

SOUTHERN/MODERN

Educator Guide

Frist Art Museum

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Tennessee State Standards

Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the Respond domain of Tennessee's Fine Arts Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the Connect domain. The Create domain includes the generation, conceptualization, development, and refinement of artistic work.

Social Studies: K–12

SSP.05: Develop historical awareness by:

- Recognizing how and why historical accounts change over time
- Perceiving and presenting past events and issues as they might have been experienced by the people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness
- Evaluating how unique circumstances of time and place create context and contribute to action and reaction
- Identifying patterns of continuity and change over time, making connections to the present

SSP.06: Develop geographic awareness by:

- Using the geographic perspective to analyze relationships, patterns, and diffusion across space at multiple scales (e.g., local, national, global)
- Analyzing and determining the use of diverse types of maps based on the origin, authority, structure, context, and validity
- Analyzing locations, conditions, and connections of places and using maps to investigate spatial associations among phenomena
- Examining how geographers use regions and how perceptions of regions are fluid across time and space
- Analyzing interaction between humans and the physical environment

Contemporary Issues: Grades 9–12

CI.03: Analyze how cultural characteristics (e.g. language, religion, ethnicity, gender roles) link, divide, and/or define regions.

CI.06: Identify how geography shapes culture, economics, politics, and history.

CI.20: Compare and contrast folk/traditional culture with popular culture and analyze efforts to preserve folk culture amid the spread of popular culture.

African American History

AAH.21: Assess the economic and social impact of Jim Crow laws on African Americans.

AAH.29: Describe the African American experience during and after World War I (e.g., economic opportunities, Second Great Migration, resurgence of Ku Klux Klan).

AAH.32: Describe the contributions of African Americans to the visual arts during this era, including the work of William Edmondson.

AAH.36: Identify the contributions of African Americans who served in the military and compare their experiences to other Americans who served in World War II.

United States History and Geography

US.28: Analyze the impact of the Great Migration of African Americans that began in the early 1900s from the rural South to the industrial regions of the Northeast and Midwest. (T.C.A. § 49-6-1006)

US.39: Analyze the causes of the Great Depression, including:

- Bank failures
- Laissez-faire politics
- Buying on margin
- Overextension of credit
- Crash of the stock market
- Overproduction in agriculture and manufacturing
- Excess consumerism
- High tariffs
- Rising unemployment

US.41: Describe the impact of the Great Depression on the American people, including: mass unemployment, migration, and Hoovervilles.

US.43: Analyze the impact of the relief, recovery, and reform efforts of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, including:

- Agricultural Adjustment Act
- Civilian Conservation Corps
- Securities and Exchange Commission
- Fair Labor Standards Act
- Social Security
- Federal Deposit Insurance
- Tennessee Valley Authority Corporation
- Works Progress Administration
- National Recovery Administration

US.52: Examine and explain the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce and armed forces during World War II and the subsequent impact on American society.

US.53: Examine the impact of World War II on economic and social conditions for African Americans, including the Fair Employment Practices Committee and the eventual integration of the armed forces by President Harry S. Truman.

Southern/Modern

Southern/Modern presents the relationship between the modern art and the American South through artworks that preserve the lore, history, and change occurring throughout the region in the first half of the twentieth century. Multimedia works of art explore a rich variety of themes and cultural contexts while remaining true to the principles of modernism. The works in the exhibition are made by artists who either were from the South or spent time in the region; together, the works on view embody a time capsule of change, exploration, and analysis of Southern culture in this era.

This educator guide will highlight several artworks that explore important themes within *Southern/Modern* and propose thoughtful questions about the South's history, then and now.

What is modernism?

Modernism is an art movement that swept throughout the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modernism largely emerged in Europe as a reaction to the rapid change of the Industrial Revolution, which socially and technologically altered the world's landscapes. In the early twentieth century, artists like Paul Cézanne, Gustav Klimt, and Pablo Picasso developed their own approaches to modernism in cities such as Paris and Vienna, making them centers of culture.

Although modernism has deep roots in Europe, the movement would become popular in the United States as well. In the American South, modernists found inspiration in the immense technological, industrial, and social change that occurred in the region throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. In the 1920s through '50s, urbanization, increasing technology, changes in attitudes toward race, and more began to spread through the region, leading artists to respond. These modernist works both illustrate the South coming into a new age and reflect on traditional ways of life and elements of culture that had been preserved.

Many Modernisms

Most of the artists in this exhibition spent time outside of the South, gaining exposure to the latest trends in art in places like New York and Paris, where they might have seen the work of such influential figures as Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, and Pablo Picasso.

