

Art and Life of William H. Johnson: Rural Life in South Carolina; City Life in Harlem, New York
Grades 3-5

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 five 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

Two 45-minute classes

Key Concepts

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

Vocabulary

shapes, colors, objects, activities, family, community, rural, urban

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 [\[link\]](#)
- William H. Johnson, *Café*, ca. 1939-1940, oil on paperboard, 36 1/2 x 28 3/8 in. (92.7 x 72.2 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation [\[link\]](#)
- William H. Johnson, *Street Life, Harlem*, ca. 1939–40, oil on plywood, 45 3/4 x 38 5/8 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation [\[link\]](#)
- William H. Johnson, *Li'l Sis*, 1944, oil on paperboard, 26 x 21 1/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation [\[link\]](#)
- Graphic organizer [\[link\]](#)
- *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie* by Gwendolyn H. Everett (book)

Background Information (for the teacher)

- Biography of William Henry Johnson [\[link\]](#)
- Background information on *Li'l Sis*, *Early Morning Work*, *Cotton Pickers*, *Café*, and *Street Life, Harlem* [\[link\]](#)

Part One Listing the pictures' elements

Hand out images of *Early Morning Work*, *Cotton Pickers*, *Café*, and *Street Life, Harlem*, 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) by listing:

- the *colors* found in the paintings
- the *shapes*
- the plants, animals, farm equipment, and any other *objects*
- the *activities* being performed, which can include actions that change facial expressions and body posture

Finally, ask the students to guess the time of day the actions are taking place and to explain how they arrived at their conclusions.

Part Two Discussing the pictures

Review the lists of words (colors, shapes, objects, activities) and the students' comments about time of day, and then share additional information about the paintings from the **Background Information** [\[link\]](#) to enhance their understanding.

Follow up with a discussion on the differences between rural and urban life, as seen in the paintings. Ask the class to consider: *How does Johnson portray a sense of place through colors, shapes, and actions?* Record the responses in the bottom section of the graphic organizer.

Part Three Read aloud

1. Introduce the image of *Li'l Sis* and then read the Gwendolyn H. Everett book aloud, paying particular attention to the pages referring to life in New York City and Florence, South Carolina. (Please review the book for mature subject matter before reading it in full to your students.)
2. Consider the images in the book and discuss the ways Johnson portrays urban and rural scenes in these depictions. Do these distinctions fit with the lists that the students generated?

Part Four 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.

An alternate activity, students write a poem or short essay about their own lives in which they use eight words from the list: two colors, two shapes, two objects, and two actions.

Part Five Concluding or extension activity

Provide the students (working as individuals, in pairs, or in small groups) with a large sheet of plain drawing paper or mural-sized craft paper. The students decide if they want to create a rural or an urban scene, and then draw or paint an uninhabited landscape or cityscape. Next, they cut figures from the prints of Johnson's works. They use the figures to fill 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>