

A vibrant, multi-colored quilted fabric, likely a protest quilt, featuring various patterns and text. The quilt is composed of many small, rectangular patches of fabric in various colors and patterns, including polka dots, stripes, and solid colors. The patches are held together by thick black stitching. The text on the quilt includes "DUKE ELLINGTON THE MIRCLES" at the top, "MISS ATTITUDE" in the middle, and "BLACK PANTHER PARTY" in large, bold letters across the center. Other visible text includes "THE S... D A..." and "THE S...".

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties

March 7–July 6, 2014

Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties

About this Teaching Resource

This packet features three works of art from the special exhibition *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*. It is intended as a tool to help you look at art with fifth- to twelfth-grade students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussion by reviewing the descriptions and background information provided. Then use the section “Questions for Viewing” to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one or more of the suggested activity ideas. Share your teaching stories with us! If you use these materials, [let us know](#).

About the Exhibition

The 1960s was a decade defined by dramatic social and cultural upheaval. A hundred years following the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the Thirteenth Amendment (1865), which abolished slavery in the United States, African Americans still faced vast inequities in their daily lives. Many local and state laws barred them from classrooms and bathrooms, theaters and restaurants, railway cars and buses, juries and legislatures. Initially, the Civil Rights Movement used nonviolent protest and civil disobedience to bring about change. Subsequently, activists pushed a more confrontational stance to address the enduring economic, political, and cultural consequences of racial oppression. *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* explores some of the creative ways that artists aligned themselves with the campaign to end discrimination and worked to bridge racial borders. In works that encompass gestural and geometric abstraction, assemblage, Minimalism, Pop imagery, printmaking, and photography, the sixty-six artists in the exhibition demonstrated their activism, documented others' activist efforts, and reflected on the social and political climate to which they bore witness.



Gordon Parks (American, 1912–2006). *Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1963*. Gelatin silver print, image 18 15/16 x 13 7/16 in. (48.1 x 34.1 cm) The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the photographer in honor of Edward Steichen, 1993. © The Gordon Parks Foundation



Description of the Artwork

A well-used wood door with a large, clear-glass panel is anchored upright on a black rectangular base. “ADMISSIONS OFFICE” is written in black capital letters across the top of the glass panel. Below the lettering appears a child-sized body print, including two handprints with fingers outspread and facing inward, placed above the head; both sides of the figure’s face, joined at the mouth and nose; and an impression of the figure’s clothing. The inked surface reveals textures made from the fabric, skin, and hair.

About the Artist

David Hammons (born 1943) is a conceptual multimedia artist who employs sculpture, printmaking, and performance to create his art. In 1963 Hammons left his hometown of Springfield, Illinois, and moved to Los Angeles, California. There he discovered a community of practicing black artists and studied under the former Works Progress Administration (WPA) artist Charles White, whose socially committed work reflected the experiences of black Americans. Hammons captured his response to the political and social climate of the 1960s through his early Body Prints series. In these works, Hammons’s own body often served as the printing plate, and diverse materials, including paper and found objects, were used as the surface. After coating his naked or clothed body in an oily substance, the artist pressed himself against the chosen surface. He then dusted the print with a dry pigment, which adhered to the oily imprinted areas, revealing the image. Finally, he sprayed the dusted surface with a fixative to protect the image and ensure that the pigments adhered.¹

About the Artwork

In *The Door (Admissions Office)*, a found object—the glass-paneled wood door—serves as the surface for a body print and becomes a

conceptual sculpture. The size of the print suggests that it is that of a young boy. The history of the door is unknown. Hammons invites viewers to interpret the relationship between the body print, door, and surrounding space for themselves.

Questions for Viewing *The Door (Admissions Office)*

Look closely at this sculpture. What do you see?

What is a door used for? Where might you find a door like this? If this door is used to block an entryway, do you think the figure is trying to enter or exit? Explain your answer.

Zoom in on the glass panel. What do you notice?

Describe the figure’s pose. What does it communicate to the viewer?

The U.S. federal government began to implement school desegregation throughout the nation in 1954. Many white communities responded with mass resistance and violence and attempted to block black students from attending schools in white neighborhoods. Given this history, what kind of metaphor (an object, activity, or idea used as a symbol for something else) could this door represent? What might the body print represent?

