

# Black Is Beautiful

**The Photography of  
Kwame Brathwaite**

Educational Resource



**“It was a time when people were protesting injustices related to race, class, and human rights around the globe. I focused on perfecting my craft so that I could use my gift to inspire thought, relay ideas, and tell stories of our struggle, our work, our liberation.”**

Kwame Brathwaite

# About this Resource

This resource is intended to inform educators about the exhibition *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite*, so they are better able to lead students of all ages in meaningful discussions surrounding its content. Each photograph in the exhibition offers a valuable opportunity for students to discover and discuss themes related to the Black Is Beautiful movement. This resource provides a selection of photographs from which to begin these dialogues.

Also included in this resource are works in conversation and a post-visit activity. Each image is accompanied by a brief summary of the associated movement, as well as guiding questions to engage students in the exhibition. Following each image is a section titled “Going Further: Works in Conversation.” This section brings other images and ephemera from the exhibition into the conversation.

Before a conversation about a photograph begins, offer students a few moments to examine the work and carefully investigate the scene. Encourage them to look closely and share their thoughts and ideas about the artwork, then guide a dialogue based on their inquiries, perceptions, and thoughts.

# About the Exhibition

Known as the “Keeper of the Images,” Kwame Brathwaite deployed his photography from the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s as an agent of social change. Born in Brooklyn to a Caribbean American family and raised in the Bronx, Brathwaite traces his artistic and political sensibilities to his youth. After seeing the horrific images of Emmett Till published in *Jet* magazine in 1955, Brathwaite and his brother Elombe Brath turned to art and political activism, absorbing the ideas of Jamaican-born activist Marcus Garvey, who promoted a Pan-Africanist vision for Black economic liberation and freedom.

Kwame and Elombe founded the African Jazz-Art Society (AJAS)—later known as the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS)—a collective of artists and creatives, who organized jazz concerts in clubs around Harlem and the Bronx, featuring luminaries such as Miles Davis, Abbey Lincoln, and Max Roach. In addition to promoting musical events, the group advanced a message of economic empowerment and political consciousness in the Harlem community, emphasizing the power of self-presentation and style. “Think Black, Buy Black” became a rallying cry. In the 1960s, Brathwaite and his collective also sought to address how white conceptions of beauty and body image affected Black women. To do so, they popularized the transformative idea “Black Is Beautiful” and founded the Grandassa Models, a modeling troupe of locally cast women who appeared in annual fashion shows at Harlem’s Apollo Theater.

Brathwaite’s work, which harnessed the power of music, style, and community to advance social justice, deepens our understanding of the Black Freedom Movement and is now becoming part of that era’s visual canon.

The texts in this guide are adapted from Tanisha C. Ford’s essay in the accompanying book, *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019).

## **Part One: African Jazz-Art Society**

Brathwaite discovered his love for photography while frequenting jazz clubs and festivals in New York City, and he took some of his first iconic images at these shows. In the 1950s, Brathwaite created the African Jazz-Art Society (AJAS) in order to bring performers back uptown to Harlem and the Bronx, where the movement began. In this section of the guide, you will look at photographs and ephemera associated with the surge of mid-century jazz culture.

## **Part Two: Think Black, Buy Black**

In this section, you will look at photographs and ephemera associated with the “Think Black, Buy Black” movement. Tanisha C. Ford, author of *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (Aperture, 2019) states, “Buying Black was rooted in Garvey’s principle of Black economic independence: in order to empower the Black community, Black folks needed to keep their dollars circulating within their own community.” She adds, “To ‘Think Black’ meant not only being politically conscious and concerned with issues facing the Black community, but also reflecting that awareness of self through dress and self-presentation.”

## **Part Three: The Grandassa Models**

AJAS founded a modeling troupe of Afrocentric Black Harlemites and New York transplants, named the Grandassa Models, to promote the Black Is Beautiful movement through the 1960s and ’70s. Models in the group were committed to wearing their hair in natural styles, while often showcasing African-influenced fashion and jewelry. In this section of the guide, you will look at photographs and ephemera associated with the Grandassa Models.

# Themes

Each photograph and object in the exhibition offers a valuable opportunity to discover and discuss the following themes, vocabulary words, and concepts.

