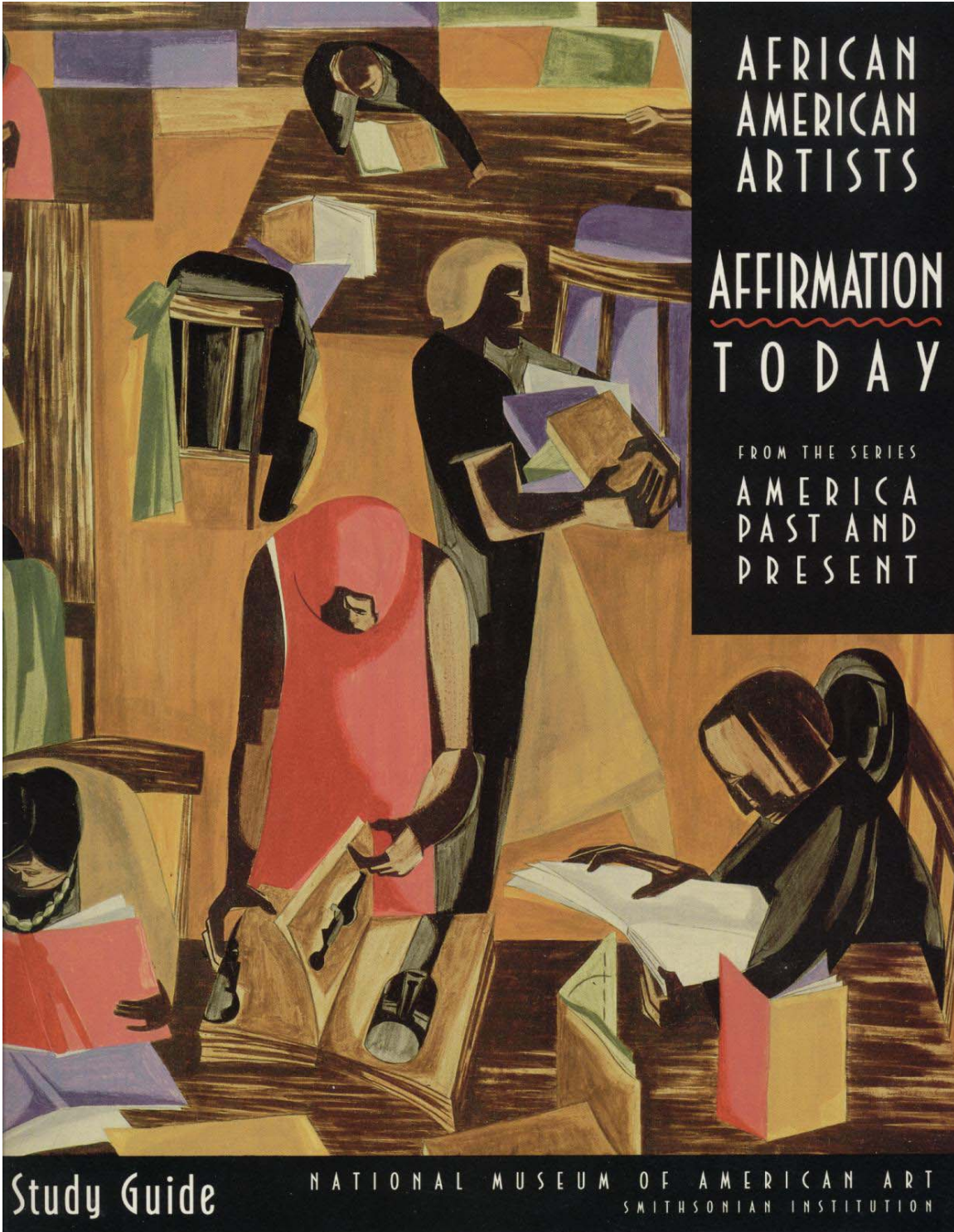




Smithsonian
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture*
Smithsonian American Art Museum



UNIT I

UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. TO UNDERSTAND
THE DIVERSE
EXPERIENCES OF
AND CULTURAL
CONNECTIONS
AMONG AFRICAN
AMERICANS

2. TO EXPLORE HOW
AFRICAN AMERICANS
CONTRIBUTED TO
AND INFLUENCED
AMERICAN CULTURE

MY PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE

Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My People! My People!

