was fourteen when his father was murdered by a group of white men who were never asked to answer for their crime. His mother took Charles and his two sisters to live in Chicago, Illinois, working two jobs to provide for them. His mother's strength, courage, religious faith, and strong will left a powerful imprint on Charles. In the summer of 1955, less than a year after Smith's father was killed, his mother took her children to the funeral service of a fourteen-year-old African-American boy, Emmett Till, who had been brutally murdered by white racists while visiting relatives in Mississippi. Till's mother insisted that her son's funeral service be open to the public, and that his horribly damaged body be displayed in an open casket to unmask the cruel realities of racism in America. Till's murder had a particularly profound impact on Smith, and on many other Americans as well, adding fuel to the already mobilizing civil rights movement.

When Charles Smith returned to Illinois in 1968, after serving in the Vietnam War, he saw a country torn apart by civil unrest. His combat experiences generated physical, psychological, and spiritual wounds, as well as traumatic memories of brutality, suffering, and loss. Vietnam veterans of all races came home to find themselves the object of America's collective shame, and African-American veterans found themselves doubly shunned.

Smith's art environment chronicled the African-American experience and history. In his world, images of grandmothers were juxtaposed with those of violent gang members, slaves with bleeding welts, African tribal figures, and children playing games. Cultural ancestry is blended with details of American history;

figures representing the nineteenth-century Underground Railroad stand next to African-American icons such as Louis Armstrong and Serena Williams. Smith insists that America's history—all of it—must be recognized and understood in order for any sort of social change to occur⁴.

Events such as the murder of Emmett Till, Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat on a bus, and the passionate speeches and civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. deeply impacted Charles Smith and America at large. Learn more about the lives, dreams, and goals of these civil rights leaders by working through the following Student Connections.



5



6

Student Connection: Q & A⁷

Step 1: Imagine that you are journalist. Your assignment is to cover the civil rights movement as it takes place. You need to investigate the beliefs and leadership of the movement for a special broadcast report. Brainstorm a list of questions that you would ask either Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks to learn more about their lives and perspectives. Use the best of your questions to create the outline of an interview.

Step 2: Research the time and situation more deeply by exploring actual interviews and source documents. You can access these letters and interviews from the following websites...

<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/king/timeline.html>
<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/king/speeches.html>
http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/popular_requests/
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/rosa/interview.htm#today>

Step 3: Use your questions as an outline and write up an imagined interview with the person you have chosen. Think about what you should ask first, then what questions might follow, or build on your subject's "answers." You can start your questions with "Q" and your imagined responses with "A." Use the historical and cultural information you've learned to help create the most realistic responses you can. Read your completed interview out loud.

⁴ Derived from gallery handout. Portions of the handout were excerpted from: *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (John Michael Kohler Arts Center and Princeton Architectural Press; 2007)

⁵ Image derived from: <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/king/photogallery.html>

⁶ Image derived from: <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/king/photogallery.html>

⁷ Derived from "Q & A." Artful Writing by the Weisman Art Museum.

Student Connection: Making It Personal

Many Americans feel disconnected from civil rights movements today, observing civil rights only as a day off in the form of a national holiday (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. day). Click on the link below to read a news article written by Paul Andrews for the Seattle Times, on the creation of this holiday. After reading, discuss the following questions as a class.

<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/perspectives/holiday/>

Discussion Questions:

- Dr. King is the only American besides George Washington to have a national holiday designated to honor him. Compare Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to America's first president. How were they similar? How were they different? Do you think that it is right for Dr. King to be celebrated with a holiday, in the same manner as George Washington? Why or why not?
- In the above article, the question was asked, "Why put Dr. King above other famous people?" How would you respond to this question?

Reflect on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders in the civil rights movement. Choose one of the following options to write an essay on: A). Compare the messages in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches and letters to the visual messages found in the sculptures of Dr. Charles Smith. B). Write a reflective essay on the impact or inspiration that Dr. King and the civil rights movement has had upon your own life. Read the below links for essays written by students and adults from across the United States:

<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/perspectives/essays/>

<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/perspectives/reflections/>

Student Connection: Would He Still Have A Dream?⁸

"I have a dream..." is a well-known quote from one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speeches, delivered in 1963 to an audience of over 200,000 civil-rights marchers at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. While you may be familiar with this quote, do you know what the dreams that Dr. King spoke of in his speech were? Click on the link below to read this speech in its entirety, then reflect on the following question below. Students may want to take turns reading each section aloud so that they can dramatize the energy of Dr. King's words.

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.pdf



⁸ Derived from: <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/freeatlast/>

⁹ Image derived from: <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/king/photogallery.html>

Discussion Questions¹⁰:

- What key images and phrases did Dr. King choose?
- What was the overall emotional tone of his words?
- Imagine that Dr. King has returned to today's world. Would he still have a dream for our country? Write a speech that he might deliver today.
- What is your personal dream for your life, community, or world? Dr. King challenged students to develop a blueprint for their lives. Click on the link below and read aloud a speech that Dr. King gave to a group of high school students. After listening to his speech, take time to reflect and develop your own life blueprint.

<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/mlk/king/words/blueprint.html>

Additional Resources:

<http://www.useekufind.com/peace/lessonplans.htm>

<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/freetatlast/>

http://www.besthistorysites.net/USHistory_CivilRights.shtml

<http://www.cyberlearning-world.com/lessons/blackhistlp.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/socialstudies/inventory/culturalstudiesafricanamericanstudies-912.html>

¹⁰ Questions derived from: <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/freetatlast/>