## Race

Kwame Brathwaite's photography, and the Black Is Beautiful movement it spurred on, served as a vehicle for his Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist politics. By centering economic independence and highlighting the cultural richness of the African American community in his photos, Brathwaite created a platform to celebrate Black beauty in both local and global contexts.

## Fashion

In Brathwaite's portraits of the Grandassa Models, the eye-catching, African-inspired fashion served a political role—it helped assert an autonomous vision of Black beauty.

## Music

Brathwaite started his career photographing musicians playing in jazz clubs. He strove to capture the musicality and mood of the genre in his images, and the inherent radicality of jazz became an essential influence on his politics and photo practice.

## Additional Themes

Archives	Diversity	Harlem Renaissance
Black Nationalism	Documentation	Jazz
Beauty	Empowerment	Pan-Africanism
Civil Rights	Feminism	Portraiture
Community	Growth	Place
Culture	Ideology	Respect
Cultural Unity	Intersectionality	Storytelling

# African Jazz-Art Society

**“Jazz set the rhythm for all of Brathwaite’s work.  
Having come of age in the Bronx just after World War II,  
he is a son of the modern Jazz Age.”**

Tanisha C. Ford

Kwame Brathwaite frequented Club 845 in the South Bronx as a teenager. One night, he noticed his friend taking pictures of club-goers without using a flash. He was so impressed by the speed and versatility of the professional camera that, from that moment on, whether documenting the dimly lit atmosphere of Club 845 or the eclectic energy of the streets of Harlem and the Bronx, Brathwaite committed himself to capturing the tempo and vibe of his surroundings. “Music is the lifeblood of Brathwaite’s photography,” writes Ford. Brathwaite saved up his money and bought a Hasselblad medium-format camera and began shooting in both black and white and color, before realizing that black and white captured the essence of jazz that he was looking for. “Jazz set the rhythm for all of Brathwaite’s work,” writes Ford. He studied the elasticity, improvisation, and syncopation of the genre and translated it directly into his photographs.

In this photo, Brathwaite captured Miles Davis and Paul Chambers performing at the Randall’s Island Jazz Festival in New York City.

#### Guiding Questions:

1. What’s going on in this photograph? Who do you think these people are, and why do you think Brathwaite chose to photograph them?
2. Does this image capture what it feels like to be at a live performance?
3. Brathwaite thought that photographing in black and white captured the essence of jazz better than photographing in color. What do you think and why?



Image: Miles Davis and Paul Chambers, Randall’s Island Jazz Festival, ca. 1958



# Going Further: Works in Conversation

Related Themes:

Archives  
Culture  
Documentation  
Music  
Jazz  
Portraiture



Fig. 1

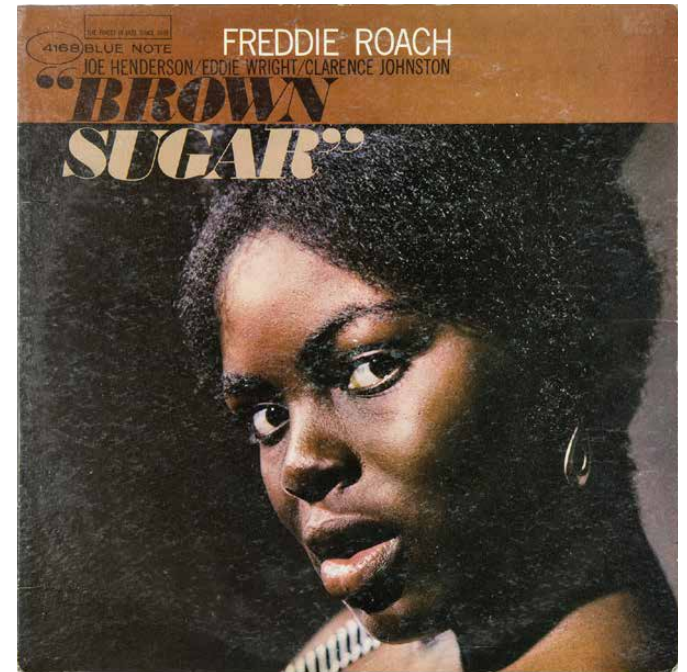


Fig. 2

**Fig. 1:** Original AJASS members, left to right: Bob Gumbs, Frank Adu, Elombe Brath (seated), Kwame Brathwaite, Ernest Baxter, and Chris Hall. AJASS, Harlem, ca. 1962