—Zora Neal Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942, reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. 172.

Africans first arrived in the Americas as explorers and traders even before the Europeans, according to some scholars. Yet the first recorded presence of Africans in the English colonies was as indentured servants in 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia. The Africans had been seized from a Spanish ship and brought to Virginia on a Dutch warship. By the middle of the seventeenth century most Africans in the English colonies were enslaved for life. Furthermore, the status of life servitude was inherited by the children of enslaved Africans.

Resistance to slavery occurred on the African continent, aboard ship, and in the colonies. Methods of resistance included organized efforts to abolish slavery, armed attacks against slaveholders, emigration back to Africa, and alliances with Native Americans. Enslaved Africans regularly escaped and took refuge among various Native American nations. From time to time the two groups united to fight against European settlers.

In exchange for their freedom, some enslaved Africans volunteered to fight against the British during the American Revolution. However, the only way most Africans in the slave states received their freedom before the end of the Civil War was by way of the Underground Railroad, a secret route of trails, paths, and safe houses where slaves were hidden as they fled from the South to the North.

The Civil War did not end the oppression of African Americans. Laws in many states curtailed the

freedom of blacks. Many laws prohibited blacks from carrying weapons, holding certain types of jobs, restricting the amount of property they could own, and limiting their freedom of movement. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the system of segregating African Americans existed throughout the South and in places in the North as well.

During the first half of the twentieth century, millions of African Americans moved from the South to urban areas in the North. This population shift is often referred to as the "Great Migration." Blacks left the South for better jobs, living conditions, and education, as big northern cities—Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and New York City—became their new homes. The new arrivals found that racism and resentment were not unique to the South. Race riots and mob violence occurred in the cities of the North as whites feared the new competition of blacks.

In the midst of these unsettling times, several individuals—Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey—and organizations—The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League—were able to rise to prominence because they fought prejudice and injustice.

The majority of African Americans have suffered great poverty, and the decade of the Great Depression from 1930 to 1941 saw a deepening of that poverty. Yet many benefited and found employment through Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Federal Art Project, a branch of the WPA, employed many artists and writers.

