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UNIT 1

VISUALIZING HISTORY THROUGH ART

We can visualize the past in a stimulating way by focusing on the way artists have captured and illustrated turning points in history.

In this unit we invite you to explore American art through the analysis of selected works which deal with the American experience. We will consider the work of artists such as Faith Ringgold, Jacob Lawrence, Robert Gwathmey, Dorothea Lange, and Reginald Marsh because they described the everyday struggle of American people, especially the working-class, the poor and the victimised.

We are going to focus on three case studies: the black forced migration from Africa to America, the first great African-American migration from the South to the North of the United States, and everyday life in the United States during the Great Depression.

LESSON 1

ARTISTIC IMAGES OF THE BLACK FORCED MIGRATION

In this lesson we aim to reflect on one of the darkest episodes of American history, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and its appalling consequences. As a starting point, we have chosen Faith Ringgold's "We came to America" (1997) because of her ironical depiction of the forced transportation of people into America. Ringgold's picture addresses a crucial moment in history: the arrival of forced immigrants into "the American Harbour of Liberty". The artist has created a poignant and very detailed piece of artwork. As historian Nell Irvin Painter has stated, "smoke from Miss Liberty's torch merges with that of a slave ship on fire and links the American pride in Liberty to the reality of the traffic in people" (Painter 2007: 23).

Task 1.1.1.

Observe this work of art by Faith Ringgold, an African-American artist who is well-known for her paintings on race and gender, and answer the questions below:



Figure 1. Drawing inspired by
"We came to America"
by Faith Ringgold
(You are advised to search for the original
picture on the Internet)

- What does this work of art suggest to you?
- What do you know about the history behind it?
- Why do you think the work of art is called “We came to America”?
- How is the Statue of Liberty depicted?
- What about the ship behind the Statue? What does it represent?
- What message do you think this picture is trying to convey?

STUDY LINK: See Appendix I, section 1, “Word order”.

Task 1.1.2. Narrative events

Write a brief note of what you think has happened to the people that appear in the water.

STUDY LINK: See Appendix VIII, Section 1, “Editing your written work”.

Task 1.1.3. Vocabulary exercise

Underline the words from the following list that you consider best to describe the feelings depicted in the scene:

despair
horror
joy
fear
happiness
anger
panic
sadness
calm
excitement

(Check the answers in the key)

- Can you think of other words to describe the scene?
Discuss with your partner(s).
- Look at the following image:



Figure 2. "Boat people in the Mediterranean sea"
by María Eugenia
Sánchez Suárez.

- Who are the people on the boat? Where do they come from? In what ways can you relate this image to Faith Ringgold's picture?
Discuss it with your partner(s).

Task 1.1.4.

Read this brief biography of Faith Ringgold and answer the questions below:

FAITH RINGGOLD'S BIOGRAPHY

Faith Ringgold is an African-American artist and author. She was born in 1930 in Harlem, New York City, and is best known for her large painted story quilts, art that combines painting, quilted fabric and storytelling. As a child, she was taught to sew fabrics creatively by her mother, a professional fashion designer; and to make quilts by her great-great-grandmother. The latter had been a slave in her younger years, and made quilts for her white masters. Ringgold's work has had a profound influence on the contemporary art world from the late sixties, when her unique style first appeared. During the 1970s she introduced her dynamic Tonka quilts into the public consciousness combining the originality of the avant-garde with the folk-lore tradition of storytelling. She began to sew fabric borders around her paintings, instead of stretching the canvas over wooden stretchers in the traditional manner—she had seen this done in Tibetan paintings, called tankas. She has had numerous books published including her famous “Tar Beach”, winner of the 1992 Caldecott Honor and of the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration, among numerous other honours. Her newest body of work, The American Collection, continues in the tradition of her social commentary.

Ringgold has received more than 75 awards, fellowships, citations and honours, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship for painting, two National Endowment for the Arts Awards and seventeen honorary doctorates.

Her work is exhibited in major museums in the USA, Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. She is in the permanent collections of many museums including the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all in New York City.

She also has her own website: www.faithringgold.com, where information about her can be found. The ‘motto’ on her site is “If One Can, Anyone Can, All You Gotta Do Is Try.”

Sources:

<http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/default.htm>

www.ndoylefineart.com/ringgold.html

- Do you feel that reading about the artist's biography helps you to have a better understanding of the picture? YES /NO, why?
- In Faith Ringgold's text there are some examples of the passive voice. Can you spot them?

