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# Learn Together: Art as Activism











Bar and Grill, Jacob Lawrence 1942  
Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM)

## African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond

The Black artists in this exhibit all reached a pinnacle of success. Their work is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. The artists belonged to overlapping artistic circles. Several were part of New York's Harlem Renaissance. Some got career boosts from the WPA, a government program. Others were connected through schools, such as Howard University. Over the years, African American art has become more connected to fine arts institutions and entered global art markets. Nevertheless, the art in this show represents years of struggle for the artists.

Click [here](#) to learn about more than 80 years of African American art.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. During what years did the artists create the works of art in this exhibit?
2. What did the artists in the exhibit have in common? Choose at least two artists. Identify their shared experience, such as going to the same school, living in the same place, or painting similar subjects or in a similar style.
3. How did the artists' work reflect their experiences and viewpoints as African Americans? Describe and analyze at least two works of art from the exhibit.

To view a model of how to observe and analyze an individual painting, click [here](#).







**Echoes of Harlem, Faith Ringgold 1980, The Studio Museum in Harlem**

## A Constellation

The Studio Museum in Harlem was founded in 1968, after intense community activism made it happen. The museum describes itself as “the nexus for artists of African descent locally, nationally and internationally and for work that has been inspired and influenced by black culture.” This exhibit combines works from the museum’s permanent collection with works by new artists. The artists differ in their media and their approach, but they share a common commitment to communicating their Black identity and inspiring social change.

Click [here](#) to learn about connections between established Black artists and upcoming young stars.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. When was this online exhibit on display at The Studio Museum in Harlem?
2. What artists painted abstract pictures composed of large, boldly colored geometric shapes? Describe the work of at least one of these artists using words or sketches.
3. What work of art do you think conveyed the most powerful message? Support your analysis and opinions with details from the art and text.

To learn about the Studio Museum in Harlem, click [here](#).



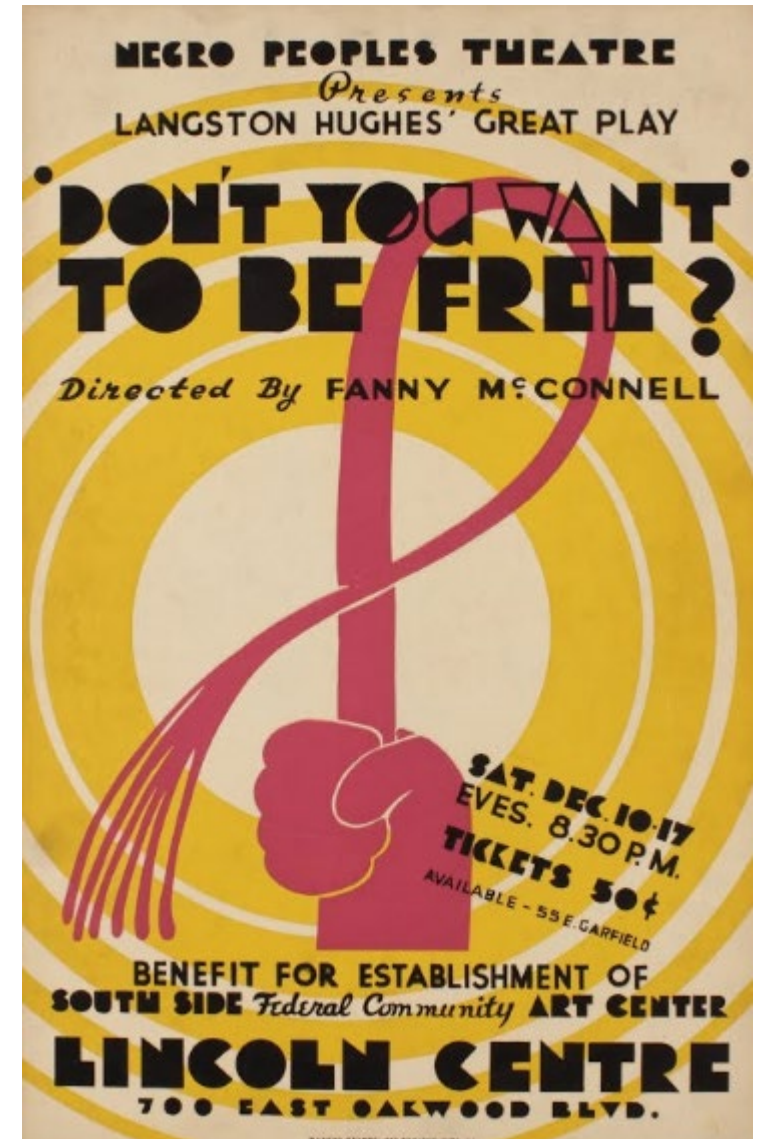
## Quiz

Read the questions and write your answer in your notebook or on a piece of paper.

