

African American Artists

Protesting Racism/Celebrating Strength

Overview: After completing this activity, students will have a better understanding of the effects of racism, as well as some of the techniques that can be used to communicate complex ideas both visually and verbally.

Age Group/Grade Level: 13-17 years, grades 8-12

Subject Area: English/Language Arts, Visual Arts

Duration: approximately 60 min.

Background

Herbert Singleton carved and painted this visual protest against racism in America on an old door. A black nanny cradles a white baby, a slave master holds a whip, slaves carry cotton, and a Klansman oversees a lynching. A dancing Uncle Tom in the upper right, “playing two ends against the people,” is a man unafraid of his oppressor, but still the victim of injustice and hatred.

“This is the way we was, take us as we are, Uncle Tom is dead.”
—Herbert Singleton

Discussion

Share Herbert Singleton’s *The Way We Was* with students. Consider posing the following questions:

- What do you notice first about this artwork? How has the artist drawn your attention to those images?
- Starting at the top left and working to the bottom right, let’s focus on just the images. What story does each [vignette](#) tell? What role does each figure play in that story?
- What story do the vignettes tell when taken together? Why might they be arranged as they are? What meaning does this arrangement add to the story?
- The artist has painted the title, *The Way We Was*, at the top of this artwork. How does that influence your interpretation of the story?
- The artist has painted this whole artwork on a door. How does his choice of materials contribute to the meaning?



Herbert Singleton, [The Way We Was](#), 1990, carved and painted wood, metal locks and hinges, 97 x 38 1/2 x 2 1/2 in., Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1997.124.88.

Activity

Have small groups of students read and annotate Alice Walker’s *Women* (on page 2). Encourage each group to write questions in the margin, mark phrases that indicate the poem’s meaning, and highlight specific ideas that support the poem’s overall theme.

Have small groups explore links between the artwork and the poem. Encourage each group to annotate a reproduction of *The Way We Was* with passages from the poem.

Have students reflect on their activities as a large group. Consider posing the following questions:

- How are the artist’s and author’s depictions of African Americans different or similar? Why might they differ?
- How has racism affected people in each of these works?
- What has changed over time in each work? Why have those changes come to pass? What could bring about positive changes in the future?
- What message does each work seem to be sending?

For a full-size image of Herbert Singleton’s *The Way We Was*, visit:

https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1997.124.88_1

Women

Alice Walker

They were women then
My mama's generation
Husky of voice—stout of
Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts
How they led
Armies
Headragged generals
Across mined
Fields
Booby-trapped
Ditches
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what
we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves.

Walker, Alice. *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973. Reprinted by permission of The Joy Harris Literary Agency, Inc.