Back home, they processed these new approaches while developing their own expressive styles and ideas. Some incorporated the basic elements of modern art—simplifying or stylizing forms, flattening compositions, and exploring pure color relationships—while still making relatively representational work. Others pushed harder at traditional boundaries in works that were more fully abstract.

Throughout his career, Maryland artist and educator Charles H. Walther worked in a variety of styles, ranging from post-impressionist and cubist-inspired canvases to ones like *Reversible Composition*. The approach



Charles H. Walther. *Reversible Composition*, 1937. Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD. Bequest of the artist, BMA



Anna Heyward Taylor. *Magnolia Grandiflora*, 1938. Carolina Art Association / Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC. Gift of the artist. 1953.007.0042

here is closely linked to Wassily Kandinsky's late works and those of other artists associated with the Bauhaus school in Germany. In this painting—which can be hung in any orientation—Walther created a sense of energy and dynamism with a series of overlapping and interlocking planes of color. The rigidity of the angular shapes is offset by circles and the organic yellow form at right, which add to the sense of balance and motion.

Anna Heyward Taylor's *Magnolia Grandiflora* draws viewers in close to examine the beautiful blossom of a magnolia, a flowering tree that is an emblem of the South. The widening flower and gently curling leaves are simplified and flat, evoking the style of the Japanese woodblock prints that were popular at the time. The print is also aligned with the work of American modernists like Georgia O'Keeffe, who famously also created close-up views of flowers.

Discussion Questions

- How do the works highlighted in this section reflect the modernist movement?
- Walther's *Reversible Composition* is not meant to convey a specific object. What do you think the artist wanted to accomplish by creating such a work?
- Why is it important for artists like Anna Heyward Taylor to travel and learn about new mediums and techniques?

Activity: Nonobjective Sculpture

Have students use cardboard, scissors, glue, and paint or markers to create nonobjective sculptures. They may decide what shapes to use, then cut them out, add colors, and arrange them into a three-dimensional composition.

Activity: Rainbow Scratch Art

Participants will make rainbow scratch paper and draw a design of a “new” object. This object can be architecture, technology, or anything else that you consider a new addition to the changing world.

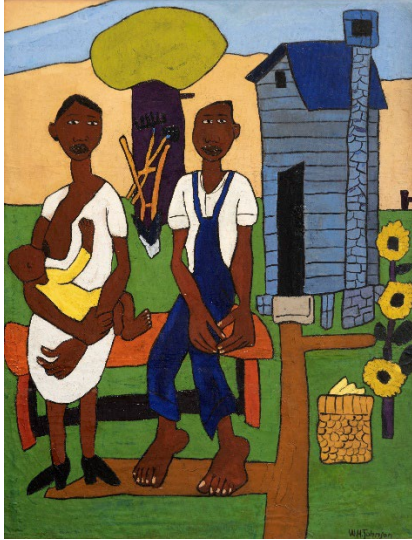
Materials

- Cardstock
- Crayons
- Black tempera paint
- Dish soap
- Pencil
- Paint brush
- Container for the paint
- Wooden stylus

Steps

1. Use crayons to cover an entire sheet of cardstock in different colors.
2. Once the paper has been colored, mix dish soap with black tempera paint in a container. The ratio for creation should be 2 parts paint to 1 part soap.
3. On a paint-safe surface, use a paint brush to apply a layer of the black paint mixture evenly across the entire colored sheet and allow it to dry.
4. While the paint dries, look closely at *Magnolia Grandiflora* and consider the use of line and shape in the print.
5. Brainstorm a list of ideas for your work. This may include current technologies or items you use every day. You may also draw something from an interesting point of view.
6. Once the paint is dry, use a pencil to sketch your design idea onto the painted surface. Remember to use lines and shapes to represent your object.
7. Now that the sketch is complete, use a wooden stylus to scratch your sketched image into the surface of the paint. Press just hard enough to scratch lines into the paint.
8. Once the design is scratched in, you are done! If you'd like, you can attach your artwork to a piece of cardboard or posterboard for display.

Southerners



William H. Johnson. *Evening*, 1940–41. Florence County Museum, Florence, SC, Gift of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1344.2

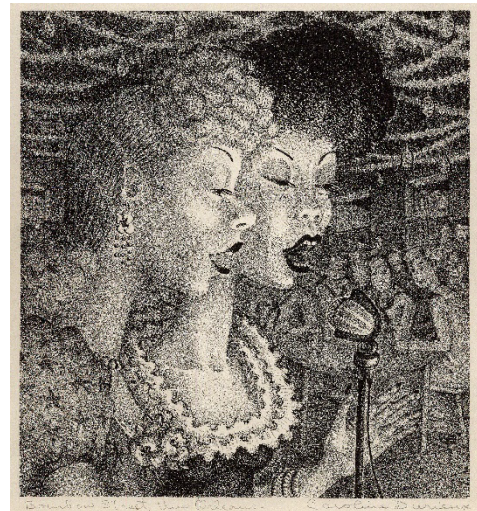
art. His mature style echoes the flatness, bright colors, and emotional emphasis of modernism, which informed his interest in cultivating what he called a “conscious naivete” inspired by folk art.

Johnson applied his familiarity with international trends to the creation of works that reflect the region of his birth. In *Evening*, the bright palette and the sunflower to the right of the figures do not convey the difficult conditions under which the subjects most certainly lived, suggesting that they are making the best of their situation. The man’s tools are set aside, leaning against a tree in the background, while the woman continues with a different sort of work, nursing their young child.

Although many of Caroline Durieux’s prints are satirical renderings of religious and high society figures, *Bourbon Street, New Orleans* documents another aspect of life in her home city of New Orleans: its entertainment industry, centered around Bourbon Street. Durieux created this print for a juried competition for graphic artists organized by the group Artists for Victory to support the United States’ military during World War II. Rather than portraying men preparing for war, Durieux created a scene of smiling sailors on shore leave watching two Black-presenting singers

Works in this gallery show people posing for portraits, going shopping, or hanging out with friends. Although, in the national imagination, Southerners’ cultural distinctiveness is often stereotyped and exaggerated, these images show a common humanity—everyone can identify with portrayals of leisure and camaraderie. However, they also reveal the racial division that has defined this region—as it has the entire nation, if not always quite so visibly—for centuries. While most works depict both Black and white southerners, they are rarely seen together. Only Lamar Dodd’s *Bargain Basement* and Caroline Durieux’s *Bourbon Street, New Orleans* hint at interaction across racial lines.

Evening is from a series of works by William H. Johnson representing various times of day in the lives of Black Southerners. Although Johnson was born and raised in South Carolina, most of his career was spent in Europe and New York. In the late 1920s, he lived in France, where he absorbed the influence of German expressionism, cubism, and African



Caroline Durieux. *Bourbon Street, New Orleans*, 1934. Louisiana State University Museum of Art, Baton Rouge, LA, Gift of the artist, 63.9.18

performing for the troops. As seen in this print, entertainment on Bourbon Street was racially diverse, although the city was otherwise segregated.

Discussion Questions

- These works focus on Black and white Southerners from the past, but who has been left out? How might a portrayal of the South's diverse populations look different today?
- The bright colors of *Evening* do not convey the challenging conditions that the subjects of the painting had to face. What challenges would this family have dealt with during the early to mid-twentieth century?
- What does Durieux's *Bourbon Street, New Orleans* tell us about New Orleans and the South during World War II?

Activity: The End of the Day

Write about the end of your day. How do you feel? What is your evening routine? Are you able to relax, or is there still more work to do before the day is over? After writing, create a drawing that depicts an image of your evening.

Segregation and Jim Crow

Individual and systemic racism pervaded the everyday lives of Southerners. This often manifested as intimidation and violence, as white supremacists went to vicious lengths to maintain social and political control, and Jim Crow laws provided a legal framework for relegating Black Americans to second-class citizenship throughout the South until 1965.

The subject of Elizabeth Catlett's *War Worker* conveys a feeling of quiet dignity, his downward gaze communicating sorrow and stoicism. It was created in 1943, when Catlett accompanied her husband, the artist Charles White, to Hampton University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, while he worked on a mural commission. The area is home to a large naval base, and fellow artist John Biggers, who was also at Hampton at the time, recalled the difficult conditions that African American workers and servicemen faced: "We were right across the street from the US Naval Recreation Center and we couldn't go there. Segregation, you know. They would be out swimming, dancing. It was very frustrating and terribly demoralizing. But it was part of that very terrible time of segregation."



Elizabeth Catlett. *War Worker*, 1943.
The Johnson Collection, L2023.43.3

Discussion Questions

- Is it important to know the history of segregation as people strive to advance racial justice in our own time? Why or why not?
- Look closely at *War Worker* and describe the colors, lines, and shapes used by the artist.
- How did the artist depict the "sadness" and "quiet dignity" of the subject of this portrait?