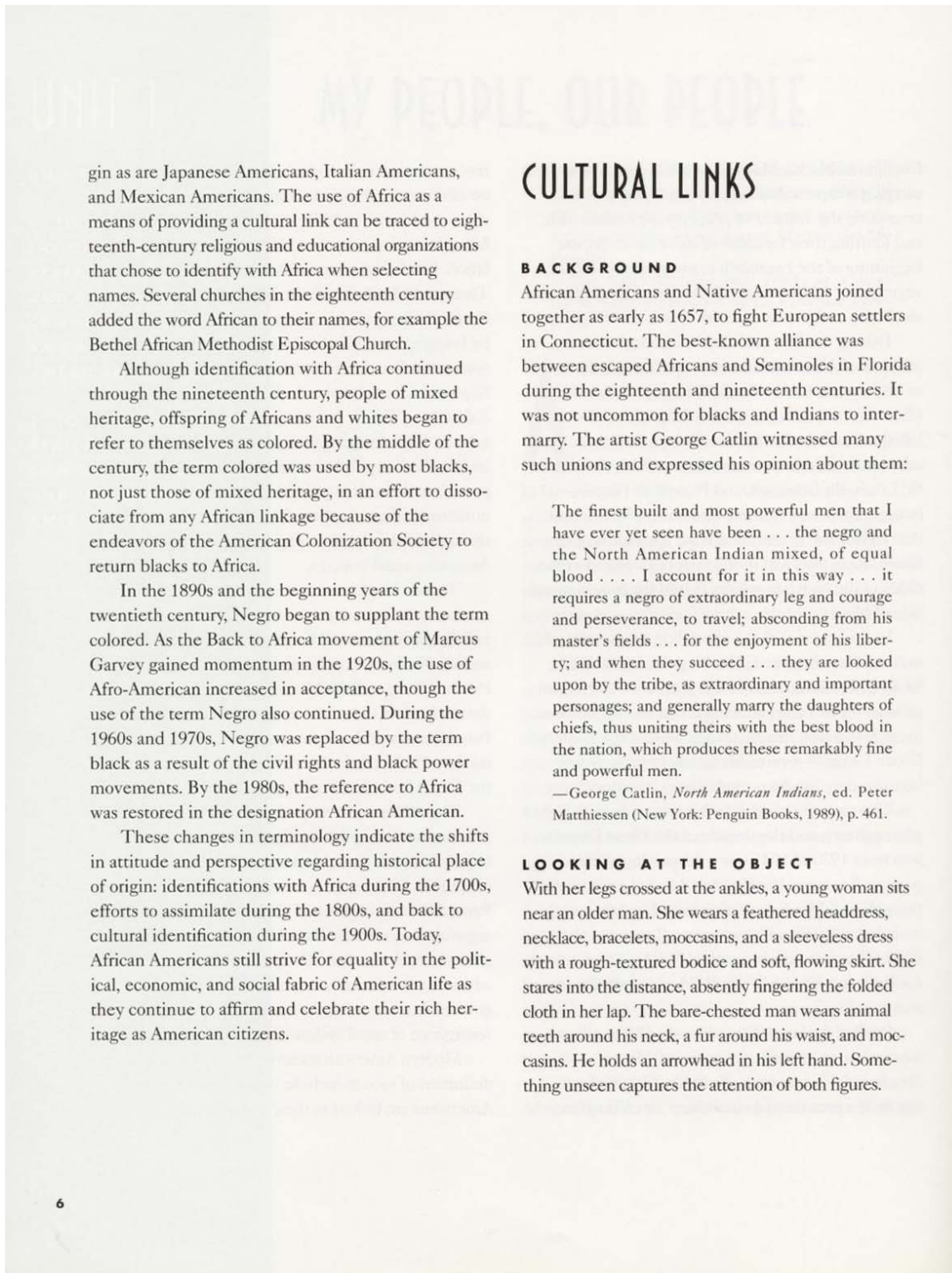
During the late 1940s and early 1950s, efforts were made to improve the status of African Americans. For example, *To Secure These Rights*, a report of a presidential committee on civil rights,

recommended to President Truman that segregation be eliminated. But aside from the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, the federal government failed to actively support additional civil rights legislation. Black leaders, especially Charles H. Houston, Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, challenged segregation in the public schools by bringing suit in federal court against the school systems in five different states. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* put an end to legally segregated schools. The desegregation movement eventually included other public facilities, particularly transportation. Soon sit-ins, boycotts, marches, and numerous other social confrontations were practiced throughout the South to expose the inequalities in American social policies.

The civil rights movement was essentially integrationist. Its primary aim was for African Americans to fully participate and benefit as equals in American society. Nationalist movements, such as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, stressed self-determination, cultural consciousness, and advocated Pan-Africanism; these groups gained support during the late 1960s, particularly after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed African Americans accomplishing significant breakthroughs in politics, with more blacks being elected to public office than in any other period in American history. Pan-Africanism continued to be advanced through organizations such as TransAfrica, which monitors affairs in Africa and the Caribbean. Despite political advances, the period was marked by massive cuts in government spending for social programs and by the resurgence of racial violence.

