AN AMERICAN

"I paint what we Americans know. We're a brand-new race, raised and manufactured in the United States."

—PALMER HAYDEN

I painted this picture because no one would call this young man a painter, they'd call him a janitor.” —Palmer Hayden

When Private Peyton Cole Hedgeman reported to his American Army regiment during World War I (1914-1918), he had to get used to a new name. His white commanding officer couldn’t pronounce Hedgeman, so the young recruit’s name became Palmer Hayden. The fact that this could happen, and that Hayden kept this name for the rest of his life, shows how repressive conditions were for African-Americans a century ago.

After the war, Hayden settled in Harlem in New York City. There he found other black people who had moved North to find work and to escape Southern racism and poor conditions. Among them were writers, musicians, and artists such as Langston Hughes, Bessie Smith, Hale Woodruff, and Lois Mailou (May-LOO) Jones. The period (1919-1929) during which these artists were producing new art forms based on African-American identity became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

With no artistic tradition to guide them, these artists painted from experience. While working as a handyman to support his art, Hayden created The Janitor Who Paints (left). The work’s composition emphasizes the poor conditions in which most African-Americans lived. Every space is filled; objects overlap and interlock. Circular shapes—the garbage can, palette, clock, heads, cat—are repeated and arranged to guide the viewer’s eye through the work to its focal point—the tip of the artist’s brush. The title makes a statement about the social place African-Americans found themselves in during the 1920s and 1930s—janitor first, artist second.

Many artists such as Hale Woodruff painted African-American life in the South. In works such as Picking Cotton (below right) the artist simplifies and abstracts real scenes, transforming his figures into universal symbols of an oppressed people. Their solid, dark shapes stand out against the linear patterns of the cotton. The bright, intense colors of the workers contrast with the light background tints.

Lois Mailou Jones was one of the first to use African imagery. In her painting (above right), the artist combines five African masks, a necklace, and a red sculpture. These items represent African religious symbols meant to protect the wearer from harm. The different masks dissolve into one another, suggesting the great variety of African cultures. The sharp angles, slashing line patterns, stripes, diagonals, and dark colors give the work an exotic, quality that fascinated, yet threatened viewers of the time. Lois Mailou Jones—who died just five years ago at the age of 93—was among the pioneers of African-American art.

△ "The French were so inspiring. The color of my skin didn't matter in Paris and that is why I was encouraged to paint." — Lois Mailou Jones


△ "There is something in Black art which is absent from the art of other people." — Hale Woodruff

Hale Woodruff (1900-1990); Picking Cotton; 1950; Oil on canvas; 30 in. x 22 in.; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Purchase with High Museum of Art Enhancement Fund, 2000.
WILLIAM H. JOHNSON
Visions of Harlem

“My travels have taught me that, in order to create, an artist must live and paint in his own environment.”
—WILLIAM H. JOHNSON

Another important artist associated with the Harlem Renaissance was William H. Johnson. Born in 1901 in South Carolina, Johnson left in 1918 for New York City. Work as a porter, cook, and dock worker allowed him to save enough money to study at a top New York art school. Johnson soon became aware of the many obstacles he would face as a black artist in America, so he left for Paris to study and paint. For 12 years, the artist lived in France, Norway, and Denmark, where he met and married a Danish textile designer. In 1938, before World War II began, Johnson returned to New York City and Harlem. He came back because of the war, but also because he needed to paint “my own people.”

Though highly trained in perspective, proportion, modeling, and painting technique, Johnson felt he had to invent new visual ways of expressing the vitality of African-American life in Harlem. As you can see from the works on these pages, he did that by making his figures flat, highly simplified, outlined, and brightly colored. Street Musicians (above) reflects the modest appearance and untrained sounds of the real urban musicians who made their living by singing on street corners in black communities. The large heads, hands, knees, feet and side-by-side pose of this couple resemble traditional African sculptures. The bright primary colors are those found in hand-woven African fabrics. The linear pattern in the background suggests city buildings, sidewalks, or urban street grids. The quickly painted black and white intersecting
diagonal lines seem to move and sway, as if following the sounds of the guitar. The seemingly crude depiction of these figures is reminiscent of folk art. The style also suggests the dark side of urban street life in Harlem in the 1940s.