**Fig. 2:** Clara Lewis Buggs on the cover of Freddie Roach, *Brown Sugar*, 1964

**Fig. 3:** Max Roach playing the drums, Harlem, ca. 1962



Fig. 3

Kwame Brathwaite and his brother Elombe Brath formed the African Jazz-Art Society (AJAS), a collective of playwrights, graphic artists, dancers, and fashion designers. By the early 1950s, the jazz scene in New York had migrated away from its origins in Harlem and the Bronx, to places like Birdland in Midtown or Café Bohemia in the Village. AJAS made it their goal to bring jazz back uptown and began to recruit rising musicians to play. Soon, “we could pick some of the best musicians in the world. We’d have good, packed houses all the time,” Brathwaite remembers.

“From his days photographing the jazz shows, Brathwaite learned a skill that would serve him well over the course of his career: patience,” writes Ford. “His main aim with these initial photos was to translate the essence of the experience for the viewer. Make them *feel* and *hear* it.”

In this photograph, Brathwaite caught musician Abbey Lincoln’s expression as she belted out a song in concert in Harlem.

#### Guiding Questions:

1. Take a look at this woman’s expression. What do you think she is doing? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. What clues are there in the image that tell you this is a musical performance?
3. Brathwaite stated that his aim was to translate the essence of this experience to the viewer; make them feel and hear it. Can you hear what she might be singing? Do you think it is a slow ballad or an upbeat song? Why?
4. What does this image make you feel? Why?



Image: Abbey Lincoln singing at an AJASS event, Harlem, ca. 1964

# Going Further: Works in Conversation

Related Themes:

Archives  
Community  
Cultural Unity  
Documentation  
Growth  
Jazz



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

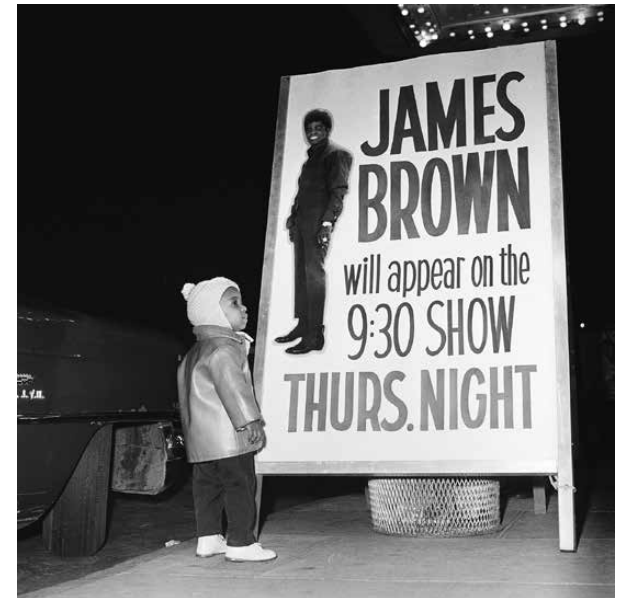


Fig. 4

**Fig. 1:** Jazz musicians Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, AJASS, Harlem, ca. 1962

**Fig. 2:** Nomsa Brath on the cover of Lou Donaldson, *The Natural Soul*, 1962

**Fig. 3:** Brenda Deaver on the cover of Big John Patton, *Oh Baby!*, 1965

**Fig. 4:** James Brown sign outside the Apollo Theater, Harlem, ca. 1962

# Think Black, Buy Black

**“They were calling themselves African and Black long before those terms became common in American racial vernacular. AJAS members were the woke set of their generation.”**

Tanisha C. Ford



AJAS was committed to Marcus Garvey's ideals of Black empowerment and economic independence, and the work of Harlem activist Carlos Cooks became a template for their organizing principles. In 1941, Cooks formed the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement (ANPM), whose three core components included: Black pride, economic autonomy and self-help, and independence from European colonialism. Ford states, "Buying Black was rooted in Garvey's principle of Black economic independence: in order to empower the Black community, Black folks needed to keep their dollars circulating within their own community." She adds, "To 'Think Black' meant not only being politically conscious and concerned with issues facing the Black community, but also reflecting that awareness of self through dress and self-presentation."