Modern American society tends to broaden the definition of race to include land of origin. African Americans are linked to their historical place of ori-



gin as are Japanese Americans, Italian Americans, and Mexican Americans. The use of Africa as a means of providing a cultural link can be traced to eighteenth-century religious and educational organizations that chose to identify with Africa when selecting names. Several churches in the eighteenth century added the word African to their names, for example the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Although identification with Africa continued through the nineteenth century, people of mixed heritage, offspring of Africans and whites began to refer to themselves as colored. By the middle of the century, the term colored was used by most blacks, not just those of mixed heritage, in an effort to dissociate from any African linkage because of the endeavors of the American Colonization Society to return blacks to Africa.

In the 1890s and the beginning years of the twentieth century, Negro began to supplant the term colored. As the Back to Africa movement of Marcus Garvey gained momentum in the 1920s, the use of Afro-American increased in acceptance, though the use of the term Negro also continued. During the 1960s and 1970s, Negro was replaced by the term black as a result of the civil rights and black power movements. By the 1980s, the reference to Africa was restored in the designation African American.

These changes in terminology indicate the shifts in attitude and perspective regarding historical place of origin: identifications with Africa during the 1700s, efforts to assimilate during the 1800s, and back to cultural identification during the 1900s. Today, African Americans still strive for equality in the political, economic, and social fabric of American life as they continue to affirm and celebrate their rich heritage as American citizens.

CULTURAL LINKS

BACKGROUND

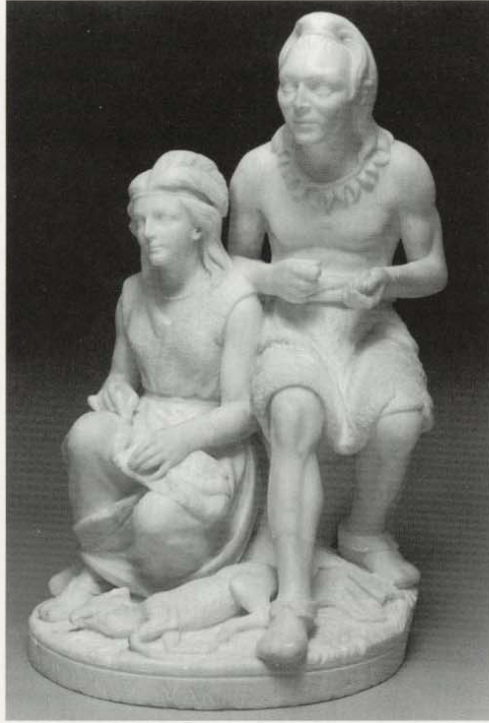
African Americans and Native Americans joined together as early as 1657, to fight European settlers in Connecticut. The best-known alliance was between escaped Africans and Seminoles in Florida during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was not uncommon for blacks and Indians to intermarry. The artist George Catlin witnessed many such unions and expressed his opinion about them:

The finest built and most powerful men that I have ever yet seen have been . . . the negro and the North American Indian mixed, of equal blood . . . I account for it in this way . . . it requires a negro of extraordinary leg and courage and perseverance, to travel; absconding from his master's fields . . . for the enjoyment of his liberty; and when they succeed . . . they are looked upon by the tribe, as extraordinary and important personages; and generally marry the daughters of chiefs, thus uniting theirs with the best blood in the nation, which produces these remarkably fine and powerful men.

—George Catlin, *North American Indians*, ed. Peter Matthiessen (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 461.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

With her legs crossed at the ankles, a young woman sits near an older man. She wears a feathered headdress, necklace, bracelets, moccasins, and a sleeveless dress with a rough-textured bodice and soft, flowing skirt. She stares into the distance, absently fingering the folded cloth in her lap. The bare-chested man wears animal teeth around his neck, a fur around his waist, and moccasins. He holds an arrowhead in his left hand. Something unseen captures the attention of both figures.



Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1843-after 1911
Old Arrow Maker, modeled 1866, carved 1872
 marble
 54.5 x 34.5 x 34.0 cm (21 1/2 x 13 5/8 x 13 3/8 in.)
 National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian
 Institution, gift of Joseph S. Sinclair

COMMENTARY

As the daughter of a Chippewa Indian woman and a free African-American man, Edmonia Lewis often depicted her dual ancestry in her sculpture. In fact, scholars consider *Old Arrow Maker* to have been inspired by the artist's memories of her childhood among her mother's people. She enjoyed telling sto-

ries about the carefree life she led then, fishing, swimming, and making moccasins. When she was twelve, her older brother paid for her schooling in Albany, New York; later he helped her attend Oberlin College in Ohio in 1859. At college she took the name Mary Edmonia Lewis and stopped using "Wildfire," the English translation of her Chippewa name. She left Oberlin and went to Boston, where she decided to become a sculptor. After minimal training with the portrait sculptor Edward A. Brackett, she was able to sell several portrait busts to finance her first trip to Europe. The artist settled in Rome in 1865 and became acquainted with prominent white Americans living there.

In 1869 she was visited by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Lewis admired especially *The Song of Hiawatha*, his epic poem about a fictional Chippewa youth.

At the doorway of his wigwam
 Sat the ancient Arrow-maker,
 In the land of the Dacotahs,
 Making arrow-heads of jasper,
 Arrow-heads of chalcedony.
 At his side, in all her beauty,
 Sat the lovely Minnehaha,
 Sat his daughter, Laughing Water
 Plaiting mats of flags and rushes,
 Of the past the old man's thoughts were
 And the maiden's of the future.

He was thinking, as he sat there,
 Of the days when with such arrows
 He had struck the deer and bison,
 On the Muskoday, the meadow;
 Shot the wild goose, flying southward,
 On the wing, the clamorous Wawa;
 Thinking of the great war-parties,
 How they came to buy his arrows,
 Could not fight without his arrows.
 Ah, no more such noble warriors
 Could be found on earth as they were!

Now the men were all like women,
Only used their tongues for weapons!

She was thinking of a hunter,
From another tribe and country,
Young and tall and very handsome,
Who one morning, in the Spring-time
Came to buy her father's arrows,
Sat and rested in the wigwam,
Lingered long about the doorway,
Looking back as he departed.
She had heard her father praise him,
Praise his courage and his wisdom;
Would he come again for arrows
To the Falls of Minnehaha?
On the mat her hands lay idle,
And her eyes were very dreamy.

Through their thoughts they heard a footstep.
Heard a rustling in the branches. . . .

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, excerpt from *The Song of Hiawatha* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1901), pp. 85–86.

Lewis completed at least three figural groups inspired by the poem: *The Wooing of Hiawatha*, *The Marriage of Hiawatha and Minnehaha*, and *The Departure of Hiawatha and Minnehaha*. It has been suggested that *Old Arrow Maker* also might be related to Longfellow's poem.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. Look carefully at the reproduction of the sculpture. What evidence is there that the artist based this work on memory rather than on observing the subject?
2. Divide the class into small groups. Using the background information about Edmonia Lewis and the sculpture in *Free Within Ourselves* (pp. 135–138), have each group role-play a fictional dialogue between the arrow maker and his daughter. What events have they witnessed in American history? What feelings can they express? What are they talking about?

3. Research alliances among African Americans and Native Americans. The best-documented examples are those with the Seminoles; others include those with the Cherokees and the Comanches. Discuss reasons for these affiliations.

4. Compare *Old Arrow Maker* with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* and discuss the similarities and differences.

INNOVATION

BACKGROUND

George Washington Carver was born a slave in 1864, on the Carver plantation near Diamond Grove, Missouri. He never knew his parents. When he was an infant he was kidnapped, and returned to the owners of the plantation in exchange for a horse valued at \$300. As a young child he developed a fascination for plants and gardening. He left the farm at the age of eleven in search of schooling, traveling from Missouri and Kansas to Iowa. He was accepted at Highland College in Kansas, but was refused admission when he arrived to register. Although he did enroll in Simpson College to study art and piano in 1890, he eventually turned to agriculture and decided to become a teacher. He attended Iowa State College where he received his B.S. degree in 1894 and his M.S. in 1896. That same year he was asked by Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, to come and help establish an agricultural school there. He became the director of Tuskegee's department of agricultural research, a position he held for the rest of his life.