Just minutes away from the Harlem Community Art Center where Johnson taught art classes to support himself and his wife, was the Savoy Ballroom. This was a huge dance hall where famous jazz bands played and couples went to try out the latest dance craze. The abstracted, jigsaw-like figures and geometric, fragmented instruments in Jitterbugs II (right), suggest the movement of the dancers to the uneven tempos and rhythms of jazz. The interlocking shapes suggest the way the musical notes in jazz are woven together. The striped patterns in the floor, drums, and the man’s suit, and the repetition of the red circles in the horns and woman’s hat might even suggest notes in a musical score.

On his walks around the city, Johnson observed the activities of inner-city children. In scenes featuring street baseball, playgrounds, and games played under bridges, the artist expressed the dynamic energy of children packed into tiny spaces. Children at Ice Cream Stand (below right) captures the heat of a summer day in the city. The simplified, geometric shapes of the figures echo those of the buildings that surround them. The bright colors stand for heat reflected from concrete surfaces. In spite of the subject’s peaceful nature, some graphic elements suggest another side of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s. The downcast facial expressions, sharp angles, and numerous verticals resembling bars may symbolize the feeling of confinement, poor conditions, and poverty that also characterized life in this city-within-a-city.

William Johnson lived and worked in Harlem until 1944, when his wife died of cancer. He then returned to the small town of Florence, South Carolina, where he was born.

“I need to paint my own people.” — William H. Johnson
Although he hadn’t been back to South Carolina in 14 years, William H. Johnson had never forgotten the images he grew up with—cotton fields, wooden shacks, and hard-working black farmhands. His style became more extreme—his shapes, like those in Sowing (far right) were more simplified, his backgrounds flatter, his colors brighter. The distorted figures in this painting not only look like African sculptures, their large hands suggest a life of hard work. The vertical stripes resemble African fabric patterns and African-American quilts. The repetition of the stripes and the curving patterns of the furrows take on the rhythm of farm work. The moon’s circular shape reminds us of the farmers’ long hours.

Johnson did many portraits of family and friends. In Li’l Sis (below right) he captures his niece’s wide-eyed innocence. Almost all the colors—the yellow background, blue dress, green carriage are of the same intensity (brightness or dullness) and value (lightness or darkness). The dark skin of the girl, heightened by the white hands around the neck and arms, becomes the focal point of the picture.

At this time, Johnson began creating religious works. Christian symbolism even appears in portraits such as Woman in Calico (above right). The background in this symmetrical (same on both sides) composition is dark on one side, light on the other. The intersecting diagonals of the figure’s arms form a cross, while the repeat pattern in her dress is made up of red crosses.

In Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (pages 8-9), Johnson reinterprets traditional religious symbols into images meant for the black community. The painting illustrates the words of a famous spiritual. The River Jordan flows across the bottom of the picture, angels hover overhead and a chariot dips to carry the waiting man “home.” The stylized, repeated line of angels wear modern dresses, shoes, and socks. The urgency of the occasion—a man’s death—is expressed by the asymmetrical composition (each side is different, but visually balanced), and the diagonal lines formed by angels, chariot, and river. Accent patterns—flowers and stars—balance each corner, keeping the eye moving throughout the composition.

In 1947 Johnson had a mental breakdown, remaining hospitalized until his death in 1970. But his work survived and he is now considered one of America’s most important 20th-century painters.

“My people are black, as I show in this portrait of a woman sitting with folded hands and an expression of resignation.”
—William H. Johnson

“’One idea of my painting is to give, in simple and stark form, the story of black people as they exist.’
—William H. Johnson

6 Scholastic Art
SOUTH

“I have completed it all from my people’s point of view—workers, sharecroppers, city life, jitterbugs, religious themes, families down South, and every kind of portrait I can paint.”

