

# Activity: Dynamic Collages inspired by Jacob Lawrence

Using the visual art medium of collage, students will recreate one of the portraits discussed in the style of noted African-American painter Jacob Lawrence.

## Students will:

- Become acquainted with the artistic technique of collage.
- Be introduced to the work of noted African-American painter Jacob Lawrence.
- Analyze the paintings of notable African-Americans from Oklahoma in the Capitol Art Collection.
- Create their own original artwork.

## PASS Objectives Addressed:

Grade 4- The Arts

Standard 1: 1,2,3,4

Standard 2: 3

Standard 3:1,2,3

High School- Visual Arts

Standard 1:1,2

Standard 3:1,3

Standard 4:2

## Materials

Black, white, or gray construction paper (12" X 18") for each student

Various colors of construction paper (9" x 12")

Scissors

Glue

Sketch paper

Pencils

## Vocabulary

Background - part of the picture plane that seems furthest from the viewer usually in the upper portion of the image.

Collage - twentieth-century technique of making art in which various materials, such as paper, photographs, fabric, string, etc., are pasted on a flat surface.

Composition - arrangement of objects, shapes, colors in a work of art.

Foreground - part of the picture plane that seems closest to the viewer, usually in the lower portion of the image.

Middle ground - area of a picture between foreground and background

Medium - material used by an artist to produce a work of art. May also refer to the liquid mixed with pigment to make paint.

Palette - (1) A tray or board on which colors of paint are mixed. (2) The set of colors used by an artist in a work of art.

Repetition – This term refers to a way of combining the elements of art so that the same elements are used over and over again. For example, a certain color or shape might be used several times in the same picture.

## Introduction

### A. Notable African-Americans from Oklahoma

Begin the lesson by introducing the student to the notable African-Americans from Oklahoma who are included in the Capitol Art Collection. This includes:

- [Edward P. McCabe](#)
- [Albert Comstock Hamlin](#)
- [Benjamin Harrison Hill](#)
- [Roscoe Dunjee](#)
- [Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher](#)
- [John Hope Franklin](#)

Resources are linked to each painting which offer details and information to help the teacher guide a class discussion about the artwork.

Ask the students:

- What is similar about each of these people?
- What is different about them?
- Why do these people deserve to be recognized in the Capitol Art Collection?

### B. Jacob Lawrence

Next, introduce the students to Jacob Lawrence.

Jacob Lawrence was an African-American painter who concentrated on depicting the history and struggles of African-Americans. His work often portrayed important periods in African-American history. Lawrence is said to have been the most celebrated African-American painter in the country.

Lawrence described his distinct style as “dynamic cubism.” He was most recognized for his limited color palettes and simple compositions. The colors he used were bold and reflected those of his home of Harlem. Repetition of shape was often an important element used in his compositions.

Like the subjects of the portraits associated with this activity, Lawrence also overcame racial discrimination. In 1941, Lawrence became the first African-American artist whose artwork was included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, where he had a solo exhibition in 1944.

In addition to his accomplishments as an artist, Lawrence was also enlisted in the United States Coast Guard and served with the first racially integrated crew in World War II.

Ask the students:

- How is Jacob Lawrence similar to the Oklahomans we discussed earlier?
- How is he different?

### C. The Artwork of Jacob Lawrence

Introduce the students to Lawrence's artwork through the following links. Explore several of Lawrence's works.

[Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series by The Phillips Collection](#)

[Jacob Lawrence: Exploring Stories by Whitney Museum of American Art](#)

[The Life and Art of Jacob Lawrence Teacher's Manual by the New Orleans Museum of Art](#)

Ask the students:

- What is Jacob Lawrence's artwork about?
- Why did the artist make artwork about these subjects?
- Would Jacob Lawrence have been an appropriate artist to create paintings about the Oklahomans we discussed earlier?
- Why or why not?

