

# African American Artists

## Seeing Sound

**Overview:** After completing this activity, students will have a better understanding of the influence of African American culture on blues music, as well as techniques such as repetition and rhythm used when creating visual representations of this musical style.

**Age Group/Grade Level:** 9-12 years, grades 4-7

**Subject Area:** Social Studies, Visual Arts, Music

**Duration:** approximately 60 min.

### Background

In a nightclub, swaying musicians back up the soloist in *Empress of the Blues*, a reference to legendary singer and songwriter Bessie Smith. She was one of the biggest stars of the 1920s and was popular with both black and white audiences. The statuesque six-foot Smith transfixed listeners with her fabulous voice and imposing presence. Bessie Smith was born in Tennessee in 1894 and orphaned as a young child. A tough businesswoman, she made her first known recording in 1923. A Columbia Records representative said of Smith's voice: "I had never heard anything like the torture and torment she put into the music of her people. It was the blues, and she meant it."

(Quoted in Chris Albertson, *Bessie* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003].)

### Discussion

Share Romare Bearden's *Empress of the Blues* with students. Begin your conversation with the questions below. Solicit visual evidence to support students' observations and interpretations by asking, "What do you see that makes you say that?"

- What do you think is going on in this picture?
- What might the music playing in this place sound like?
- How would you describe the mood of this artwork?
- Do you see any repetition in this artwork? If so, where?

Share one of Bessie Smith's recordings while students look closely at the artwork. Suggested songs include *Poor Man's Blues*, *Backwater Blues*, or *Cold in Hand Blues*.

- Did you hear any repetition in this song? If so, where?
- Clap out the rhythm, or beat, of the song. Do you see a similar rhythm in the artwork? If so, where?



Romare Bearden, *Empress of the Blues*, 1974, acrylic and pencil on paper and printed paper on paperboard, 36 x 48 in., Museum purchase in part through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1996.71.

Explain that blues music came from a blend of different kinds of slave songs that told about hard lives and tough times.

- Romare Bearden often created mixed-media collages by adding pieces of paper to paintings. How does his way of making an artwork match the history of the blues?
- How does the sound of the music match the sad lyrics?

### Activity

Have students choose a blues singer or musician from the 1920s or 1930s to research as inspiration for creating an artwork.

- What information have you discovered that should be included in a portrait of this singer or musician?
- How might this be done visually?

Have students select one song recorded by their singer or musician and translate it into a visual representation of their chosen person and song. Encourage students to include collage elements in their work and to address the following questions:

- What emotions does the music express? If the song includes lyrics, what emotions do the words express? How can color give viewers a sense of the emotions being expressed in the music?
- Tap out the rhythm of your selected song. How can you use lines, shapes, space, and repetition to give viewers a sense of the song's rhythm?
- Is the singer's voice or an instrument the main feature of your selected song? How can the composition give viewers a sense of the strongest/loudest elements of your selected song?