David Hammons once said, “I feel that my art relates to my total environment—my being a black, political, and social human being. Although I am involved with communicating with others, I believe that my art itself is really my statement. For me it has to be.” What does Hammons mean? What statement might *The Door (Admissions Office)* make for him?

This artwork was made in 1969, after the passage of two major acts of legislation: The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (also known as the Fair Housing Act), which prohibits discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing. What might be the connection between this artwork and the two acts?



Description of the Artwork

This highly polished wood sculpture shows a stylized, life-size female form. The figure stands upright; its right arm is fully extended above the head with the fist clenched. The small head is devoid of facial features. The figure has small, round breasts, and a large, hollow cavity dominates the torso area. The left knee is bent in a forward motion.

About the Artist

Elizabeth Catlett was born in 1915 in Washington, D.C. She studied design, printmaking, and drawing at Howard University and in 1940 became the first student to receive an M.F.A. in sculpture from the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa. In 1942 Catlett moved to New York, where she became acquainted with Harlem's leading African American artists and intellectuals. During this time she was briefly married to the artist Charles White. She taught sewing and sculpture at George Washington Carver, a community school in Harlem for students who "labored during the day as domestic workers, cooks, janitors, elevator operators, or in the garment industry."² These students "opened her eyes to the hardships endured by working class and poor people"³ and inspired Catlett to create art that was socially relevant and politically engaged in the struggle against oppression. She received a fellowship in 1946 to travel to Mexico City, where she studied painting, sculpture, and lithography. There, she worked with printmakers at the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphic Arts Workshop), dedicated to using graphic art to promote social change. She eventually remarried, to the Mexican artist Francisco Moya, and became a Mexican citizen. Catlett taught sculpture at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas at Mexico's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México until retiring in 1975. She died in 2012. Her work continues to be critically acclaimed worldwide.

About the Artwork

Although living in Mexico, Catlett nonetheless felt connected to sociopolitical developments in the United States. She carved *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* to honor the brave young women of the Civil Rights Movement and to express what the movement meant to her. The figure's two most distinguishable features—the raised fist and hollow torso—both carry symbolic meaning. Historically, the raised fist has been used to express unity, strength, defiance, or resistance, and it became the salute of the Black Power movement that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, medal winners John Carlos and Tommie Smith sparked controversy when they raised their fists during the American national anthem to protest on behalf of the Olympic Project for Human Rights. The hollow torso also draws the viewer's eye, defining the figure's form as much as the sculpted wood does. The egg-shaped void can be seen as a symbol for women's physical power—the ability to generate and cultivate life in the womb.⁴ It is also associated with political power, as Melanie Ann Herzog observes: "The opening in the torso does not suggest emptiness but instead evokes the source of energy carried upward in the raised fist."⁵



Description of the Artwork

This two-piece suit, comprising a waist-length jacket and knee-length skirt, is a brightly colored patchwork of fabrics featuring polka dots, checks, stripes, plaids, and other patterns. On the top third of the jacket, various images mimicking political posters or advertisements for musical performances have been imprinted onto the fabric. The bottom two-thirds of the jacket and sections of the skirt are appliquéd with velvet lines suggesting a brick wall. Tagged in acrylic paint are phrases such as “‘E’ Thang,” “Miss Attitude,” and “Black Prince.”

About the Artist

Jae Jarrell was born in 1935 in Cleveland, Ohio. She has been a fashion designer and textile artist for more than fifty years. The granddaughter of a tailor, Jarrell learned sewing and fine handwork early on from family members. In 1967 she married the artist Wadsworth Jarrell. In 1968 they both became founding members of the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA). She contributed several handmade garments to AfriCOBRA exhibitions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including *Urban Wall Suit*, which Jarrell proudly described as her “revolutionary Silk Wall of graffitied messages from the ‘hood.’” Another of her garments, the unlocated *Revolutionary Suit*, is depicted in her husband's painting *Revolutionary*, 1971 (Brooklyn Museum), which pays homage to the political activist Angela Davis.

