

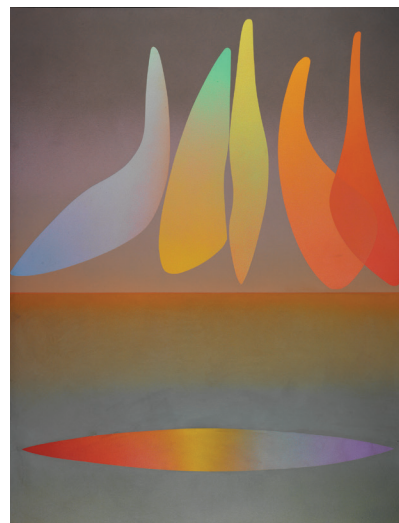
Breaking with Tradition: Abstract Art

Educator Resource | Grades 6–12

Subject Area: Art

INTRODUCTION

Abstraction refers to an artistic approach in which artists use shapes, colors, and forms to express ideas and emotions, rather than creating realistic images. Emerging in the early 20th century and gaining momentum through the 1940s to 1970s, abstraction became a powerful tool for African American artists to explore aesthetics, identity, culture, and social change — especially during the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements. During the 1960s and 1970s African American abstract artists were often criticized by Black people and critics for creating art that was not obviously engaged with the Civil Rights Movement. Despite this pushback, African American abstract artists viewed abstraction as a tool to break free from stereotypes and assert creative freedom. It allowed them to speak in a visual language that was bold, imaginative, and deeply personal.



Charles McGee, *Spectral Rhythms*, early 1970s. Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Dr. Edward J. Littlejohn

LEARNING TARGET

Through classroom and museum experiences, students will learn how artists use abstraction to explore a variety of topics, such as color, shape, materials, emotions, identity, resilience, and cultural pride. Through guided observation, they will sketch patterns, note meaningful symbols, and respond to reflection prompts in their sketchbooks. While viewing *Reimagine African American Art*, they will take photos of textures, color palettes, and details that resonate with them. This experience will help students build a personal visual vocabulary to inform their own symbolic and expressive artwork. At the conclusion of the three lessons, students will create a mixed-media silhouette filled with layers of material and shapes. This silhouette will express a positive personal story highlighting resilience and courage.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Analyze how some African American artists use abstraction and symbolism to explore aesthetics, materials, emotions, and identities.
- Create a personal bank of abstract shapes and symbols that reflect a person's story of courage or resilience.
- Closely observe and document inspiring artwork during their DIA gallery visit.
- Design a layered mixed media portrait using shapes, texture, and found imagery.
- Write an artist statement explaining the meaning behind their visual choices.

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COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

ART.VA.II.HS.1

Identify, define problems, and reflect upon possible visual solutions. (21st Century Skills: I.2, I.3, I.4)

ART.VA.II.HS.2

Create artwork using materials and techniques with skill so that personal intentions are carried out. (21st Century Skills: I.1, 1.2, II.7, III.3)

ART.VA.II.HS.8

Explore social and global issues through the application of creative processes. (21st Century Skills: III.7, III.8, III.9, III.10)

ART.VA.III.HS.5

Recognize and understand the relationships between personal experiences and the development of artwork. (21st Century Skills: I.3)

ART.VA.IV.HS.3

Analyze the correlation between art, history, and culture throughout time. (21st Century Skills: I.6, III.1, III.2, III.7, III.8, III.9, III.10)

Pre-Visit Activities

Visual Thinking Activity | 10 minutes for each artwork

Materials Needed:

- Projections of *Black Venus* and *Spectral Rhythms*
- Chart paper or whiteboard
- Markers
- Student journals or reflection sheets

Artwork Selections:

- Mark Bradford, *Black Venus*, 2005, Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.
- Charles McGee, *Spectral Rhythms*, early 1970s. Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Dr. Edward J. Littlejohn

1. Ask students to silently observe the artwork without discussion. Encourage them to look carefully at shapes, figures, positioning, contrasts, and negative spaces.
2. Ask the question, “What’s going on in this picture?” Encourage open responses. Paraphrase each answer neutrally and point to the part of the artwork they’re referencing.
3. Ask the question: “What do you see that makes you say that?” This deepens observation and helps students ground their interpretations in visual evidence. Encourage students to be specific with their interpretations.
4. As the conversation develops, add the question, “What more can we find?” Encourage students to continue scanning the artwork for clues and interpretations.

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Historical and Artistic Context | 5 minutes for each artwork

Provide historical and artistic context for each artwork. Develop and provide a thorough explanation of *Black Venus*. More information on Mark Bradford and *Black Venus* can be found on [Art21's website](#). For more information on Charles McGee and his artworks, visit [The Metro Times guide](#), and the art gallery [Louis Buhl & Co.](#)

Optional

1. Facilitate a follow-up discussion with [this video](#) of Mark Bradford.
2. Additional artworks from the DIA's collection can be used for this activity:
 - Sam Gilliam, [Gram](#), 1973, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Patricia A. Fedor and Christopher T. Sortwell
 - Information on [Sam Gilliam](#)
 - Alvin Loving, [Untitled](#), 1967, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Arthur and Marilyn Zivian

Small Group Discussion | 15 minutes

Ask students to discuss some or all the guiding questions below in small groups of three or four. Encourage students to be specific with examples or evidence when stating their response.

Examples could be societal or personal.

