

Elementary Education

Using Art to Teach History to Young Learners

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Conventionally, the elementary social studies students' curriculum examines heroes and heroines. Yet there are many ways one becomes a hero or heroine and only a few of these are explored in textbooks. Bernice Sims, for example was a voting rights activist in the 1960s, and later documented that era as a folk artist. As the sole provider for her six children, she hesitated to take part in demonstrations that might have caused her to lose her job.¹ After her retirement, she used her artistic talents to illustrate the events and experiences of her life, and thus became known as a "memory painter."

This article describes how using authentic artwork, such as that of Bernice Sims, as an instructional strategy can help young learners inquire about historical events. The accompanying lesson illustrates how to use Sims's works and life experiences to gain new perspectives and a greater understanding of the civil rights movement and social justice issues in 1965.

Bernice Sims witnessed a state troopers' attack on marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on Bloody Sunday. This experience, and her work as an activist in the civil rights movement, led her to paint about this time. The painting used in this lesson is called *The Selma Bridge Crossing* (above); a variation of the painting was selected by the U.S. Postal Service to memorialize the Selma



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March (page 313). The march was one of 10 events of the civil rights movement commemorated in the "To Form A More Perfect Union" stamp series.

Gaining the right to vote was a long and difficult quest for many Americans. African Americans who attempted to register to vote in many southern cities during the Jim Crow era had to overcome a series of obstacles, including answering unanswerable questions such as "How many bubbles are in this bar of soap?" Adding to the difficulty, the voter registration office was open only a few hours a month. Yet no number of insulting comments, threats, injuries, jail, or deaths would

stop people's efforts to register.

Our nation has a haunting past of bigotry, hatred, and discrimination, and we still see a huge gap between valuing democracy and the reality of how the pluralistic society in the U.S. lives up to the ideal of justice and equality. The coordinate concepts of justice and human dignity are foremost components of a social studies curriculum encompassing civil rights. However, careful examination of these ideals is too often left out of the social studies curriculum. Among the curriculum questions needed to address issues related to civil rights are the following:

- Who are people who have been proponents of democracy, justice, and equality?
- Who has documented the history of the United States?
- How do history books document the courage of people of color or those who have defended their rights in our democracy?
- What important information is hidden or omitted from text used by our students?
- Is “liberty and justice for all” a reality?
- How do we make civil rights, justice, and equality a certainty in today’s world?
- How can the skills of looking, thinking, asking, and reflecting deeply be practiced and applied in confronting the learning of civil rights in the social studies?

Banks suggests a plethora of resources including the in-depth study of role models, artwork, and historical documents to promote democratic and pluralistic ideals.² When using artwork, depth of content is added by focusing on the following:

- Learning the geography of the place portrayed in the artwork.
- Envisioning issues students may or may not have encountered or considered previously.
- Viewing life or issues from another’s perspective.
- Inquiring and researching to gain new details about the era.
- Reflecting on changes in the way they view the artist’s work.
- Giving opportunities to recommend ways in which they can disseminate information learned to share with others.
- Offering solutions to solve a social issue that students identify by studying the hero.

Time and Space Context of Pettus Bridge Paintings

Historically, the legal segregation of African Americans in the South following the Civil War was referred

to as “Jim Crow.” Jim Crow laws were the basis for preventing Blacks from registering to vote. In 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., arrived in Selma to lead peaceful demonstrations protesting discriminatory voting practices.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge extends across the Alabama River on the southern edge of Selma. Almost 600 non-violent demonstrators started over the bridge on Sunday afternoon, March 7th, on their way to Montgomery, Alabama. State troopers met them before they ever crossed the bridge, telling them to turn back. When the marchers stood firm, with eyes cast downward, they were brutally assaulted with clubs, tear gas, and cattle prods; thus the day became known as “Bloody Sunday.”³ Bernice Sims lived in Brewton, Alabama, but was in Selma that day and has painted her experiences.