Jarrell first studied at Bowling Green State University and later at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She earned a B.F.A. from Howard University, in Washington, D.C., and began graduate studies at Howard University and Parsons School of Design while also raising three children. Jarrell has always seen her commitment to family as linked to her work as an artist and activist, as reflected in her first AfriCOBRA project, *Ebony Family*: “My political stance on nurturing the strong loving Black family is real, and personally experienced.”⁶

About the Artwork

Urban Wall Suit references the traditional use of murals as a vehicle for advocating social and political change. The garment's poster imagery, graffiti-like phrases, and thin black appliquéd lines in a bricklike pattern all evoke an urban landscape. During the late 1960s, several visual artists associated with the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) came together to create the Wall of Respect, an outdoor mural in Chicago's South Side focused on the theme of black heroes. Jarrell and her husband were heavily influenced by the conversations surrounding this project, which eventually led them to found the artists' collective AfriCOBRA. Of this period, Jarrell has said, “It was a call to all the aesthetically endowed to show up! Bring it: outspoken word, music with infectious cadence, images that look like me and mine, fond titles of ‘Sister’ and ‘Brother.’”⁷ When worn, the suit literally becomes a mobile urban wall—displaying colors, signs, and slogans that speak directly to the realities and needs of those living in disenfranchised urban communities. As Jarrell said: “The thing that AfriCOBRA achieved was in setting up a philosophy of positive imagery, and just good direction for young people, for neighborhoods, for the community. . . .That's something that is an advantage of working in a group, and having honed our own language. . . .We clearly wrote on the canvases and garments and tapestries, exactly what we wanted you to know, and say.”⁸

Questions for Viewing *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* and *Urban Wall Suit*

Take a moment to look closely at these two artworks. In what ways are they similar? How are they different?

What do you notice about the materials used by each artist?

Mimic the pose of Elisabeth Catlett's sculpture. How does this stance make you feel?

How does Jae Jarrell's suit compare to a traditional business suit? How might someone wearing this suit feel?

Both Jarrell and Catlett wanted to make art that helped to create better lives for themselves and their communities. What connections to this goal do you see in these artworks?

The title of Catlett's sculpture is *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*. What does this title tell us about the artist? About the artwork?

Jarrell was inspired by an outdoor mural in Chicago's South Side created to uplift young people by portraying positive images from their cultural heritage. What evidence of this source of inspiration do you see in her artwork? Do you think the words, phrases, and images she features in *Urban Wall Suit* are still relevant to young people living in urban communities today? What updates would you make, if any? Why?



Classroom Activities

Art as Activism

The artists featured in this exhibition demonstrated support of the Civil Rights Movement by creating art that reflected the inequality, conflict, and rising empowerment of the period. The movement continues to inspire civil rights efforts in the United States and around the world. Create your own artwork to express your support of a contemporary civil rights issue.

Identify an issue that interests you. Possible topics include racial profiling, immigration, housing, and the criminal justice system. Find at least three resources. The website <http://www.civilrights.org/issues/> offers helpful links to articles and other resources. Use the following questions to guide your research:

What conflict or disagreement is at the center of this civil rights issue?

Who are the key players involved? Are they individuals and/or organizations?

What specific rights are under debate? Who will these rights benefit?

What is your position in this debate? How might the outcome of this issue have an impact on your life? Write a statement summarizing your findings.

Now create a work of art to visualize your statement. For example, Hammons selected the door to an admissions office to serve as a statement for equal access to jobs, education, and social acceptance, while Jarrell chose to paint shapes that resemble a brick wall as a statement about the needs of black youth in urban spaces. Select a medium: photography, painting, drawing, collage, or fashion design (all forms that are represented in the exhibition). Brainstorm and collect images, colors, materials, and text that might reference or illustrate the key players, central conflict, and desired outcome in your statement. Give your artwork a title. Share it with others.

Creative Writing

Write a short story or poem in which Catlett's sculpture comes to life and is dressed in Jarrell's suit. Where would the figure go? What would she do?

Witness/Words: Writing, Research, and Analysis

During the 1960s, multiple and conflicting perspectives on civil rights issues were documented, and these testimonials now serve as primary resources (original documents created during the time under study). Artists shared their opinions and perceptions, and advocated for change through visual art, poetry, music, dance, and theater. Others chose to express their views in essays, speeches, newspaper articles, and interviews.

Identify one work of art in the exhibition (images are available at: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/witness_civil_rights/) and one text-based primary source (poem, essay, song lyrics, interview, newspaper or magazine article, letter, field note) that document experiences of people involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Use a Venn diagram to take notes on the similarities and differences between the artwork and the text. Now collect some information about the artist and the author. Write a short essay to compare and contrast their perspectives. What circumstances caused their opinions to align and/or diverge?

