

Art and Life of William H. Johnson: Rural Life in South Carolina Grades K-2

This lesson has been adapted from *Art and Life of William H. Johnson: A Guide for Teachers*, produced by the education department of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (<http://americanart.si.edu/education/guides/whj>).

Learning Standards

These standards are achieved through guided work with the teacher.

U.S. History (from the National Center for History in the Schools)

- Topic 1. Living and Working Together in Families and Communities, Now and Long Ago
 - Standard 1. Students understand family life now and in the recent past, and family life in various places long ago.
 - Standard 2. History of students' local community and how communities in North America varied long ago.

Visual Arts (from the National Art Education Association)

- N-VA.3. Visual Arts: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.
- N-VA.4. Visual Arts: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Language Arts (from the National Council of Teachers of English)

- N.12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Objectives

- To examine two works by the artist William H. Johnson
- To understand how a painting can tell a story
- To develop vocabulary using a painting as a prompt

Duration

One 45-minute class

Key Concepts

- William H. Johnson painted images from his own life.
- A painting tells a story through shapes, colors, objects, and activities.

Vocabulary

shapes, colors, objects, activities, family, community

Materials and Reproducibles

- William H. Johnson, *Early Morning Work*, ca. 1940, oil on burlap, 38 ½ x 45 5/8 in. (97.8 x 115.9 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation [\[link\]](#)
- William H. Johnson, *Cotton Pickers*, ca. 1940, watercolor and pencil on paper sheet, 10 ¾ x 11 ½ in. (27.4 x 29.2 cm) irregular. Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation [\[link\]](#)
- Graphic organizer [\[link\]](#)

Background Information (for the teacher)

- Biography of William H. Johnson [\[link\]](#)
- Background information on *Early Morning Work* and *Cotton Pickers* [\[link\]](#)

Part One Listing the pictures' elements

Hand out images of *Early Morning Work* and *Cotton Pickers*, or display them on a computer screen. Working as a class, fill in the columns of the graphic organizer (on the board, chart paper, or the computer) in the following way:

- Ask students to identify all the *colors* found in the paintings.
- Ask them to identify all the *shapes*.
- Ask them to identify plants, animals, farm equipment, and any other *objects*.
- Finally, have them list the *activities* being performed in the paintings. These can include actions that change facial expressions and body posture.

Part Two Creating an artwork

After reviewing the final lists of words, tell students that they will create an artwork (a drawing, painting, or collage) that includes two colors, two shapes, two objects, and two actions from the lists.

Part Three Concluding or extension activity

Working individually, in pairs, or in small groups, students now draw or paint an uninhabited landscape on a large sheet of plain drawing paper or mural-sized craft paper. Next, they cut figures from the prints of Johnson's works and arrange them on their drawn or painted environment. In this way they "collaborate" with William H. Johnson to create a collage.

Additional Resource

A Journey Through Art with W.H. Johnson

<http://americanart.si.edu/education/johnson/index.html>