1. What kind of art did James VanDerZee create?
2. What government program helped Black artists during the Great Depression?
3. What artist created twelve paintings in honor of John Henry, the legendary African American railroad man?
4. During what years did the artist paint the John Henry series?
5. What photographer described his camera as “a weapon of protest”?
6. For what national magazine did that photographer produce many of his photo essays?
7. What kind of art did Elizabeth Catlett create?
8. List at least three media in which contemporary Black artists express themselves.

## Explore Further

This lesson has given you some vocabulary to talk about Black Art in the United States. It has also introduced you to some basic ideas that are relevant to this topic. To learn more about Black history and culture, click [here](#).



[Negro Peoples Theatre Presents: Langston Hughes' Great Play, "Don't You Want to be Free?" Unknown 1938](#)  
New-York Historical Society



Can Fire in the Park, Beauford Delaney 1946, Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM)

## It's Your Turn!

In this lesson, you learned how some Black artists worked hard to develop their skills and establish their careers. Now it's your turn to start turning *yourself* into an artist. Here are two projects that will help you develop an artist's vision.

- ❖ **Flip, Quarter, and Copy.** An artist sees the world in terms of lines, angles, shapes, colors, and patterns. Copying a piece of art can help you focus on those elements. Print a picture of the art you want to copy. Then turn the picture upside down. Use a pencil and ruler to divide the picture into quarters. Then, on a piece of drawing paper, copy the art in each quarter. Use the grid lines to help you copy accurately.
- ❖ **Solve a Picture Puzzle.** [Google Arts & Culture's Puzzle Party game](#) contains dozens of puzzles that you can assemble into works of art. To solve the puzzles, you must notice shapes, lines, colors, and patterns. You can have fun while you train your artist's eye!

## Answers

### African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond

1. The exhibit contains work from the early 1920s into the 2000s. The earliest work dates from 1922 and the latest from 2002.
2. Artists shared connections to Howard University, the Harlem Renaissance, the rural South, and to art studies in Paris, Haiti, and Cuba.
3. Answers will vary. Analysis and opinions should be supported by details from the art or text.

### Palmer C. Hayden Collection

1. Hayden received prizes and other support from the Harmon Foundation.
2. Answers will vary. Descriptions should include details from the art.
3. Hayden's urban scenes show people in clubs or apartments or outside surrounded by buildings. In the scenes from the South, the people are surrounded by nature. The urban scenes are funnier, and the southern scenes are more sentimental. Both groups of paintings show the everyday lives of Black people.

### Gordon Parks: A Harlem Family 1967

1. Parks shot the photos in the summer of 1967. They appeared in the March 8, 1968, issue of *Life* magazine.
2. Parks communicates feelings of sadness and despair and hoped that viewers would respond with outrage over racism and poverty and compassion toward their victims.
3. Answers will vary but should be supported with details from the photos.

### A Constellation

1. The exhibit was on display at The Studio Museum in Harlem from November 12, 2015, to March 6, 2016.
2. Al Loving, Hugo McCloud, Torkwase Dyson, Jack Whitten. Descriptions will vary.
3. Answers will vary but should be supported with details from the art and text.

### Quiz

1. James VanDerZee was a photographer.
2. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) hired and supported Black artists during the Great Depression.
3. Palmer Hayden created twelve paintings in honor of John Henry.
4. Palmer Hayden painted the John Henry series between 1944 and 1947.
5. Gordon Parks described his camera as "a weapon of protest."
6. Gordon Parks produced many of his photo essays for *Life* magazine.
7. Elizabeth Catlett made sculptures in stone, wood, and metal.
8. Contemporary Black artists express themselves through painting, sculpture, collage, photography, dance, quilting, ceramics, and performance art.