Resources for Teachers

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, http://bcri.org/education_programs/index.html

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is a large interpretive museum and research center in Birmingham, Alabama, that is devoted to the struggles of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Its archives, a repository for the collection and preservation of civil rights documents and artifacts, serve as a national resource for educators and researchers.

Carbone, Teresa A., and Kellie Jones, with Connie H. Choi, Dalila Scruggs, and Cynthia A. Young. *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*. Exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Monacelli Press, 2014)

This catalogue of the exhibition *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, features a chronology of events from 1954 to 1970, as well as four essays.

Facing History and Ourselves: Boston Public Schools Civil Rights Curriculum, <http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/units/boston-public-schools-civil-rights>

This curriculum provides strategies for linking young people's struggles today to young people's activism during the Civil Rights Movement. The curriculum is organized around three critical moments in the Civil Rights Movement: the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, the Selma-to-Montgomery March for voting rights in 1965, and the desegregation of Boston public schools in the 1960s and 1970s.

The National Civil Rights Museum, <http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/>

The National Civil Rights Museum is dedicated to chronicling the key moments of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and inspiring participation in civil and human rights efforts globally. The website offers information about the museum's collections and exhibitions, teacher resources, and more.

Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera, Brooklyn Museum Teacher Resource Packet, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/norman_rockwell/uploads/Rockwell_Teachers_Packet.pdf

This teaching resource for a 2010–11 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum discusses Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*, which was inspired by the story of Ruby Bridges, who in 1960 became the first African American child to attend an all-white elementary school in New Orleans.

Teaching with Documents: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/>

This online resource created by the National Archives provides teachers with resources to teach about the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including legislative documents, background information, classroom activities, and additional resources.

Voices of the Civil Rights, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civilrights/>

The website for the online exhibition Voices of Civil Rights documents events during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The exhibition couples oral histories and photographs to explore diverse individuals' experiences during the Civil Rights Movement.

This packet was written by Keonna Hendrick, Senior Museum Educator, and Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Museum Educator, with assistance from Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development, and Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art.

Notes

1. For an image depicting this process, go to:

http://ep.yimg.com/ca//artbook_2270_1679534736.

2. Melanie Anne Herzog, "Sculpting a Lineage: Elizabeth Catlett and African American Sculptors," *Sculpture Review* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 9.

3. Ibid.

4. Herzog, "Sculpting a Lineage," 142; and Michael Brenson and Lowery Stokes Sims, organized by Lucinda H. Gedeon, *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture: A Fifty-Year Retrospective* (Purchase, N.Y.: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 1998), 22.

5. Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

6. Artist's statement, in Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, exh. cat. (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Monacelli Press), 117.

7. Ibid.

8. Jae Jarrell, interview by Rebecca Zorach, "Conversations about Art Transforming Politics & Community in Chicago & Beyond: Wadsworth and Jae Jarrell", *Never the Same: Conversations about Art Transforming Politics & Community in Chicago & Beyond*, <http://never-the-same.org/interviews/wadsworth-and-jae-jarrell/> (accessed January 10, 2014).

Pp. 1 (detail), 5, 6, 12 (overall): Jae Jarrell (American, born 1935). *Urban Wall Suit*, circa 1969. Dyed and printed silk with paint, 38 x 21 x 10 (96.5 x 53.3 x 25.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of R. M. Atwater, Anna Wolfrom Dove, Alice Fiebiger, Joseph Fiebiger, Belle Campbell Harriss, and Emma L. Hyde, by exchange; Designated Purchase Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, and Carll H. de Silver Fund, 2012.80.16. © Jae Jarrell

Pp: 4, 6, 11: Elizabeth Catlett (American, 1915–2012). *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*, 1968. Cedar, 68 x 12 x 12 in. (172.7 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm). Collection of Reginald and Aliya Browne. © Catlett Mora Family Trust / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Erwin Gaspin

Pp. 3, 10: David Hammons (American, born 1943). *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969. Wood, acrylic sheet, and pigment construction, 79x 48 x 15 in. (200.7 x 122 x 38.1 cm). California African American Museum, Los Angeles, Collection of Friends, the Foundation of the California African American Museum. © David Hammons. Photo: Gene Ogami

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