### D. The Artistic Style of Jacob Lawrence

Next, steer the class discussion towards Lawrence's artistic style. Ask the students:

- What is similar about each of Lawrence's paintings?  
(*bold colors, repeated colors, strong shapes, repeated shapes, strong lines, little detail*)

Focus on one painting from The Migration Series to explore the artistic style. Ask the students:

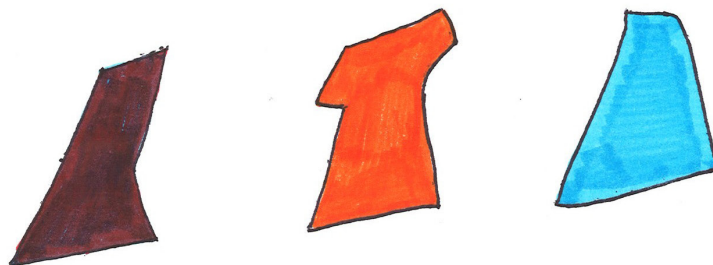
- Is the artwork composed using a vertical or horizontal layout and why?
- (Most, but not all portraits are done in a vertical format; and most, but not all landscapes are done in a horizontal format.)
- What is in the background?
- What is in the middle ground?
- What is in the foreground?
- How does the artist distinguish between the "grounds"?:  
(*by varying the size of the shapes, from smallest in background to largest in foreground*)
- What shapes do you see repeated in the painting?
- Why do some shapes overlap?  
(*to create depth through layers*)

### E. Collage

Now introduce the students to the artistic style of collage. Explain that collage is medium in which to create a work of art. Collage comes from the French work *coller* which means to glue.

In many collages, artists layer shapes, color, and other items onto a single surface to create a multi-layered composition with the illusion of depth. In collage, there is often a background, middle ground, and foreground. Explore various works of collage such as Peter Blake's [\*On the Balcony\*](#), the illustrations for [\*The Very Hungry Caterpillar\*](#) by Eric Carle, and [\*Newspaper and Fruit Dish\*](#) by Juan Gris. A variety of examples can be found by doing an internet [image search](#).

With the class, look again at the Jacob Lawrence painting you discussed in part D. Ask the class to imagine that instead of paint, the artwork was made up of individual colored shapes layered to make up the final composition. For instance, if you were looking at [\*In the North the Negro had better educational facilities\*](#), the dresses would be made up of the



following colored shapes:

Other shapes for the girls' bodies, hair, chalkboard, and wall would also be needed for the composition.

Look again at the painting you discussed earlier. Ask the students:

- How would the artist create the illusion of depth with the flat shapes?  
(by layering and overlapping the shapes to create a background, middle ground, and foreground)
- In what order do you think the artist would place the individual shapes onto the paper?  
(background to foreground)
- How would the artist know where to place the items?  
(He would probably make a sketch with pencil first to visualize the pieces and their placement on the paper.)

## Create

A. Instruct the students to choose a painting from the following list to create a Lawrence-style collage:

- [\*Edward P. McCabe\*](#)
- [\*Albert Comstock Hamlin\*](#)
- [\*Benjamin Harrison Hill\*](#)
- [\*Roscoe Dunjee\*](#)
- [\*Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher\*](#)
- [\*John Hope Franklin\*](#)

B. Guide the students in creating their collage using the following steps:

1. Study the painting they chose and think about what shapes make up the background, middle ground, and foreground.
2. Think about what shapes make up the features of the face, such as the nose, eyes, mouth, and ears.
3. Sketch a rough draft of the picture you will construct from cut paper. Pay careful attention to the size and placement of each object.
4. Begin with a piece of black, white, or grey construction paper (12" x 18") on which you

will attach all the other shapes. This will act as your background. Decide the orientation of your picture (landscape or portrait).

5. Cut the main pieces first, such as the head, neck, and shoulders, and decide on their placement.
6. Glue the main shapes onto the large piece of construction paper.
7. Experiment with pieces that will make up the features of the face and clothing. Practice overlapping the pieces to create a sense of space or depth. Change the size and/or placement of the pieces as needed.
8. Glue all the shapes to complete the collage.

Use the questions on the Final Analysis and Criticism PDF to assess the students knowledge of the artist, art techniques, as well as the subject of their art. In addition, the following links will guide you through formal assessment and critique:

[Formal Visual Analysis: The Elements & Principles of Composition](#)  
[Teaching Students to Critique](#)  
[Art Critiques Made Easy](#)