In this photograph, Brathwaite captures people in the crowd at one of New York's Marcus Garvey Day celebrations. This annual event included an extravagant parade, with flags, banners, African dancing, speakers, and the Miss Natural Standard of Beauty pageant.

#### Guiding Questions:

1. What's going on in this photograph? From your observations, what can you conclude about the importance of Marcus Garvey Day in New York City?
2. What do you think the term, "Think Black, Buy Black" means? How does this phrase translate in Brathwaite's images?
3. Why do you think the concept "Think Black, Buy Black" was important in the 1960s, and do you think it's still important today? Why?
4. Take a look at these people's expressions. What do you think they are looking at? How do you think they are feeling? What do you see that makes you say that?



Image: Marcus Garvey Day Parade, Harlem, ca. 1967

# Going Further: Works in Conversation

Related Themes:

Race  
Identity  
Fashion  
Advertising  
Community  
Ideology



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

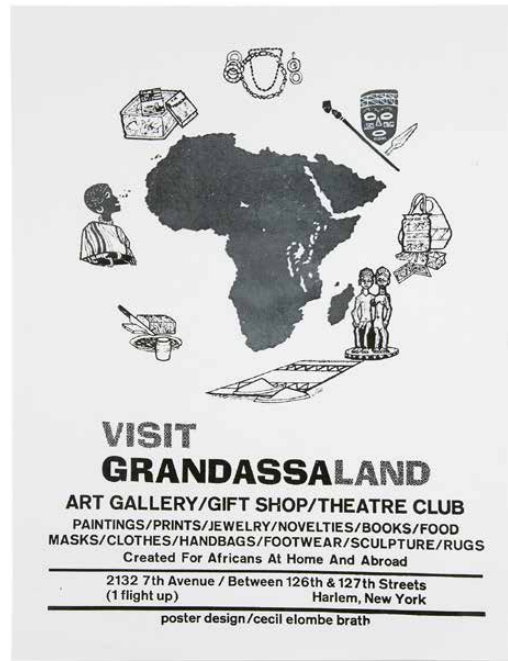


Fig. 3

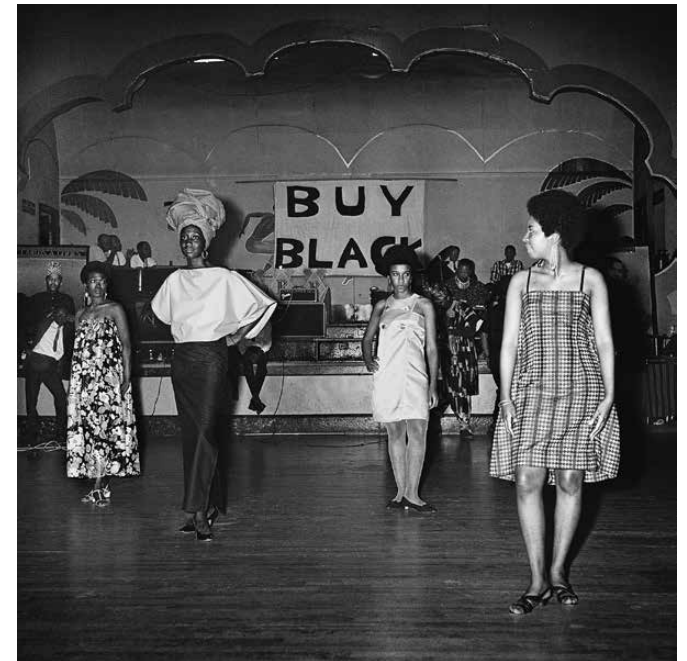


Fig. 4

**Fig. 1:** African Market, Harlem, ca. 1967

**Fig. 2:** Charles Peaker speaking on 125th Street. Peaker became the head of the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement after its founder, Carlos Cooks, died. Harlem, ca. 1967