A Selma to Montgomery march took place once again on March 21st. Federal protection was granted to the scores of protesters who had come from all over the United States to join in solidarity for voting and civil rights. President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, five months later. This legislation terminated discriminatory voter registration and unjust voting practices imposed upon people of color.

Summary

There are many other artists whose works teachers can utilize. Two African American artists whose works portray justice issues that usually are not presented in textbooks are Jacob Lawrence and Lorenzo Pace. The life and art of Jacob Lawrence encapsulates much of the bigotry and struggles of African American history, especially in regards to employment discrimination. References to his work are available at www.whitney.org/jacoblawrence and www.whitney.org/jacoblawrence/art/index.html.

Lorenzo Pace’s story and accompanying artwork in *Jalani and the Lock* tells the true story of a young boy, Jalani, kidnapped from his home in western

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Online Resources

For more details about Sims’s life, including work in the voter registration movement and to see additional paintings, consult the following websites:

www.voicesofcivilrights.org/civil5_2004_04_bs.html

www.marciaweberartobjects.com/sims.html

www.yarddog.com/catalog.php?category=9

www.americanprofile.com/issues/20030921/20030921_3353.asp

www.crmvet.org/vet/simsb.htm

athomegallery.com/bio_bs.htm

www.gingeryoung.com

www.agiftedeye.com/sims.html

Additional Resource on Civil Rights for Children and Youth

Jim Crow Laws: www.nps.gov/malu/documents/jim_crow_laws.htm.



Bernice Sims’s painting was celebrated in the 2005 “To Form A More Perfect Union” stamp series.

Using Artwork by Bernice Sims

Name of the Painting: *The Selma Bridge Crossing*

Artist: Bernice Sims

Exploratory Introduction

Objective: Students examine the painting and stamp, making observations and generalizations about the event shown in the painting.

Copies of the picture and the postal stamp can be downloaded from these two sites: www.marciaweberartobjects.com/sims.html and www.outsider-folk-art.org/outsider/education/news.asp. Teachers may also wish to purchase the postal stamps series “To Form A More Perfect Union” and the series of stamps on postcards. A DVD is also available for purchase.

Evaluate this examination based on students’ willingness to offer observations and generalizations, rather than on the correctness of their observations.

Procedures

1. In small groups, students examine the artwork and record their observations.
2. Tell students to describe what they see in the picture. Encourage students to note the particular colors, shapes, patterns, and textures. Ask students to look for themes or messages in the picture. Have students write answers to the following questions: What feelings do the pictures generate in you? What do you think are the personal characteristics of the artist who painted these pictures?
3. Have groups share their lists and ideas with the entire class and identify similarities and differences.
4. Review the students’ conclusions and generalizations about the pictures and artist.

Development of the Lesson

Objective 1: Given teacher assistance and guiding questions, students examine the artwork for additional details and revise their generalizations.

Evaluate objective 1 on the willingness of students to look for more details and to make logical conclusions based on the new facts they observe.

Objective 2: Given teacher questions, as a class the students examine the physical characteristics of the painting.

Evaluate objective 2 for correct and logical answers to the questions.

Objective 3: Students ask their own additional questions related to the picture, artist, and the event in the picture.

Evaluate objective 3 by the willingness of the students to cooper-

ate and agree to five meaningful questions.

Objective 4: Students conduct research for answers to their questions.

Evaluate objective 4 by willingness to search for answers and by student recognition of important facts.

Objective 5: Given their new information about Bernice Sims and the civil rights movement, students revise their generalizations to make them reflect their new information.

Evaluate objective 5 by the willingness of the students to include new facts as a guide to more accurate conclusions on the event and the role of artists in recording history.

Procedures

1. **Teacher helps students agree on answers to the following questions:**

What groups of people are in the picture? Where is each group? What can we observe about the various people? What is going on in this picture? What do you see in the picture that makes you say that? Can we speculate on where the scene took place? When do you think the event shown in the picture took place? What else do you notice about the time of the event?

