



Smithsonian American Art Museum

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS AFFIRMATION TODAY

FROM THE SERIES  
AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

## EDUCATION AND EQUITY

## UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. TO DISCOVER  
THE EFFECT OF  
EDUCATION UPON  
PEOPLE AND THEIR  
COMMUNITIES

2. TO DEMONSTRATE  
THE DIFFERENT  
WAYS ARTISTS HAVE  
RESPONDED TO THE  
CULTURAL AND  
EDUCATIONAL  
OPPORTUNITIES  
AVAILABLE TO THEM

African Americans traditionally have viewed education as the way to provide better opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities. Before the Civil War, slaves were usually forbidden from learning to read and write. Those few who could read were forbidden from doing so. Following the war, the Freedmen's Bureau helped to establish schools for blacks in the South.

In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v Ferguson* that if blacks were granted separate but equal accommodations, it was legal to bar them from schools, theaters, and restaurants reserved for whites. This ruling remained in effect in public schools until *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. In this decision, the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional because "separate but equal" facilities were inherently unequal and violated the equal protection of civil rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

The ruling was challenged in many school districts. Students were subjected to mob violence and angry protests. The National Guard was used in some towns to protect black students as they entered and studied at previously all-white schools, as in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 sought to end segregation by linking discriminatory practices to a loss of federal funds for public education.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, some school districts across the country were under federal court orders to eliminate segregation. Busing students to achieve racial balances that the courts had established was one method, but not the only method, used to desegregate public schools. Although black and white students had been bused for years, the use of busing to achieve racial integration was opposed by many



whites and some blacks. In some places schools were boycotted, buses were stoned and dynamited in protest. The U.S. Supreme Court continued to support integration and ruled in favor of several efforts involving busing plans. Also, the establishment of the U.S. Department of Education in 1979 was seen by many as a positive measure to ensure quality education for all students in American schools.

## PUBLIC SCHOOLS

### BACKGROUND

The majority of African-American children attended segregated public schools during the first half of the twentieth century, whether they lived in the South or the North. Many southern states had laws requiring separate schools for black and white children. In fact, the “separate but equal” precedent, upheld in 1896 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, permitted most states to enforce strict segregation policies in educating black children and to continue those practices well into the twentieth century. Blacks who migrated from the South to the North found that some public schools were integrated, yet most northern states preferred to provide separate schools for black children. In 1900, New York was the first state to prohibit segregated public schools.

Public schools for black children were seldom equal. Often they were impoverished and ill equipped, with faculty and staff paid less and making do with second-hand supplies. Disparities between funds allocated to black and white schools were greater in the South than in the North; thus black schools in the North had better facilities. Northern states also adopted compulsory education laws that required students



Allan Rohan Crite, born 1910

*School's Out*, 1936

oil on canvas

76.9 x 91.8 cm (30 1/4 x 36 1/8 in.)

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian

Institution, transfer from the Museum of Modern Art

to remain in school. As a result, blacks who attended school in the North usually stayed in school longer and often completed high school.

### LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Young girls of various ages and complexions leave their school on a sunny day. They form an orderly queue until they step onto the sidewalk and street in front of the black iron fence; then they romp and play with zest. Some stroll with their mothers, others play with friends or engage in argument. The red brick of the buildings forms a backdrop for these colorful vignettes.

### COMMENTARY

Like many industrial cities in the North, Boston experienced population shifts because of the migra-

tion of southern blacks between the world wars. The Roxbury neighborhood, south of Boston proper, was known for its classic red-brick buildings surrounded by wrought-iron fences. The community became a predominantly black neighborhood during the 1920s and 1930s.

Allan Rohan Crite was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, and moved to Roxbury as a youth. He took classes at the Massachusetts School of Art after he finished high school. Later he studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 1933 and 1934 he participated in the Works Progress Administration (WPA). He continues to live and work in Roxbury.

*School's Out* is one of several works Crite created in the 1930s. Inspired by events in his community, the artist conceived a series of paintings to chronicle familiar places and occurrences with truth and objectivity. Crite described his intent as that of an “artist-reporter.”

#### ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. Examine the painting carefully. Describe how the artist suggests that this might be the start of summer vacation (the bright colors, short sleeves, the month and date following the artist’s signature).
2. Research the educational efforts for and by African Americans, especially the role of educators such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Booker T. Washington. Create a timeline of significant events.
3. Conduct an oral history project with people in your community to determine what educational opportunities were available before 1964 and what changes have occurred since then.
4. Invite community leaders who have helped improve the quality of education in your community

to speak about their role in enriching the educational institutions in your area.

5. Select a group of figures in the painting *School's Out*. Designate teams of artist-reporters to create an imaginary dialogue among these figures. Then assign teams to illustrate and document important events in your school or community.

## LIBRARIES

#### BACKGROUND

Libraries have existed for thousands of years. It was not until the fifteenth century in Europe, however, that the use of the word library, derived from the Latin *liber* meaning book, was used to describe a particular room or building set aside for a collection of books. Libraries vary in size, function, and type. They range from national libraries such as the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., one of the largest in the world, to the public libraries that can be found in most communities.

African-American associations established libraries for black patrons early in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the twentieth century, the desire for literacy and educational advancement stimulated organizations to request the right to use main public libraries or create branch libraries in black communities.

The artist Jacob Lawrence spent many hours in the 135th Street Public Library, which was the local public library in Harlem in the 1930s. The white librarian at the time, Ernestine Rose, desired to make all members of the community aware of their history and cultural heritage by holding art exhibi-





Jacob Lawrence, born 1917  
*The Library*, 1960  
 tempera on fiberboard  
 60.9 x 75.8 cm (24 x 29 7/8 in.)  
 National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian  
 Institution, gift of S. C. Johnson and Son, Inc.

tions at the library. Performances and lectures were presented in the library's auditorium.