**Fig. 3:** AJASS poster for Grandassaland, ca. 1976. Designed by Elombe Brath

**Fig. 4:** Marcus Garvey Day event, Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, Harlem, ca. 1966

In 1963, a white-owned wig shop called Wigs Parisian expanded from their Brooklyn location and opened up a storefront on 125th Street in Harlem. “Hearing that two white men were trying to open a shop to sell Black women a dream of European beauty—through the artifice of straight-haired wigs—the ANPM staged a protest,” writes Ford. Brathwaite captured images of this powerful protest with his Hasselblad camera, which accompanied him everywhere he went, and local newspapers covered the protest. The shop owners, apprehensive about an upcoming battle, decided to close the shop.

In this image, Nomsa Brath marches in front of Wigs Parisian wearing her natural hairstyle and a sign over her dress that reads “Natural...Yes! Wigs...No.” It was clear to Brathwaite and AJAS that Black women were essential in creating change around the conceptions of beauty. This protest was a catalyst for the Black Is Beautiful movement and marked the beginning of the Grandassa Models.

#### Guiding Questions:

1. What's going on in this image? What do you think these women are doing?
2. Who do you think these women are? What can you learn about them from their expressions and clothing?
3. Why do you think Brathwaite chose to photograph this protest?

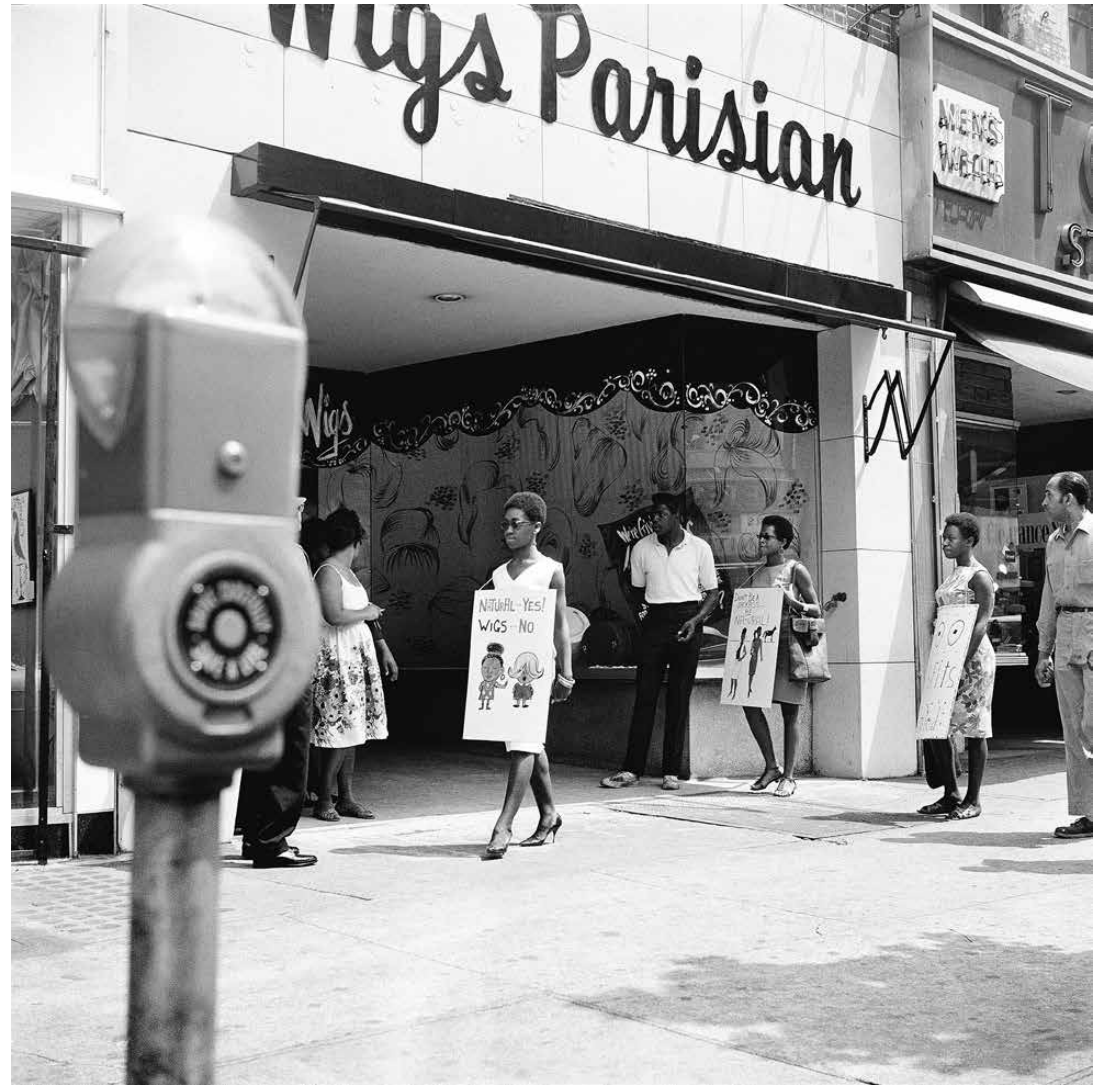


