

African-American Artists in the "World of Tomorrow"

By David J. Cope

Overview

In this lesson, students will study primary and secondary sources to discover the role African Americans played in the arts at the 1939 New York World's Fair and the historic context of those art forms. This lesson serves as a great complimentary lesson to the middle years of the Jim Crow era and can easily be adapted for upper elementary through high school students.

Time Required

Two to three days for background readings, discussion, Internet research, and project preparation.

Materials Needed

- Internet access to these sites:
 - <http://odyssey.lib.duke.edu/sgo/exhibit/captions/caption10.html>
 - <http://www.northbysouth.org/1998/art/pages/savage.htm>
- "The World of Tomorrow" video. Johnson, Tom and Lance Bird, directors.
- Copy of "William Grant Still on Jim Crow Laws", below
(If school Internet access is unavailable, teachers can print the necessary information and distribute)

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

Ask your school's music teacher for one of the numbers that the school's choir plans to perform within the year. Have members of the choir sing it for the class or play a recording of it. Then, ask the students what emotions they felt as they heard the piece.

Procedures

1. Have the students read the **"African Americans in 'The World of Tomorrow'" essay** and ask them to note the important contributions of William Grant Still and Augusta Savage to the arts. Also, discuss how Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a well-loved stage and screen star of the time, helped the fair try to become solvent. (The video, "The World of Tomorrow," contains two brief segments of Robinson's promotional activities.) Ask students: What major cultural figures today would have this impact on a failing enterprise?

You should note that major participants at The American Common programs included:

- J. Rosamund (or Rosamond) Johnson: the composer of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (see the Augusta Savage section);
- Juanita Hall: a Broadway performer who began her career in the chorus of "Show Boat" and won a Tony for her Bloody Mary in "South Pacific." During the '30s, she formed the Juanita Hall Choir as a Works Progress Administration group; and

- Todd Duncan and Ann(e) Brown: the original Porgy and Bess in the 1935 Broadway premier.
2. Guide students in learning about William Grant Still, as follows:
- a. Have students read the William Grant Still essay in this lesson plan. Note that Still personally experienced the effects of the Supreme Court's Plessy v. Ferguson decision. In his early years, before devoting most of his time to musical composition, Still toured with W. C. Handy's band.
 - b. Give a copy of Still's recollections to each student and have them answer the following:
 - How does Still describe the railroad cars assigned to African Americans?
 - From his description, does the "separate but equal" policy endorsed by the Supreme Court appear to be effective?
 - What angers Still in the concluding paragraph?
 - Cite examples from his recollections in which he "experienced segregation and its inconveniences" and endured "its humiliations."

(Note: the restaurant stories tie in well with the lesson "Exhibiting At A World's Fair" also found on this site.)

- c. Explain to students that, in its August 1, 1938 editorial "A Pleasant Choice," The New York Times noted that the musical composition for the Theme Center's display "Democracy" "will be played almost 50,000 times a year, allowing only 12 hours for an Exposition day. This is a multiplicity of presentation achieved by few composers, living or dead." With that kind of exposure, everyone anticipated much from Still's theme "Rising Tide." And, in his essay "An Afro-American Composer's Viewpoint," Still wrote, "Melody, in my opinion, is the most important musical element. After melody comes harmony; then form, rhythm, and dynamics."

Have the students enter the <http://odyssey.lib.duke.edu/sgo/exhibit/captions/caption10.html> web site and click on the musical notation to hear a brief excerpt from "Rising Tide." They should answer this question: In your opinion did Still fulfill his own prescription for musical success?

- d. Discuss the following with students. In his essay "An Afro-American Composer's Viewpoint," Still wrote:

Colored people in America have a natural and deep-rooted feeling for music, for melody, harmony, and rhythm. Our music possesses exoticism without straining for strangeness. The natural practices in this music open up a new field which can be of value in larger musical works when constructed into organized form by a composer who, having the underlying feeling, develops it through his intellect.

In its August 1, 1938, editorial, *The New York Times* noted a similar idea: "If there is an art in which the race excels it is music." Indeed, it has been said that the only original music of real content which America ever produced is the spiritual developed by the slaves. Dvorak used such a theme to give authentic richness to his symphony, "From the New World." The Czech composer Anton Dvorak visited and worked in the United States in the 1890s. Harry T. Burleigh, the African-American collector and arranger of many spirituals, studied with Dvorak, interesting him in "plantation songs."

During Dvorak's trip to Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition, he visited the Dahomey Village and met African-American composer Will Marion Cook. From these experiences, he wrote a groundbreaking series of articles "On the Value of Negro Music." Commenting on their content, he said, "I came to America to discover what young Americans had in them and help them express it." He accomplished this by including a mirroring of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" in the second theme of the first movement of his "New World Symphony."

