

Social Issues in Art

Organizing for Action

A guide for looking, talking, and taking action



Our hope

We strongly believe that an in-person visit to the museum benefits students in myriad ways. Being in the galleries, seeing art up close, and being guided by a gallery teacher all foster a sense of wonder and an openness to consider and discuss difficult concepts. Perhaps you've already brought your students for a visit, or maybe scheduling a visit is not possible. In any case, we hope that this guide may serve you and your students in exploring issues of identity, community, and society through looking at, discussing, writing about, and making art.

The Blanton Museum of Art is pleased to offer Social Issues in Art. This series presents objects from the Blanton's collection that provide opportunities for students to discuss issues relevant to individuals, schools, communities, our nation, and our world.

About this guide

The Theme: "Organizing for Action" offers educators the opportunity to explore themes related to the importance of collaboration between various groups, of exercising the right to vote, and of learning about others who have had an impact on our communities. Each work prompts students to consider groups who work together in their own communities, those who help others exercise their right to vote, and those who have worked tirelessly to lead others to economic, social, or political equality.

The Plan:

- Select a work to share with students. The title of each work is linked to the Blanton collections website that provides more information AND an image that can be expanded onscreen for projection in the classroom. Zoom in and out to allow students to look closely at the work as you lead students in discussion. (1-2 min.)
- Use the thinking routine (Values, Identities, Actions) on the next page to help students make personal connections to the artwork and to each other. (5-10 min.)
- Select some (or all) of the suggested questions and prompts for follow-up activities of artmaking or research. (5-10 min.)

The Resources:

- A thumbnail image
- Link to object label information (click on the title of the artwork to access curatorial comments about the artist and the art)
- Suggested discussion questions and follow-up activities
- A high resolution image (for providing photocopied images for classes)

[Relevant TEKS, by grade level](#)

In addition, each page in this resource may include a gray box that highlights TEKS specifically addressed by the artwork.

Our donors

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A Thinking Routine

Values, Identities, Actions*

This conversation can be done in large or small groups, either orally or written. The bulleted statements below each question help extend the discussion but are not required. However, the primary questions (1, 2, 3) are integral for using this routine to examine the art more closely.

1. What values does this work invite us to think about?

- Values are kinds of things that people value – fairness, justice, safety, respect, traditions, a nation or group a person belongs to, creativity, etc.
- Dig a little deeper... are they your values?
- Does this work affirm or challenge or raise questions about these values?

2. Who is this work speaking about? And who is this work trying to speak to?

- Dig a little deeper... Is anyone left out of the story that should be in it? Do you fit in, or not so much for this story? Why?

3. What actions might this work encourage?

- Actions could include doing something concrete, refraining from doing something, simply learning more, etc.
- Dig a little deeper... Whose actions – yours, others, which others? Why?

After discussing the questions, have students return to look at the work closely for several minutes. Did their discussion help them to see anything new?

Barrio Flag

Manuel Gómez Cruz, 1996

Manuel Gómez Cruz is considered by his peers to be the godfather of the Chicano Art Movement due to his involvement with community arts organizations from the 1970s well into the 1990s. His *Barrio Flag*, an image that he first featured as part of a large mural on East Cesar Chavez Avenue in 1994, includes an eagle – a simultaneous reference to the flags of the United States, Mexico, and the United Farm Workers labor union. A banner hangs beneath the bird’s talons with the phrase “Barrios United is Peace & Power,” suggesting the artist’s belief in the importance of the American barrio to the development of Latinx artists and to the development of the nation.



*[TEKS connections](#) (US History Studies since 1877; Mexican American Studies)

LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What symbols do you see? What do you think they might represent?

LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students. You might consider sharing that the large mural that Cruz painted in Los Angeles is now painted over, so it is only available to see in an art museum.

- What is a “barrio?”
- What do you think might have motivated Cruz to make a new flag?
- What book do you think is under the four hands? Why do you think he placed their hands on top of it?
- If you were to create a mural about uniting groups to create peace and power, what groups would you include?

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Have students look for murals in their school, neighborhood and city. They might take a walk, or go for a bike or car ride... or even do a quick search on their computers.

- Which neighborhoods have the most art in them?
- Who or what is depicted in their community art?
- What do you think is the message of the artist(s)?
- Is it easy to identify who the artists are?