Activity: Expressive Portrait

Draw or paint a portrait of yourself or someone else that captures a specific emotion. How will the emotion come across in the subject's facial expression or posture? Instead of using realistic colors, consider choosing colors that fit the mood that you are trying to convey.

The Enduring Land

The landscape of the South, from its cotton and tobacco fields to its coastal beaches and marshes, to its heavily forested mountains and hills further inland, has long been a source of inspiration for Southern artists. Land and the agrarian traditions that link Southerners to it are deeply tied to the region's identity, and the art featured here often conveys the complicated relationship between the land and humanity. Some works show the relative self-sufficiency of agricultural life; others reveal the devastation of the landscape, ravaged by decades of overcultivation, mining, and deforestation. In each, the landscape is not simply a vision of nature apart from humanity—it is an arena for human aspiration, memory, care, and disregard.



Nell Choate Jones. *Georgia Red Clay*, 1946. Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, GA, 1989.01094

Although Nell Choate Jones was born in Georgia, she spent most of her life in New York. Despite this, she maintained strong ties to the South, visiting often and exhibiting her work with the Southern States Art League. By the 1940s, her style had become expressionistic, as evident in *Georgia Red Clay* with its thickly applied paint, vivid colors, flowing brushwork, and rhythmic forms. Along with the darkening sky and heavy, twisted tree trunks, the red clay of the rutted road and furrowed, barren field gives the scene a foreboding quality, suggesting the challenges of rural life in the region during this period.

Carroll Cloar's work belongs to a strain of Southern art rooted in stories and reflecting the wonder the landscape evokes. To these qualities he added his own memories and experiences growing up and living in the Arkansas Delta. Cloar recalled, "[One] of my fantasies was that I had been the surviving child of a beautiful young couple who had been eaten by panthers." Indeed, this work might be linked to a story that Cloar vaguely recalled from his childhood: "there was a woman, and a panther . . . and something." The woman in the scene is based on a photograph of the artist's friend Bonnie Everson. Lifting her skirt as if about to run, she turns away from the panther in the background.



Carroll Cloar. *A Story Told by My Mother*, 1955. Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN, Bequest of Mrs. C.M. Gooch, 80.3.16. © Estate of Carroll Cloar

Cloar's mysterious, haunting scenes and precise style link him to magic realism, a movement popular in the United States at midcentury. He was one of only a handful of Southern artists to achieve national recognition at the time, to be represented by New York galleries, and to have work acquired by leading institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

Discussion Questions

- Nell Choate Jones captured Georgia’s rural landscape in the mid-twentieth century. What is the mood of this painting? What might Jones have been trying to communicate about the landscape?
- Carroll Cloar used his memories, experiences, and connection with the landscape to shape his work. There is often a wonder or mysterious quality to stories that become well-known local legends as they are shared. Do you know of any such legends?
- How might artists today express the human relationship with the landscape and the environment around us?
- How do the paintings in this section give us a glimpse into the past?

Activity: Time Capsule

Have students think about current stories and events and compile a collection of items that can serve as a glimpse into the past for future generations. For this exercise, have students bring in objects such as photographs, articles, postcards, drawings, etc. Gather the items and place them in individual boxes or one collective box, then seal it until a predetermined date. Imagine the ideas and stories that people may draw from these objects in the future. What assumptions might they make?

Resources

Catalogue

Southern/Modern edited by Jonathan Stuhlman

Books for Children

Story Painter: The Life of Jacob Lawrence by John Duggleby (author)

Ablaze with Color: A Story of Painter Alma Thomas, by Jeanne Walker Harvey (author) and Loveis Wise (illustrator)

Come Look with Me: Exploring Landscape Art with Children by Gladys S. Blizzard (author)

The Little House by Virginia Lee Burton (author and illustrator)

The Hundred-Year Barn by Patricia MacLachlan (author) and Kenard Pak (illustrator)

Where Are You From? by Yamile Saied Méndez (author) and Jaime Kim (illustrator)

North, South, East, West, by Margaret Wise Brown (author) and Greg Pizzoli (illustrator)

Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie, by Gwen Everett (author)

Books for Teens and Adults

Carroll Cloar: In His Studio, by the Art Museum of the University of Memphis

Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico, by Melanie Anne Herzog

Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America, by Jacqueline Francis

Modern Art in America, 1908–1968, by William Agee

William H. Johnson: An American Modern, edited by Teresa G. Gionis

SOUTHERN/MODERN

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