2. **Teacher helps students examine the artist’s technique through questions:**

What do you think the different lines in the picture signify or mean? What are the characteristics of the various lines (thick, thin, straight, curved)? Why do you think the lines are painted in this way? How are colors and texture used? What do you think the artist was trying to tell us with this picture? Do you think the artist is a man or a woman? Do you know anything about the history of the Edmund Pettus Bridge?

Review what the students think about the picture. Have a show of hands on their conclusions about what they think of the pictures. Use such prompts as: Who thinks the event shows a happy event? Sad? Dangerous? Exciting? An important or unimportant event in the history of the United States?

3. **Give the students five minutes to work in their small groups and decide on several questions that they would ask the artist. Students share their groups’ questions and work as a class to agree on five questions. Ask the students for suggestions on how they can find the answers to their questions.**

4. **Tell the students the name of the artist. Use the urls in the online resources section on the artist and the civil rights movement,**

in addition to literature for children, to provide the information needed. The sites provide biographical information, additional paintings, and an interview. Consult a map to locate Alabama, Montgomery, Selma, and the site of the Pettus Bridge.

5. Review the conclusions students made about the paintings. In a class discussion, have students share their ideas and feelings on the following questions:

Do you want to change any of the conclusions we made about the paintings because of something new you have learned from the readings or websites? Do you think that Bernice Sims's work has made a difference in history? How do you think that using art as a means of expressing her experiences helped this artist to understand the importance or meaning of civil rights? How do her paintings help you to understand life in the South and the civil rights movement? Which of the two paintings do you think is a better presentation of the events at the Pettus Bridge? Why do you think that Bernice Sims painted so many versions of the Pettus Bridge events on Bloody Sunday? Have students answer questions following their research; discuss and document their findings.

Lesson Expansion Objectives:

1. Students apply their newly learned ideas about color, texture, and details by becoming memory artists and painting events

from their own lives.

2. Students explain their drawings to their classmates by providing an explanation of the event and the techniques and choices they selected for their illustrations.

Evaluate the drawings on the totality of the event illustrated, the explanation to the class, and the use of multiple types of lines and textures. Evaluate the presentations on how the students relate their stories and indicate the content and style elements used in the picture.

Procedures:

1. Provide crayons, paint, colored pencils, and drawing paper for students' use in completing the assignment. Review and encourage the students to use some of the same techniques of color, lines, and texture that artists, such as Bernice Sims, use in their own drawings. Assign students to make their own drawings that tell a story about a historical event. Tell the students to give their picture a short title and to write an explanation or poem about the event shown in their pictures.
2. Display the artwork in the room and call upon students to relate or read their explanations to the class. Look for common themes in their works of art and in the use of color or lines and texture to help deliver the message about the events.

Africa, and of a lock passed down through his family. ⁴ Pace's artwork and historical non-fiction site is www.lorenzopace.com/drpace/sartwork.htm.

Artwork provides an important record of history and culture. Creating works of art is of interest to young learners and can be a means of applying what they have learned and disseminating the information to inform others, or can help resolve issues students have identified through the in-depth study of heroes and heroines through artwork. Lessons examining the works of artists help both beginning and more accomplished readers and writers to examine such NCSS Curriculum Standards themes as ❶ Culture; ❷ Time, Continuity, and Change; ❸ People, Places, and Environments; and ❹ Civic Ideals and Practices in their quests to learn more about the world in which they live. 📖

Notes

1. Claudia Dreifus, "I Painted Those Scenes to Get Them Out of My System," *Voices of Civil Rights*, a joint project of AARP (American Association of

- Retired Persons), the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and the Library of Congress (April 2004).
2. J. A. Banks, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2006).
 3. Sheyann Webb, Rachel West Nelson, and Frank Sikora, *Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil Rights Days* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1980); Marilyn Miller, *The Bridge at Selma* (Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett Press, 1984).
 4. Lorenzo Pace, *Jalani and the Lock* (New York: PowerKids Press, 2001).

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