

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?