

Art of William H. Johnson and Allan Rohan Crite: Rural Life in South Carolina; City Life in Harlem and Boston

Grades 6-8

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>). The lesson also includes works by Allan Rohan Crite from the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and related information from *Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* by Regenia A. Perry.

Learning Standards

These standards are achieved through guided work with the teacher.

Visual Arts (from the National Art Education Association)

- **VA.5.2** - Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry
- **VA.5.3** - Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures

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

- **N.6** - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts (NCTE)

Objectives

- To interpret artworks that tell a story about the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century
- To use descriptive writing to convey personal views of artworks

Duration

Two 45-minute classes

Key Concepts

- William H. Johnson and Allan Rohan Crite created images of their own lives and communities.
- An examination of both rural and urban scenes can enhance our understanding of the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century.

Vocabulary

rural, urban, community, cultural identity, composition, interpretation, medium, portrait

Materials and Reproducibles

Make copies of the following images or display them on a computer screen:

- 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 [\[link\]](#)
- Allan Rohan Crite, *School's Out*, 1936, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 36 1/8 in. (76.9 x 91.8 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, transfer from the Museum of Modern Art [\[link\]](#)
- Allan Rohan Crite, *Sunlight and Shadow*, 1941, oil on board, 25 1/4 x 39 in. (64.2 x 99.1 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, museum purchase [\[link\]](#)

Make copies of the following for individual students or for group work, as you prefer.

- Handout: “Answer These Questions about the Painting” [\[link\]](#)
- Handout “Background Information on *Early Morning Work*, *Cotton Pickers*, *Café*, and *Street Life, Harlem* by William H. Johnson, and *School's Out* and *Sunlight and Shadow* by Allan Rohan Crite” [\[link\]](#)

Background Information (for the teacher)

- Biographies of William Henry Johnson and Allan Rohan Crite [\[link\]](#)
- Also refer to the handout “Background Information on *Early Morning Work*, *Cotton Pickers*, *Café*, and *Street Life, Harlem* by William H. Johnson, and *School's Out* and *Sunlight and Shadow* by Allan Rohan Crite” [\[link\]](#)

Part One Interpretation

1. Tell students that they will be studying the work of two African American artists who, while very different, both wanted to express something about African American experience. Students will *interpret* the paintings to discover the stories they tell, and will create their own titles. Do not reveal any information about the paintings at this point.
2. Divide the class into groups. Each group will work on the handout “Answer These Questions about the Painting.” Assign one of the paintings to each group.

Part Two Looking more closely

1. Reassemble the class to review the answers. Reveal the actual titles of the paintings, comparing them to the titles the students created. Then ask the students to read the “Background Information” handout.
2. Begin a discussion that addresses the following:
 - Does the information from the artists change the students’ interpretations of the paintings?
 - How do the rural and urban scenes compare?
 - Why might both artists have thought it particularly important to draw on their own experiences as African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s?
 - Does anything in the paintings or the artists’ statements relate to the students’ own experiences?

Part Three Widening the subject

1. Explore the online exhibition *Portraits of a City: The Scurlock Photographic Studio’s Legacy to Washington, D.C.* (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/scurlock/>), which documents African American life in Washington during the twentieth century. Preselect images that connect to your curriculum.
2. Ask students to write a paragraph or a short essay about community and cultural identity, comparing and contrasting the photographs and information in the Scurlock exhibition with the paintings in this lesson.

Additional Resources

- *A Journey Through Art with W.H. Johnson*
<http://americanart.si.edu/education/johnson/index.html>
- Oral history interviews with Allan Rohan Crite, 1979–1980, presented by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
<http://74.125.113.132/search?q=cache:mR623GztpAJ:www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/crite79.htm+allan+rohan+crite,+school%27s+out&cd=15&hl=en&ct=cInk&gl=uss>
- *African American History and Cultural Heritage Virtual Tour*
<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/heritage>