Have students listen to a recording, identify the melody, and answer this question: What effect do spirituals have on music presently?

3. Instruct students on the artist, Augusta Savage, as follows:

- a. Give them the following background information: The appointment of Augusta Savage by the 1939 New York World's Fair's Board of Design to sculpt a group for the grounds held double significance: not only was Miss Savage the only African American to receive such a commission, she was also one of only four women sculptors offered the opportunity to exhibit. Therefore, her choice of subject came under much scrutiny. She titled the finished product "The Harp" based on James Weldon Johnson's anthem "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing."

Although the original sculpture was destroyed after the 1940 fair season, pictures remain.

- b. Have students enter the <http://www.northbysouth.org/1998/art/pages/savage.htm> site and scroll down to view a photograph of "The Harp." Then, have them write a description of the sculpture as if for a newspaper or magazine. Explore how their descriptions compare to this one from *The New York Times*:

She modeled a vast harp, 16 feet tall, whose strings taper down from the heads of a bevy of singing boys and girls of her race. The base of the harp is a mammoth forearm, the fingers of the hand curving gently upward to complete the support. Kneeling in front of this representation of the contribution of the song which his people have made, a Negro youth tenders the gift to mankind through the message of his out-flung arms. This handsome piece has been finished in a semblance of black balsalt.

(Note that the "Negro youth" is holding out a staff containing the opening bars of the song.)

Then, discuss how Ralph M. Pearson, in a series of highly critical articles "The Artist's Point of View: New York World's Fair - World of Yesterday, Today, or Tomorrow?" reserved some of his rare appreciation for any of the fair's sculpture for "The Harp." He wrote, "This is probably the most original and authentic sculptural creation at the Fair. It roots in deeply felt life experience. (sic)"

- c. Play a version of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and have the students follow along with the lyrics, below:

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;

Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been
watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath thy hand,
May we forever stand.
True to our God,
True to our native land.

d. Ask students the following questions:

- Did Augusta Savage's sculpture do justice to the lyrics?
- Does the sculpture appear rooted in a "deeply felt life experience" as Pearson suggested?
- Did Augusta Savage's sculpture do justice to the music?

Note that Pearson mentions in his review that "The huge arm of the sounding board symbolizes the Creator." Did your students understand this symbolism? Ask them: Why did The New York Times not mention this fact?

4. Have each student select a piece of music, possibly the choral piece in the Anticipatory Set, and create a piece of artwork for it. Display the finished products. Then, assign each student a different piece and have him/her write a newspaper report of the piece like that of The New York Times. Finally, switch pieces and have students write a review like Ralph M. Pearson's.

Assessment

The teacher should assess the students through observations made during the class discussions and through the written assignments and projects provided in the Procedures section.

Related Works

_____. *The New York World's Fair 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs by Richard Wurts and Others*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1977.

Interdisciplinary Links

The listening exercises and the art project allows for great interdisciplinary links with the music and visual arts curriculums

This lesson was submitted by David J. Cope, Honors teacher at Titusville Senior High School, Titusville PA.

WILLIAM GRANT STILL ON JIM CROW LAWS

Our traveling was done in Jim Crow cars, which were usually only half cars. They offered very little that was comfortable or desirable: cinders, smoke, unpleasant odors, and the feeling of humiliation, being compelled to pay first-class fare for third-rate accommodations. One time in Alabama, a Negro prisoner was placed in our car. His captors relieved themselves of responsibility by locking him in the toilet, which, by the way, was the only one on the train that Negro passengers could use. Under these circumstances, we naturally could not use it; but, the prisoner solved our problem by breaking the window and escaping.

Early one morning, our train made a short stop in Rome, Georgia. We had gone all night without food, and we were all hungry. Again, there was no place for us to eat. We were told at one restaurant that, if we went to the back, we would be served. We didn't want to do that, partly because of the humiliation and partly because we were afraid of missing the train, so we got back on and rode until past noon without food.

My last incident has a brighter ending. One day in a Kentucky town, we went to the Negro restaurant, but it smelled like a privy. None of us wanted to eat there, so we went to a white restaurant right in town, across from the old courthouse. We described our predicament to the owner, and he promptly invited us in, sat us by the front window, and served us a delicious meal. With our thoughts geared to the reality of segregation, we had expected him to put up a screen in front of us, but he didn't. He treated us just like his other customers.

In relating this, I've had another purpose in mind besides telling you about Negro musicians and their world over a half century ago. I have heard reports of Negroes today who are trying to turn the clock back and bring separation and segregation again into our lives. I say, they can't know what they are talking about. They have certainly never experienced segregation and its inconveniences as some of us have. Even if they do understand what it is and are willing to endure its humiliations for themselves, it is not fair to advocate it for the rest of us and for our children.