—WILLIAM H. JOHNSON
“My aim is to express in a natural way what I feel, what is in me, both rhythmically and spiritually.” — WILLIAM H. JOHNSON

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

BY WILLIAM H. JOHNSON
HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Three of the most-important African-American artists who were influenced by the Harlem Renaissance

"MOST OF MY WORK DEPICTS EVENTS FROM THE MANY HARLEMS THAT EXIST THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES." — JACOB LAWRENCE

PORTRAITS OF A COMMUNITY

Jacob Lawrence was among the first African-American artists to base his work on life in the black community. He learned to paint in an after-school program in Harlem. Throughout his career, Lawrence preferred water-based poster paints similar to those provided in his early art classes. With a limited palette of bright, flat colors, Lawrence created images composed of simple organic (curved) shapes and interlocking patterns. Most of his paintings depict scenes from African-American history and daily life in Harlem. Later, Lawrence was commissioned to create public murals such as Games (right). This large-scale work of enamel on steel retains many characteristics of Lawrence’s paintings. The athletes’ muscular arms, in contrasting skin tones, interlock like pieces of a puzzle, framing the crowd behind. The large, solid shapes in the foreground stand out against the patterns formed by the small background figures. Foreground figures are tightly cropped and placed near the picture plane, bringing the viewer close to the action.

“I PAINT OUT OF THE TRADITION OF THE BLUES.”
— ROMARE BEARDEN

VISUAL MUSIC

Romare Bearden experienced the Harlem Renaissance firsthand. Visitors to his childhood home included the poet Langston Hughes and the jazz musician Duke Ellington. After graduating from New York University, Bearden studied painting, did social work, and became a successful songwriter. But he is best known for collages composed of photographs, colored paper, foil, and paint. Bearden depicted church events, Harlem life, musicians, and childhood memories. In Gospel Song (left), the artist contrasts flat, solid shapes with photographic patterns. Bearden has used a patchwork of mostly soft, muted colors. Angular shapes with smooth edges contrast with torn edges of paper. Contrasting patterns and overlapping, fragmented images contribute to a visual rhythm that shows the influence of music on Bearden’s art.

The Next Generation

"I AM INSPIRED BY PEOPLE'S QUESTS, POWERS, AND LIFE STRUGGLES..."—FAITH RINGGOLD

PRESERVING TRADITIONS

While Faith Ringgold was growing up in Harlem during the 1930s, her mother—a fashion designer—taught her to sew colorful pieces of fabric. Ringgold's great-great grandmother, who had been a slave, showed her how to make quilts. Today, Ringgold is best known for "story quilts" combining European painting techniques with African-American traditions. In Harlem Renaissance Party (left), she uses geometric patterns of cut fabric to frame a painted scene. The text tells the story of Cee Cee—the dancing woman—and her daughter, Celia, who is seated near her. The dinner guests are writers, poets, and scholars from the Harlem Renaissance. Ringgold uses simplified shapes with slight modeling. Through this work, Ringgold preserves the traditions of her mother and great-great grandmother while commemorating the Harlem Renaissance for future generations.

MESSAGES IN PAINT

When people look at Jeremy Baker’s award-winning self-portrait (right), they don’t always understand what it’s trying to say. But that doesn’t bother Jeremy, an 18-year-old freshman at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. The fact that most people connect with the image, and may walk away feeling troubled is what matters most to him. “I want my work to act as a magnifying glass, exposing wrongs that exist in our society,” he says. “If I can get people to think and re-evaluate their opinions about things, then I know I’ve made an impact.”

Jeremy dreams of having a career where he can continue to shape people’s opinions through his art. He is majoring in product design. After graduation, he would like to land a job designing props for science-fiction movies. Jeremy, a native of Miami, Florida, says, “What I love most about art is that you can escape a world of rules and create anything you want to.”

How did you first get involved in art?
When I was a kid, I took watches and other things apart, and put them back again. Eventually, that skill translated to my artwork. As I learned the principles and elements of design, I was constantly reinventing them in my art.

How did you come to do this award-winning piece?
I did it in 12th grade AP art, at the Design and Architecture Senior High School in Miami. We had to create a 10-piece portfolio for college boards. I did five self-portraits, all of which dealt with social issues that I cared about, especially stereotypes and my experiences as a minority.

Did the number of self-portraits you did have special significance?
I included a number on all the self-portraits, representing a Social Security number. That’s the way the government identifies and tracks you. Governments collect statistics. They make decisions based on numbers, not individuals. When it comes to numbers, the majority always rules. This piece is a reflection of me as part of a minority. I wanted to show how I lost my individuality, and I’m now just a number. I wanted to convey the sadness of that.

What’s the title of your work?
It’s called Blind 57. Blind, because most people are blind to this issue; they don’t care. The number 57 was just a random number I chose to represent me.

Why did you choose to paint about this subject?
I’ve experienced what I’m painting about. Miami, Florida, is the South. You experience racial tension. For example, it annoys me how you can’t have friends of any race you want to at school without undertones. A lot of it, I believe, comes from the government and large corporations; they define social issues, what’s cool or what’s not. They influence how people think, including me. It gets me upset.

What impression did you want to convey?
I wanted the viewer to feel the emotion of the piece. In the subject’s eyes, there’s a longing to be accepted, to feel like an individual and a human. I wanted the viewer to feel the sadness of that longing.

Why did you use this composition?
The composition is tight because I wanted the face to be the focus. I put black numbers on white to make them stand out. These were the two most important elements in the piece. The background is the American flag, dripping and kind of bleeding. This piece is really about social culture in

“I wanted the viewer to feel the emotion of the piece. In the subject’s eyes, there’s a longing to be accepted, to feel like an individual and a human. I wanted the viewer to feel the sadness of that longing.”
working on the background. I used a maroon and white pattern for the stripes of the flag. I included details in the face to make it stand out. That’s why I worked on the face and background at the same time. I could lighten an area or darken another to make it stand out or fade away.

**What was this work’s biggest challenge?**
Trying to create the right composition so I hit every area I wanted people to look at. I wanted viewers’ eyes to shift from one place to another — the face, the eyes, the numbers, the flag — so they would get the whole message.

**Were you happy with the work when it was done?**
I was unsure until I saw people’s reaction. They didn’t always understand what the painting was about, but they walked away from the piece troubled. It left a deep impression, which is exactly what I wanted. That’s when I knew I was successful.

**Do you have any advice for other aspiring artists?**
When you’re creating art, don’t settle just to get a good grade. Say you have a teacher that likes drawing a certain way, and you come to class with a completely different style. If you feel your approach is the best way to convey your idea, stick with it. Don’t sell yourself short on the concept you’re trying to express just to get a good grade.

**How did you go about creating this piece?**
First, I started with my idea. Then I did several sketches, transferred one to the canvas, and began painting. I started laying in rough values for my face and neck, then started America; the composition shows how our culture affects me.
In his asymmetrical composition (different on each side but visually balanced), Larry has made the figure the focal point of the work by using the door to frame him. The grid pattern of the coat on the left echoes and repeats those in the figure's vest.

By making her figure small, placing him in the center, and surrounding him with objects, Nina has chosen to emphasize the musician's environment. The importance of the horizontal patterns of the sheet music and the curved patterns of the trumpet make music the real subject of this painting.

The horizontal format and large scale of the model in Anna's painting emphasize the figure's personality. A flat, blue background frames the musician. It also divides the composition in half, separating him from the others.

SCHOLASTIC ART WORKSHOP

PAINTING PATTERNS

Learn to use pattern and composition to describe a figure.

Many of the painters whose work you've seen in this issue simplified and abstracted their subjects to give them a symbolic quality. These artists gave variety to the flat, solid shapes they used by breaking them up with a variety of patterns.

In this workshop, you'll use composition and pattern to visually describe the relationship between figure and environment.