Manuel Gomez Cruz, *Barrio Flag*, 1996, 30 1/16 x 43 15/16 in., screenprint. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Gilberto Cárdenas, 2017.342

The 1920s... Migrants Cast Their Votes

Jacob Lawrence, 1974

A master storyteller and chronicler of history, Jacob Lawrence was one of the leading figurative painters of the 20th century. A childhood spent largely in Harlem during the years of the Great Depression provided him with subject matter that he returned to throughout his long career. Inspired by the vibrant artistic and intellectual energy that had fueled the Harlem Renaissance, Lawrence studied visual art at an early age and vowed to trace the specific narratives of African American experiences. His Migration Series paintings from 1941 focus on the everyday lives of Black Americans migrating to the North during the 1920s and 1930s (referred to as "the Great Migration"). This screenprint builds on this theme and shows Black people exercising the right to vote.



LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What are your first impressions of this artwork?
- What catches your attention first?
- What do you notice about the colors?
- What do you see people doing?
- Where might this be?

*TEKS connections (US History since 1877; African American Studies)

LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students.

- What do you notice about the different types of people portrayed?
- In what stages of life are they? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Why do you think it was important for Lawrence to show individuals exercising their right to vote?
- What other aspects of the lives of Black Americans might have been important to document?

FIND OUT

Visit VoteTexas.gov to learn who is eligible to vote in Texas and how to register to vote.



1974

The 1920s... The Migrants arrive and cast their ballots.

Jacob Lawrence 1974

Jacob Lawrence, *The 1920s... Migrants Cast Their Ballots*, 1974, 34 7/16 x 25 7/8 in., eight-color screenprint. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Lorillard Division of Loews Theatres, Inc., G1976.8.1.8

General Moses and Sojourner

ORGANIZING FOR ACTION

Charles White, 1954

In 1935, Charles White asked his teacher at Chicago's Englewood High School why their history textbook mentioned African Americans only once. As he later recalled, the teacher told him to "sit down and shut up." This experience led White to learn more about African American history and to use his artistic skills to highlight some of the major figures of African American history. One such example is *General Moses and Sojourner*, a portrait of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth (depicted in profile) that he originally created for the Harriet Tubman Clinic for Children, a private medical clinic in Harlem that Drs. Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon established to serve disadvantaged children. In this drawing, the artist emphasized the intellectual nature of Truth's activism through her upward gaze. Truth was a leader of the abolitionist movement who is perhaps best remembered for her stirring "Ain't I a Woman" speech delivered in 1851. White pictures Tubman grasping a staff-like object similar to the one Moses used to part the Red Sea to lead the Israelites to freedom. Frequently referred to as "Moses," Tubman led hundreds of enslaved Black people to freedom in the North, becoming the most famous "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Although surviving portraits of Tubman and Truth capture the two as mature women, White depicts them in their youth, emphasizing their vitality. While Tubman and Truth only met once, White pairs them to celebrate Black women and suggest the possibilities of a feminist future.



LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What do you see? What details stand out to you?
- What ideas do the images suggest about the characters and personalities of the women depicted?
- What does this work make you think?
- What do you wonder?

*TEKS connections (8th grade Social Studies; US History Since 1877; African American Studies)

LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with the students. Also consider discussing the definitions and significance of the terms sojourner, general, conductor, and Moses.

- How does seeing images influence our understanding of history?
- What choices did White make in creating his image of Tubman and Truth? How do those choices influence your thinking?
- How do history textbooks reflect power?
- What are some of the effects of publishers ignoring or diminishing the contributions of certain people and groups in the United States?

READ, LISTEN, and WRITE

Have students read and compare the [two versions](#) of Sojourner Truth's speech from 1851 and listen to a recording of it. Then students should respond to the following questions and complete a writing activity.

- What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you listened to the speech?
- What words, phrases or lines stood out to you? Why?
- How do you think Truth's words are still relevant today?
- Five-minute freewrite: What issues do you see in your school, community or society that treat people unequally economically, politically or socially – in terms of access and/or opportunity?



Charles White, *General Moses and Sojourner*, 1954, 27 7/8 x 38 in., Wolff carbon pencil and white chalk over traces of graphite with scratching out, blending, and charcoal wash splatter. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon to the units of Black Studies and the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin.