

Robert Colescott

The One-Two Punch

Time: 15 minutes

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Robert Colescott: The One-Two Punch is a film about an award-winning artist of incredible strength and drama. Colescott is considered one of the most important American figurative painters of his generation. Throughout his professional career, now spanning over fifty years, he has stood at the cutting edge of painting from a position outside the mainstream art world. His work is sarcastic, satirical, humorous, and disturbing as he tackles racial and gender stereotypes. Things are never quite what they seem in Colescott's paintings. They are full of surprises. For example, in *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*, he replaces the figure of General George Washington in the Revolutionary War and reinterprets this moment in history. The more you explore his artwork, the more you challenge your own perceptions. He uses frequent references to history that cause us to open our eyes and our minds. Students will see how Colescott creates his work, as he discusses his ideas, views and bold painting style.

TO THE TEACHER

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and his accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

BIOGRAPHY

Artist Robert Colescott (1925 -) came from a musical background. His mother was a pianist; his father, a classically-trained violinist who also played jazz with the young Louis Armstrong and King Oliver. His parents had moved from New Orleans to Oakland, California. Oakland was the end of the Southern Pacific railroad line, on which Colescott's father worked as a porter. Robert played the drums and performed with local bands, but he was drawn to art.

He served in the army in France during World War II and returned to the San Francisco Bay area to attend college at University of California at Berkeley. In 1949 he traveled to Paris to study with Fernand Leger, the famous French Cubist, who awakened his interest in figuration. He returned to Berkeley in 1950 and received his master's degree , Colescott taught art in the public schools in Seattle and then in Oregon, where he taught painting and drawing at Portland State University. His career was established in Portland, where he had his first solo show.

Colescott had a life-changing experience in 1964, when he had a one-year fellowship at the American Research Center in Cairo, Egypt. He later taught at American University there. After living in Paris , where he developed a different perspective on American life, he came back to San Francisco in 1970. His style was developing as a bold, intense palette, featuring narrative, gender , race, parody, and the use of stereotypical images to subvert stereotypical views. In the 1980s, Colescott moved to Tucson to teach at the University of Arizona. His work became a way of questioning history and society. He is now Emeritus Professor of Art at the University of Arizona.

The artist has had numerous solo exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale, as well as group exhibitions in the U.S. and other countries. He is represented in public collections in such museums as Rose At Museum, Brandeis, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Walker Art Center and Whitney Museum of American Art.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.

- Watch for how people describe Colescott's work.

- Watch for famous artworks by other artists that Colescott "borrowed."
- Watch for information about Colescott's background.
- Watch for a scene on a train that shows his father and a fellow worker who is also an artist.
- Watch for examples of humor.
- Watch for the African influence on Colescott's work.
- Watch for how the artist works.
- Watch for examples of artwork based on a famous child movie star.
- Watch for how Colescott says African American history has been ignored.
- Watch for the artist playing drums.

QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

*Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Robert Colescott and his work.*

? What do people mean when they describe Colescott's work as a "one-two punch?"

? Compare the differences between Van Gogh's painting, *The Potato Eaters*, and Colescott's *Dem Taters*. Why did Colescott do this? What is he trying to say?

? What do you think of Colescott's paintings? Are they funny? shocking? offensive? mean? confusing? Back up your opinion.

? What is a satire? How are Colescott's paintings satire?

? What does Colescott say about being an artist?

? In this video we see how the artist changes things around. For example, he makes famous child movie star, Shirley Temple, black and Bill Robinson, white. What if a little black girl had been America's sweetheart starring in this 1930s movie? Would it change how people treated African Americans? Why?

? Appropriation is an artistic term for borrowing. Do you think it is right for Colescott to borrow other artist's pictures? Why or why not? Do you think he does it because he doesn't have any ideas of his own?

? Why did Colescott paint George Washington Carver crossing the Delaware? Who is he? What do the other people in the boat represent?

? What does Colescott mean when he says that artists challenge the status quo?

? What can you learn from Robert Colescott?

EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Robert Colescott's message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. One of the reasons Colescott's paintings are intriguing, and even shocking, is because he puts in a surprise ---something you don't expect. For example, what if a mouse were bigger than a cat? What would it look like? What would happen? Draw a scene of a "big" mouse and a "little" cat. Brainstorm other ideas for "surprise " drawings.

2. Look at a reproduction of the famous painting American Gothic by Grant Wood. Find some examples of how this painting has been changed. Research African Americans who could have been subject matter for this painting like Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, Bill Cosby or Whoopi Goldberg. Now create a new version with African

American people as subjects. What will be in the background instead of a farm house?

3. Write a news story about George Washington Carver crossing the Delaware. Remember to include who, what, when, where, why and how.
4. Think of a person you have heard about who changed the status quo. Write a brief biography telling about the change. Assemble the writings into a class book.
5. Debate the question: Is it right for artists to borrow the work of other artists? Be sure to research the different points of view on this question and show examples of appropriated work if possible.
6. Find out as much as you can about Sargeant Johnson. He worked on a train with Colescott's father, but was also a professional artist. Create a monologue to introduce yourself to the class as Sargeant Johnson.
7. What problem or issue of prejudice do you want to bring to peoples' attention through making art? Identify the problem and then think about what Robert Colescott might do to portray it. Share ideas with your class. Now think about what you would do to address the issue with a work of art. What media would you use - paint, pencil, pastel, clay? How would you express your idea through subject matter, color, line, shape, composition? Complete the artwork and challenge the class to figure out what the issue is. Exhibit all of the works.
8. Do a portrait of yourself as another person you admire or would like to be. Write about your choice.
9. Compare Colescott's paintings of 1981 (e.g. pieces of cakes and a landscape of hot dogs) with his later works. How are they the same/different? Use a graphic organizer to chart the responses. Which paintings do you like the best? Why?
10. In the video you saw art critics and curators tell about Robert Colescott and his work. Become an art critic and write a persuasive article about why you think people should go (or not go) to see Colescott's work.

VIDEO SERIES

Robert Colescott: The One Two Punch created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about *Robert Colescott: The One-Two Punch* and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Productions, tel: 914-238-9366; fax: 914-238-6324.

This video study guide is by Nancy Roucher, an arts education consultant, who specializes in interdisciplinary curriculum. She lives in Sarasota, Florida, and can be reached at nancyhr@home.com or at 941-349-3439.