**MATERIALS**
- Tempera (primary, secondary, black, brown and white)*
- 18 in. x 24 in. 80 lb. white sulfite drawing paper
- Ebony pencil
- Drawing board
- Variety of round and flat brushes
- Palette to mix paint (dinner plate)
- Covered containers to hold mixed paint (margarine containers)
- Container to hold water for rinsing brushes
- Saran Wrap or large plastic fruit/vegetable bag to cover palette
- Paper toweling
- Thrift-shop 1940's bold pattern suit coat/pants/vest, hat, and shoes
- Musical instrument—e.g., trumpet, saxophone, or clarinet
- Music stand and sheet music
- Wood or plain chair

*For this assignment, a 50/50 mixture of Blicrylic and Dick Blick Student Tempers was used; good color, economical, dries quickly, does not smear and has matte surface.

**STEP 1**
The look and personality of the model will be the key to the success of this assignment. The model should be wearing a boldly patterned coat, suit, hat, etc. Instrument (brass instruments work best), music, and music stand should be tightly arranged around the model. Choose a point of view (above, below, from the side, close up) that you feel will express some aspect of the model.

Select a point of view that will express what you want to say about this musician and his music, then do a simplified contour drawing of the figure and background.
the instrument and music on the left. A large hand hides the musician's face. It is balanced by an unidentified hand holding the trumpet, giving the work a mysterious, unresolved quality.

Justine has placed her figure in the center of the composition. The organic shapes of the figure and instrument contrast with the angular, geometric shapes of the door, chair, and music stand. The blue stripes of the sheet music repeat the brown stripes of the chair.

Shanna has surrounded her figure with rectangular, abstracted shapes. The flat, simplified figure of the musician stands out against the complex geometric patterns the artist has created based on the chair, music stand, and door panels.

**STEP 2**
Think about how you wish to present the figure, and how you can show his relationship to his musical instrument and his surroundings. Do two 15-minute contour drawings. Emphasize accurate, shapely drawing, silhouette of figure and objects, patterns found in objects. Pay attention to scale and proportion. Interpret figure and objects as basic shapes, such as those found in a coloring book. Keep overall composition simple; avoid focusing on small details. Consider rearranging objects in order to build a balanced composition. Select the strongest composition of the two drawings to be used as a basis for the painting.

Light, do large areas first and when they are dry, overpaint detail. Use pattern to emphasize important areas, highlight focal points. Will your patterns be grids, diagonals, repeat, random, interlocking, stripes, scribbles, alternating, dark on light, light on dark, or radiating? As you work, always refer to the area on the model you are painting. There should be no interaction between model and class. Do not discard mixed color until painting is complete. When shapes are painted, use a thin black line to outline the most important contours.

**STEP 3**
What colors will express the mood and relationships you wish to create? Use bright colors, simple shapes, surface patterns, and black outlines. Paint areas in flat color, do not use modeling or shading techniques. Depth can be shown by overlapping. Limit the number of colors to give your painting unity. You can use the color of the objects as a starting point, then brighten their intensity. Paint in stages. Work from dark to light, as you paint, remember to work with flat, bright, simple areas of color. Use a variety of patterns to emphasize focal points. Limit the number of colors you use.

CRITICS CORNER

DESCRIBING A WAY OF LIFE
How did Harlem Renaissance artists find new ways of expressing themselves?

Painters working during the Harlem Renaissance, such as William H. Johnson, wanted to create a new kind of art—one that for the first time reflected the African-American experience. To do this, the artists used a variety of styles and techniques.

The images below are details of some of the works featured in the issue. Next to each of the techniques, subjects, and names listed, write the letter of the image that seems most appropriate. (Some of the items may apply to more than one image.)

1. Interlocking patterns
2. Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
3. Simplified shapes
4. Repeat pattern
5. William H. Johnson
6. Angel
7. Flat shapes
8. Romare Bearden
9. Framing
10. Stylized shapes
11. Red crosses
12. Torn edges
14. Outlines
15. Photographic patterns
16. Jacob Lawrence
17. Intersecting diagonals
18. Overlapping, fragmented images
19. Large, overworked hands