(Check the answers in the key)

STUDY LINK: Appendix I, section 2, "The passive voice".

EXTENSION WORK

Choose any of the following tasks

- A. Explore Faith Ringgold's artistic work (www.faithringgold.com) and consider the historical contexts and aspects that she focuses on. Discuss with your partner(s).
- B. Look for other representative images of slavery by other American artists and try to find similarities and differences with Faith Ringgold's work. Discuss with your partner(s).
- C. Choose what you consider is the most inspiring piece of work in the previous task and write a short essay about it.

STUDY LINK: See Appendix VII "Art criticism".

- D. Make an exhibition which includes representative images (paintings, photographs, lithographs, etc.) dealing with the topics of "Art on Slave Trade" or "Slavery in America".

Here are some guidelines to carry out this task:

- Firstly, choose any virtual pinboard (Pinterest or any other), to upload your visual images and corresponding texts. Alternatively, you may do the task with a Power Point presentation, a Youtube video, or simply a Word document.
- Secondly, make a selection of representative images that may illustrate important cultural and historical events, aspects, movements or / and figures related to the chosen topic. You are advised to include a minimum of 5 images and a maximum of 8.

Briefly describe and analyse each of the images that you have selected. You are advised to write one or two paragraphs per image. Example:

SLAVERY IN AMERICA

<p>Slavery in what became the United States probably began with the arrival of “20 and odd” Africans to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. It officially ended with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.</p> <p>Image 1</p>	<p>Image 2</p> <p>Slaves were extremely exploited and forced to work against their will. Some of them were sold, or some were debt bondage and hereditary slaves. The common view of the slaves was that they were inferior, someone who was less than human.</p>	<p>Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) was brought as a slave to Boston, Mass, from West Africa in 1761. Purchased by the Wheatley family, she was taught to read and write. She was soon immersed in the Bible and the Greek and Latin classics. She became the first African-American and one of the first women in the American colonies to write a book of poetry.</p> <p>Image 3</p>
<p>Image 4</p> <p>An abolitionist movement only started in the late 18th century, when English and American Quakers began to question the morality of slavery.</p>	<p>Lincoln, though he privately detested slavery, responded cautiously to the call by abolitionists after the outbreak of the Civil War. As the war dragged on, the federal government began to realize the strategic advantages of emancipation</p> <p>Image 5</p>	<p>An ex-slave couple on the front steps of a plantation house, which was in decay, 1941. Although slavery officially ended in 1865, only the 1964 Civil Rights Act forbade discrimination on the basis of race.</p> <p>Image 6</p>

Figure 3. Example of pinboard. You may search for the related images on the internet

- Optional:

After your analysis and description of the images, write an essay expanding on the cultural, social and historical context.

E. Real world task: forced migration

Do some research on current forced migration in the world. You are advised to search on the internet. For example, you can explore the following sites:

<http://www.unhcr.org/>

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-fight-for-freedom-7-organizations-combatting-human-trafficking>

- What news related to forced migration have you heard of/ read about lately?
- What are the reasons why people are forced to migrate?
- What can be done to prevent human trafficking?
- Are forced migrants/refugees usually welcome in their new communities? Yes/No, why?
- What can be done to integrate forced migrants/refugees more successfully?
- Discuss these issues in small groups.

LESSON 2

THE GREAT MIGRATION

“Let us train ourselves to see beauty in black”

W.E.B. Du Bois

Figure 4. Drawing inspired by “During the World War there was a Great Migration North of Southern Negroes” by Jacob Lawrence

(You are advised to search for the original picture on the Internet)



Task 1.2.1.

Look carefully at the picture above inspired by that entitled “During the World War there was a Great Migration North of Southern Negroes” by African-American painter Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000).

Now answer the following questions:

1. Where are the people at the station travelling to?
2. What do they all have in common?
3. Why do people usually travel?

Task 1.2.2.

The people at the station look similar, we cannot distinguish their individual traits. The painter, Jacob Lawrence, emphasized their anonymity in order to describe a general experience, the extraordinary migration of African Americans to the North of USA after World War I.