Image: Grandassa Model Nomsa Brath (center) promoting natural hairstyles as part of the Wigs Parisian protest, Harlem, 1963



# Going Further: Works in Conversation

Related Themes:

Race  
Beauty  
Community  
Activism  
Fashion  
Storytelling  
Empowerment  
Growth  
Intersectionality  
Archives



Fig. 1

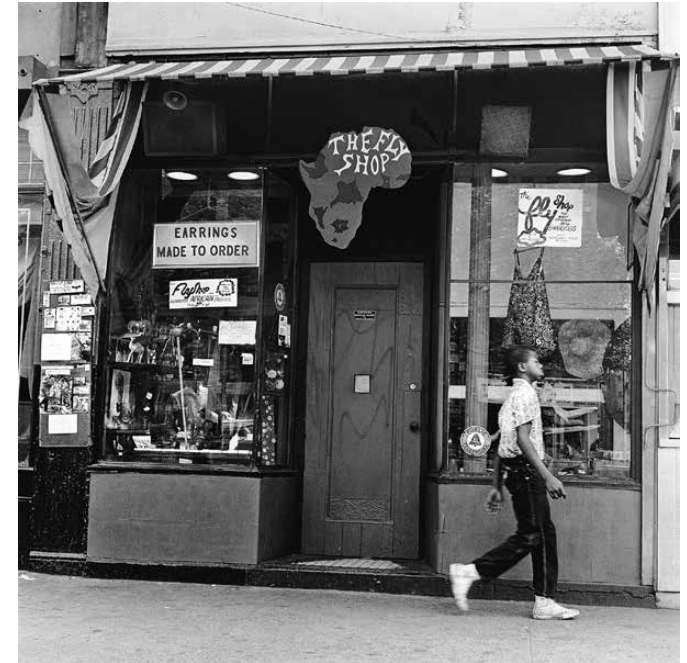


Fig. 2

**Fig. 1:** AJASS poster, ca. 1966. Designed by Elombe Brath

**Fig. 2:** The Fly Shop was owned by AJASS friend Tamu (last name unknown). Elaine Baskin Bey, still active today as a clothing and jewelry designer, worked out of the shop. Harlem, ca. 1967

**Fig. 3:** (left to right) **DeeDee Little**. This ensemble was worn and created by Little, or Khosi, as she was called, for a Naturally show ca. 1969. Grandassa Models were encouraged to be creative; once Little learned to crochet, she would create most of her own outfits, as well as outfits for other women. Courtesy Khosi "DeeDee" Little; **Lily Barnett**. Inspired by a dress worn by Sophia Loren on *The Johnny Carson Show*, this outfit was made for Bernice Barnett by her mother, to be worn at a Naturally show. Courtesy Bernice Barnett; **Carolee Prince**. An outfit designed for Sikolo Brathwaite. Courtesy Sikolo Brathwaite



Fig. 3



# The Grandassa Models

**“The Grandassa Models, with their bouffant natural hairstyles and multicolored African-inspired garments, made a clear statement: they were declaring beauty on their own terms.”**