Carver dedicated himself to improving the econ-



William H. Johnson, 1901–1970
Dr. George Washington Carver, ca. 1945
oil on fiberboard
90.2 x 72.4 cm (35 1/2 x 28 1/2 in.)
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian
Institution, gift of the Harmon Foundation

omy of the South. His efforts included teaching soil improvement and the diversification of crops. Among his many discoveries are hundreds of uses for the peanut, sweet potato, and soybean. He devised many products from cotton waste and extracted blue, purple, and red pigments from local clay.

Many people tried to persuade Carver to leave Tuskegee. Thomas Edison offered him employment and a six-figure salary, but he refused to leave Tuskegee and the \$1,500 he was paid. Dr. Carver

received several honorary degrees, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Medal for his outstanding contributions to southern agriculture, and honorary membership in the American Inventors Society. He died in 1943, having bequeathed his estate to the George Washington Carver Research Foundation, which he had established and endowed at Tuskegee three years earlier.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

George Washington Carver is the figure with green hair and mustache. He appears five times. As the central figure he is shown wearing a lab apron, standing in front of an equipment table and holding a funnel. Near his feet are his artist's palette and numerous flowers and plants: cotton, beets, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. In the upper left corner Carver receives his diploma from Iowa State; in the lower right he greets President Roosevelt.

COMMENTARY

Dr. George Washington Carver was painted by William H. Johnson as part of a 1945 series that he called "Fighters for Freedom." This group of paintings depicted famous men and women—politicians, military leaders, educators, and social activists—who were recognized for their struggles for human justice and equality, nationally and internationally. In all of the paintings the images are rendered in a flat, two-dimensional manner. The figures are elongated and color is used in a decorative, expressive style.

When Johnson was asked why he had moved in this more narrative, two-dimensional, documentary direction, he replied:

It was not a change but a development. In all my years of painting, I have had one absorbing and inspiring idea, and have worked towards it with unyielding zeal: to give—in simple and stark

form—the story of the Negro as he has existed.
—Richard Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 213.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. Using *Science . . .* by Gordon Nelson, discuss whether this painted summary of Dr. Carver's life (receiving his diploma, his palette and paint brush, his meeting with President Roosevelt, experimenting in his lab) reflects the sentiments of the poem.

Science
tells you
Black is the
absence of light

but
your soul
tells you Black
is the light of the
world.

—Gordon Nelson, *Science . . .*, in *Make a Joyful Sound*, ed. Deborah Slier (New York: Checkerboard Press, 1991) p. 97.

2. Conduct oral history interviews with older citizens in your community to find out more about Dr. Carver and Tuskegee Institute.
3. Create a timeline with pictures and information about significant African-American scientists and inventors. Among others, your list should include well-known individuals such as Benjamin Banneker, Charles Drew, Daniel Hale Williams, and Garrett Morgan.

THE BLUES

BACKGROUND

The blues evolved in the segregated rural South at the turn of the century. The music captured the experiences and hardships of African Americans who lived with despair, injustice, and disillusion. Blues performers often used traditional and nontraditional instrumental accompaniment. Some chose jugs and washboards while others used guitars, pianos, and harmonicas. The blues emerged from African and European folk traditions such as the field holler and the folk ballad. Field hollers are songs that slaves used to communicate with one other when working on plantations. Many of these hollers predate slavery and can be traced to African musical practices. Folk ballads, which use rhyme and verses, follow a European-American style of singing. African-American balladeers in the South celebrated the deeds of heroes or outlaws and achieved a sense of sadness and melancholy in their songs.