1. How would you define abstract art?
2. How are these abstract artworks similar? How are they different?
3. How can abstract forms and textures represent personal identity and lived experiences? Use Mark Bradford's *Black Venus* for reference.
4. During the Civil Rights Movement, many African American abstract artists were overlooked because they didn't publicly tackle social or political issues of the time. Do you believe artists have a responsibility to address social or political issues in their work? Why or why not?
5. Can abstract art still reflect the struggles or emotions of a time period, even if it doesn't show specific events or people? Explain your reasoning.
6. How can artists use materials, shapes, patterns, and layering to honor culture, memory, or community?

Inform students that while some artists use abstraction to explore personal or societal topics, like Mark Bradford, others may use abstraction for aesthetic reasons, such as to explore the use of shape, form, color, lines, and textures. While not all abstract artists use symbolism and storytelling, throughout this lesson students will explore how colors, lines, shapes, materials, and layering can be assigned meaning and purpose to tell a story.

If time permits, have one student from each group share the highlights of their small group discussion.

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Visual Language Bank | 20 minutes

Materials Needed:

- Sketchbook or blank sheet of paper
- Pencil or pen
- Colored pencils or markers (optional)

Reflect and Write

1. On the top or back of your paper, answer these two questions in 1–2 sentences each:
 - a. What are three parts of your identity that you want to show through shape, color, or pattern?
 - b. What stories do you want your future self to remember?

Translating Verbal Information into Pictorial Information

2. Explain to students, “Instead of using pictures or faces, we’re going to use abstract shapes, lines, and textures to represent our identity, experiences, and dreams.” Discuss with students that many possible signs, symbols, and shapes can convey narrative, feeling, or emotion.

Generate a Symbol Bank

3. Students fill their paper with at least 8–10 shapes, lines, or patterns that represent something personal. For example, these could be:
 - A jagged line for strength through challenge
 - A spiral for growth
 - A repeating dot pattern for family or community
 - A soft wave for peace or hope
4. Encourage creative combinations and overlapping.
5. Invite students to turn to their peer and explain a few of the symbols they created as well as the story, feeling, or narrative it represents.

Exit Ticket + Reflection

- How did it feel to express your story through shape instead of pictures?
- Can shapes and textures sometimes say more than words?

During Visit Activities

Guided Tour Experience and Rationale | 45–60 minutes

To complement this lesson, consider booking the “Shaping Identity | Africana” guided gallery experience with one of the skilled Gallery Teachers. Designed for students in grades 3–12, this tour explores art from the African diaspora and uses a variety of open-ended questions while layering in information about the artworks and artists. [Click here to book a field trip today!](#)

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Self-Guided Experience | 45–60 minutes

During your visit to *Reimagine African American Art*, students investigate how artists use abstraction to explore emotions, identities, and cultures. They will sketch patterns, note meaningful symbols, and respond to reflection prompts. If permitted, they will take photos of inspiring textures and colors to inform their own layered, abstract artwork.

1. Print and distribute the half-sheet directions from **Student Handout A: Self-Guided Experience** for each student.
2. Instruct students to bring their notebook and a pencil on the field trip. For the protection of the art, only pencils are allowed in the galleries.

Post Visit Activities | 2–3 Periods

Materials Needed:

*All materials below are optional

- 8.5X11 watercolor, mixed media or cardstock paper
- Watercolor paint and brushes
- Tissue paper, construction paper, fabric scraps
- Magazine (found imagery)
- Glue sticks or liquid glue
- Black ink pens or fine liners
- Scissors
- Sketchbooks or journal pages from the DIA visit

Museum Visit Debrief | 10 minutes

Once back in the classroom, ask students to use DIA reflections to answer the following questions.

- What artwork(s) from the African American art galleries might inspire the shapes or textures in your artwork?
- How can you show your story — past, present, or future — without using realistic images or faces?
- How does the layering of materials and use of shapes help express the complexity of your story?

From Sketchbook to Studio | 10 minutes

1. Students will revisit their sketchbooks and symbol banks from earlier lessons. Using their DIA reflections and shape sketches, they will choose a symbolic vessel or abstract silhouette (e.g., mask, profile, organic form, shield) to represent themselves. On scrap paper, they will plan the shape, layout, and layering approach for their final artwork.
2. Emphasize to students that abstract storytelling can hold deep emotion, cultural meaning, and personal power. Encourage students to focus on layering, symbolism, and abstract shapes as narrative tools.

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Material Exploration and Background | 20 minutes

3. Instruct students to draw their chosen silhouette on an 8.5x11 piece of cardstock or mixed media paper. Invite students to begin by building the background of their silhouette with light lines, watercolor wash, or paper scraps to suggest mood or emotion. Students can layer with tissue paper, torn magazine clippings, and found textures to add emotional or symbolic depth — representing their personal connections to memories, community, and resilience.

Shape and Symbol Collage Construction | 20 minutes

4. Guide students towards adding more layers of materials using cut or torn paper, collage, and drawn designs. Each layer represents a part of their story:
 - Layer 1 – past or personal foundation
 - Layer 2 – present self or community connections
 - Layer 3 – hopes, transformation, or innovation
5. Encourage students to refer to their symbols bank or any found shapes and silhouettes from the gallery that inspired them.

Final Touches and Written Statement | 10 minutes

6. Instruct students to write a brief artist statement (3–4 sentences) explaining:
 - What their abstract portrait represents
 - The meaning of one or more layers
 - The different shapes used to convey their personal narrative
 - How their visit to the DIA influenced their choices

Reflection Questions | 10 minutes

- What visual elements did you use to represent your identity and story?
- How did layering materials help you express the complexity of your story?
- What connections did you make between the art at the DIA and your own experience?
- If someone viewed your portrait, what do you hope they'd feel or understand?

CREDITS

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