Tanisha C. Ford

In the early 1960s, AJAS formed a modeling troupe that both promoted African-inspired fashion and embodied Black nationalist beauty principles. They named the group Grandassa, drawn from the word *Grandassaland*, which activist Carlos Cooks used to describe the African continent. AJAS recruited teenage and young-adult women to model around the Harlem community. For their first event, the Grandassa Models participated in a fashion show. All of the models wore their hair natural and dressed vibrantly. Dubbed “Naturally,” these shows became annual events throughout the 1960s. In 1973, they became more sporadic, and the last Naturally was held in 1992.

In this image, Brathwaite photographed a group of young women at a local public school who proudly emulated the Grandassa Models.

#### Guiding Questions:

1. Knowing a little bit about the Grandassa Models and the Black Is Beautiful movement, how do you think these young women represent these ideals?
2. Why do you think Brathwaite decided to pose these girls like this? What do you notice about their posture and the way they are standing? What does this tell you about these models?
3. This photograph was made outside the photo studio, at a local public school in Harlem. Why do you think it was important for Brathwaite to photograph in the community?



Image: Photo shoot at a public school for one of the AJASS-associated modeling groups that emulated the Grandassa Models and began to embrace natural hairstyles. Harlem, ca. 1966

# Going Further: Works in Conversation

Related Themes:

Beauty  
Race  
Fashion  
Feminism  
Culture  
Representation  
Respect

Fun Fact:

Rihanna used Brathwaite's Black Is Beautiful images and ideas as inspiration for her 2019 Fenty fashion collection. Read more here: <https://bit.ly/2Y00WHE>

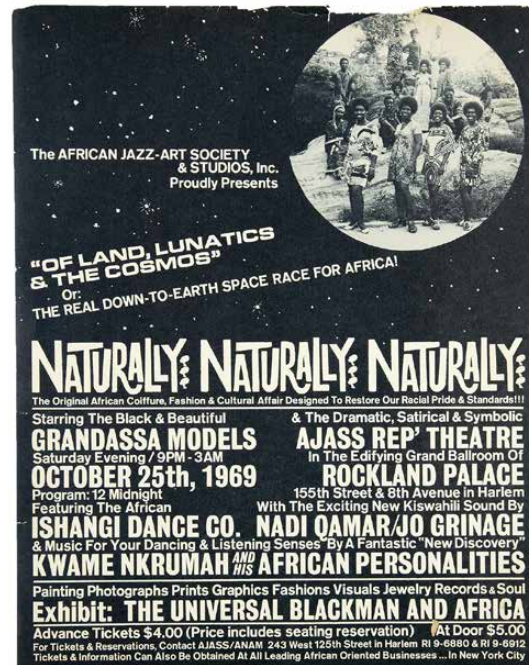


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

**Fig. 1:** Poster for Naturally '69, 1969. Designed by Elombe Brath

**Fig. 2:** Sikolo Brathwaite, AJASS, Harlem, ca. 1968

**Fig. 3:** Carolee Prince wearing her own jewelry designs. Prince created much of the jewelry and headpieces featured in Brathwaite's work. AJASS, Harlem, ca. 1964

One of the original Grandassa Models and Kwame Brathwaite's wife, Sikolo Brathwaite, is the subject of this photograph taken by her husband. The Grandassa Models were a key part of the Black Is Beautiful movement in 1960s Harlem. Models in the group were committed to wearing their hair in natural styles, while often showcasing African-influenced fashion and jewelry. Commenting on why he cofounded the modeling group, Brathwaite remarked: "We've got to do something to make the women feel proud of their hair, proud of their Blackness." The Grandassa Models and Brathwaite's photographs were not only countering the images of white models found in mainstream US publications, like *Vogue*; they were also committed to challenging the omnipresence of lighter-complexioned, straight-haired Black models in Black-owned publications such as *Ebony*. Brathwaite's photographs both capture this revolutionary time and speak to the effect that fashion, as well as artistic and political vision, can have on popular culture.

In this image, Sikolo Brathwaite is wearing a headdress made by Carolee Prince, who designed headpieces and jewelry specifically for the Grandassa Models to wear.