When blacks migrated to northern cities, the rural blues tradition was transported to the North. In fact, during the twenties, the blues was the first form of black music to be commercially recorded.

Amos "Junior" Wells was born in West Memphis, Tennessee. He became interested in music as a child, and by the age of seven had taught himself to play the harmonica and had begun to sing and play for tips as a street musician. As a teenager he moved to Chicago and soon formed a group called "The Little Boys" with two other youngsters. During the early 1950s he joined Muddy Waters' legendary blues band, began recording, and frequently appeared in local clubs.

Wells developed an innovative, amplified har-

monica style. While playing, he used the microphone to help create stylistic elements similar to those of the guitar. Affectionately referred to as the “Little Giant of the Blues,” Wells described the universal essence of his music:

... the things I sing about are true because they happened to somebody. And the blues automatically touches people because most of the things you sing about people can understand—it’s happened to them or somebody they know. This is why people call it the blues—because it’s something everybody has.

—Junior Wells, in *Going to Chicago: A Year on the Chicago Blues Scene*, ed. Laurence J. Hyman (San Francisco: Woodford Publishing, 1990), p. 19.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

A bust-length portrait of Junior Wells emerges against a background of lemon yellow, mint green, mauve, and black. The face is rendered in electric, pulsating colors—red, yellow, blue, green—while the jacket and shirt are presented primarily as broad, flat, neutral areas of black and white. The immediacy of the musical performance is suggested by the opened mouth, intense stare, and exaggerated, foreshortened hand that grasps both microphone and harmonica.

COMMENTARY

The artist Frederick Brown grew up in Chicago near the steel mills. Like his grandfather and stepfather, Brown briefly worked in the mills. There he met many of the men who had migrated and immigrated to Chicago for economic reasons. Many of the black men had left homes in Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee to find work. Some brought with them the blues and jazz. In fact, musicians such as Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Jimmy Reed lived in Brown’s neighborhood and were family friends.

Brown met Junior Wells in Chicago at the height



Frederick Brown, born 1945
Junior Wells, 1989
oil on linen
91.4 x 76.2 cm (36 x 30 in.)
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, museum purchase made possible by William Cost Johnson, George Story, Robert J. Oliver, and Grete Wagnor-Barwig

of the musician’s career. Brown attended Wells’ performances and developed an appreciation for his colorful musical style. In reference to this portrait, Brown has said that he wanted to capture “the musician’s aura.” In fact, the artist explained that the “reds, blues, greens, and yellows are the spectrum of human emotions” emanating from Wells as he performs.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss how the artist used color and form to capture the aura of Junior Wells as he performs.
2. View the video *African-American Artists: Affirmation Today*. Discuss Frederick Brown's story about how he began to portray blues musicians.
3. Use *If Sometimes Blue* by Alfred L. Woods to discuss the concept "feeling blue." How does it relate to aesthetic and musical expressions?
4. A distinctive type of blues is associated with Chicago. Conduct research about the characteristics of the music and the musicians who are famous for Chicago-style blues.

If Sometimes Blue

It's a hard time situation
set up to make you blue.
Sometimes, it's a hard time situation
set up to make you blue.
That's why Mama said she
baked up sweet cakes and
told Dad to come home
with good news.

She said remember your good thing can
go bad sometimes
but
nothing goes bad always.
Remember, your good thing
can go bad sometimes, she said,
but
nothing goes bad always.
If a hard time situation gets
heavy chew on Mama's baked
memories recalling Dad's good news.

I said, people, sometimes
it's a hard time situation
set up to make you blue.
That's why Mama said she
baked us sweet cakes and
told Dad to come home
each and every day with
some good news. . .
even if he had to fake it.
—Alfred L. Woods, *If Sometimes Blue*, in *Make a Joyful
Sound*, ed. Deborah Slier (New York: Checkerboard
Press, 1991) p. 94.

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