Now read about the historical context of the Great Migration:

It is estimated that, between 1916 and 1930, one million African Americans left the South and moved North in search of better lives. This exodus, the largest mass movement in American history, was called “the Great Migration”. It was caused by racial segregation and oppression in the South and the demand for jobs in the North brought about by World War I. Black people hoped to find more promising economic opportunities, better jobs, housing, education, and freedom from tyranny, violence and sexual abuse.

Emigration from the eleven states of the old Confederacy skyrocketed from 207,000 in 1900–1910 to 478,000 from 1910–1920. Nearly 800,000 left during the 1920s and 400,000 during the Depression of the 1930s.

Source: Lapucia, Betty, “Migration North to the Promised Land” in <http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1978/2/78.02.05.x.html> accessed 01/06/17.

Answer the following questions:

- Why did so many African-Americans move North?
- Do you think they found “more promising economic opportunities, better jobs, housing, education, and freedom? Why?

Discuss with your partner(s)

Task 1.2.3.

The picture you analyzed in the previous section is panel n.1 of a series of 60 panels. Jacob Lawrence painted the series between 1940 and 1941. When he finished it, he was just 24. A painter, a storyteller and an educator, Lawrence soon became the first African American artist to be widely recognized and accepted.

Now read Jacob Lawrence 's biography:

Jacob Lawrence was born in Atlantic City (New Jersey) in 1917. His mother, Rosa Lee, from Virginia, and his father, Jacob Lawrence, from South Carolina, were part of the first big wave of the migration between 1916 and 1919. They met on their way North and started a family. Shortly, however, when Jacob junior was only 7, his parents separated. Rosa left her three children in foster homes in New Jersey and moved to Harlem, New York, the spiritual capital of Black America. When Jacob was 13, his mother had saved enough money to take her family to Harlem.

Jacob Lawrence's sensibility was formed in Harlem during the Great Depression. He painted his environment, black working-class life, poverty, crime, racial tensions and police brutality. He was the first important artist to be trained in Harlem by the black community. He was part of the so-called "Harlem Renaissance", a cultural revolution that started in the 1920s and included an enormous amount of talented African American artists, writers, musicians, orators, dramatists, and entertainers as well as politicians, businessmen, lawyers, etc.

In 1941 Lawrence joined Edith Halpert' Downtown Gallery in New York. He became thus the first African American artist to be represented by a major NY commercial gallery. Edith Halpert agreed with *Fortune* magazine to have 26 panels of Lawrence's "Migration of the Negro" series reproduced and Lawrence became nationally well-known. However, Halpert made a controversial decision: she decided to sell the series to two different museums. The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. bought the odd numbered panels (1, 3, 5, ...) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York bought the even numbered ones (2, 4, 6, ...). Although there have been several exhibitions of both collections together — the last one in 1991 — the best way to see the whole series is in books.

We can talk about two tragedies as regards "The Migration of the Negro": on the one hand, the historical tragedy it chronicles and, on the other, the tragedy of the series' division.

Source: adapted from P. Nesbet and M. DuBois (eds.), (2000). *Over the Line: the Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press.

Now complete Lawrence's profile:

NAME:

PLACE OF BIRTH:

NATIONALITY:

JOB:

ART MOVEMENT:

SPECIAL INTERESTS:

MUSEUMS IN WHICH HIS WORK IS EXHIBITED:

(Check the answers in the key)

Task 1.2.4.

Because of the series' division, Jacob Lawrence and his work is well represented in two important web sites, www.phillipscollection.org and www.moma.org. Search for the 60 panels of "The Migration of the Negro" in both sites and answer the following questions:

- How does the series end?
- Does panel n. 60 have anything in common with panel n.1?
- Can you think of another way of ending the series? (Suggest your own panel no. 60.)

- Which is your favourite panel? Why?

STUDY LINK: see Appendix II, section 1, “Expressing personal opinions”.

- How did Jacob Lawrence emphasize the unity of the series? (Think about the colours and recurring or repeated images or sentences)

Task 1.2.5. _____

Choose any panel of the “Migration of the Negro” in which there are at least three characters. Create a short informal conversation among them.

CHOSEN PANEL: number _____

CONVERSATION:

Task 1.2.6. _____

Jacob Lawrence’s style was unique in many ways. His work has been described as “naïve”, “primitive”, “social realist”, “semi-abstract”, “expressionist”... Have a look at the glossary below. Which style do you think best matches Lawrence’s “Migration of the Negro”? Why?