#### Guiding Questions:

1. Brathwaite uses vibrant, colorful backdrops in his images. Why do you think he chose these bright colors? How do these colors affect your interpretation of the image?
2. Carolee Prince, an innovative jewelry designer, created the jewelry and headpiece that Sikolo Brathwaite is wearing in this image. What do the headpiece and jewelry tell us about Sikolo? What do these objects represent?
3. Take a look at Sikolo's expression. What do you think she is thinking about? How do you think she feels? What makes you say that?



Image: Sikolo Brathwaite wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince, AJASS, Harlem, ca. 1968



# Going Further: Works in Conversation

Related Themes:

Archives  
Community  
Beauty  
Race  
Feminism  
Societal Pressures  
Empowerment  
Representation



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

**Fig. 1:** Carolee Prince. Prince's beaded headpieces, earrings, and necklaces were worn in photo shoots and in the Naturally shows from 1965 to 1974. Her intricate beading was inspired by South African jewelry. Courtesy the Kwame Brathwaite Archive

**Fig. 2:** Model wearing a natural hairstyle, AJASS, Harlem, ca. 1970

**Fig. 3:** Naturally '68 photo shoot, featuring Grandassa Models and founding members of AJASS. Back row includes: Eleanor Ballard, far left; Sikolo Brathwaite, third from left; Juanita McLean, fourth from left; Zeta Gathers, fifth from left; and Pat (last name unknown), third from right. Front row, left to right: Klytus Smith, Frank Adu, Bob Gumbs, Elombe Brath, and Ernest Baxter. Apollo Theater, Harlem, ca. 1968



Fig. 3

# Post-Visit Activity: Portraits

Take another look at Kwame Brathwaite's photographs in this exhibition. Make note of the outfits, objects, and backgrounds in the images. Ask your students, "What do the clothes, props, and places pictured tell you about the subjects?"

Talk to your students about what they saw in the exhibition. Ask, "How does Brathwaite describe a community through pictures? What is unique about the way he shows the community members? How does he use light, color, background, and framing?"

Ask the group, "How could you describe a community through portraits of its members?" Or ask, "How could you describe yourself and your background by making a self-portrait?" Have each student make a list of clothing or objects that may represent who they are and where they come from. "What makes you unique? What would you like to show people about yourself or your community? Is there anything visually unique about your community?"

Do a little bit of research about the neighborhoods your students are from, or have them ask their parents to tell them a little bit more about their family histories. Make note of the words, moods, places, and histories that come up in the research. Invite the students to create portraits that reflect their respective backgrounds. For instance, you could ask them to "cast" themselves in the portrait to represent their communities. "What can I tell people about myself and my community in one photograph?"

## Materials Needed

Cameras or phones  
Computer  
Tripod  
Props/Objects  
Costumes  
Backdrops (optional)

## Photo Exercise

Ask students to work in pairs or small groups to create portraits of one another. Using the props, objects, and clothing that the students brought, have them dress up or create a scene that represents who they are. Students should then help one another create the image, thinking about composition and framing.

## Students Will

**Know:** Portraits take planning.

**Understand:** Photographers can convey a lot about their subjects through the clothes they wear and objects placed in the image.

**Do:** Research, plan, and carry out a portrait session.

**Kwame Brathwaite** (born in New York, 1938) lives and works in New York. His photographs have been included in solo and group exhibitions at Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles; David Nolan Gallery, New York; and the Museum of the City of New York, and published in *Aperture*, the *New Yorker*, *New York Times*, and *New York* magazine. Brathwaite's photography is held in public and private collections, including those of the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Museum of the City of New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The Aperture exhibition *Black Is Beautiful: The Photography of Kwame Brathwaite* was presented by the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, in 2019.

**Tanisha C. Ford** is associate professor of Africana studies and history at the University of Delaware and the author of *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (2019) and *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (2015).

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This resource was created by Alexandra Schlechter (Stevan A. Baron Work Scholar in the department of Education and Public Programs) and Emily Stewart (Manager of Education and Engagement Programs). Designed by Ruidan Jiang and Brian Berding, with assistance from Celine Kim.

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