The 135th Street library housed the largest accumulation of black studies materials in the world. Many of these materials were acquired in 1926 from Arthur A. Schomburg, who was born in Puerto Rico of West Indian and German parentage. Schomburg, a bibliophile, began as a young man to collect books about African Americans. The collection, now called the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, is internationally acclaimed.

#### LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Fourteen figures are present in this setting that appears cordial and inviting in spite of the absence of windows and doors. Warm ochers and browns suggest tables, chairs, and floor made from various types

of wood. Purple, red, green, gold, and black enliven the readers and the books they concentrate upon so eagerly.

#### COMMENTARY

At the Harlem YMCA, Jacob Lawrence met Charles C. "Professor" Seifert, a black lecturer and historian who had collected a large library of African and African-American literature. Seifert encouraged Lawrence to visit the Schomburg collection at the 135th Street library in Harlem to read about African and African-American culture. He also invited Lawrence to use his personal library and to visit the Museum of Modern Art's 1935 exhibition of African art.

*The Library*, Lawrence's view of a library filled with African-American readers, no doubt recalls these childhood experiences. Lawrence used the library to conduct research for several of his paintings, including the series *The Migration of the Negro* and *Struggle: From the History of the American People*. In his work called *The Curator* he depicted Arthur Schomburg among the bookshelves in the Schomburg collection.

Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and grew up in Harlem during the early 1930s. He attended public schools and participated in after-school arts and crafts activities at a local community center. Lawrence received formal training at various Harlem art workshops sponsored by the federal government under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the first of which was located in the New York Public Library at 135th Street.

#### ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. Describe the ways Jacob Lawrence used color to tie the separate scenes in the library together.
2. Did Lawrence actually see the scene he painted? What in the painting suggests that he used his imagination?

3. Research the library in your community. Conduct interviews with librarians and individuals to find out the role of the library in community affairs.

4. Research the lives of early African-American bibliophiles, such as Arthur A. Schomburg, Jesse E. Moorland, Henry P. Slaughter, and Wendell P. Dabney, to learn about their collections, some of which were acquired by colleges and universities.

5. The importance of literacy and reading can be traced throughout African-American history. Using *A Negro Library Is Founded*, discuss the historical significance of libraries in black communities.

We, the people of color of this city, being deeply impressed with the necessity of promoting among our rising youth, a proper cultivation for literary pursuits and the improvement of the faculties and powers of their minds, deem it necessary to state for the information of our friends wherever situated, that we have succeed[ed] in organizing an institution under the title of “the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored persons.”

It will be perceived that this is not a mere fractional effort, the design of any single society among us, of which we are proud it can with truth be said there are many, all having originated for our mutual benefit and improvement; neither is it sectarian, but its features are such as to embrace the entire population of the City of Philadelphia, as its name imports.

In accordance with which we most respectfully appeal to the friends of science and of the people of color, for such books or other donations as will facilitate the object of this institution.

—Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Negro Library Is Founded, 1833*, in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1951), pp. 138–139.

## THE ARTS

### BACKGROUND

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

—Langston Hughes, excerpt from *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, in *Children of Promise* (New York: Abrams, 1991), p. 8.

After Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933, he initiated several federally sponsored social programs that benefited African-American artists. Some artists were employed to decorate buildings and public sites when the Public Works of Art Program was formed. Later, when the Works Progress Administration was founded and the Federal Art Project was established, jobs were created in the visual arts, writing, and theater. Thousands of artists throughout the country received assistance and produced thousands of creative endeavors.

Community cultural centers and art workshops were funded in several cities across the nation. In Harlem, free classes were taught by professional artists such as Augusta Savage, Charles H. Alston, and William H. Johnson.

### LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Two girls are absorbed in art class. They sit on the edge of their seats, leaning over inclined drawing



tables. One wears a blue dress with a red and white apron, the other, a white blouse and green skirt. A small orange stool in the foreground holds a palette with circles of paint colors: red, yellow, green, blue, black. The students have just begun their work.

### COMMENTARY

As part of the WPA Federal Art Project, William H. Johnson taught painting at the Harlem Community Art Center in 1939. There he met an important group of black painters and sculptors: Jacob Lawrence, Gwendolyn Knight, Selma Burke, and Norman Lewis. This was an exciting time for black artists and intellectuals, perhaps even more so than the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, because during the 1940s artists and intellectuals achieved wider recognition and greater financial reward for their accomplishments.

Johnson was born in Florence, South Carolina. In his youth he realized that it would be impossible for him to become an artist in the segregated South. In 1918 he went to New York City and studied at the National Academy of Design. In spite of superior performance at the academy, he knew that any black artist would encounter difficulties in America. Upon graduation in 1926, Johnson moved to Europe, where he studied and worked for twelve years. He returned to the United States on the eve of World War II and joined the Federal Art Project.

### ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

1. William H. Johnson was employed to teach art classes when the country was at war. Discuss reasons why the arts would continue and even flourish during times of war.

2. Using the excerpt from *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, discuss the prejudices and triumphs African-American artists have experienced.



William H. Johnson, 1901–1970

*Art Class*, ca. 1939–1940

oil on plywood

83.5 x 73.6 cm (32 7/8 x 29 in.)

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, gift of the Harmon Foundation

3. Research the WPA Federal Art Project. Were artists in your state employed? If so, what types of works did they create: paintings or sculptures for public sites, plays, literary works?

4. Invite local artists or art instructors to discuss their art school experiences. Did they attend large or small art schools? Did they travel outside their states to attend school? Why or why not? Did they study with other artists?

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