

The Harlem Renaissance

Educator Resource | Grades 9–12

Subject Areas: ELA and History

INTRODUCTION

The Harlem Renaissance was a vibrant cultural movement during the 1920s and 1930s that showcased the artistic talents of African Americans, especially in Harlem, New York. This era saw a surge in music, literature, and visual arts by African American artists that celebrated Black identity and creativity. Jazz and blues flourished with artists like Duke Ellington, while writers such as Langston Hughes gave voice to the African American experience. Philosopher and writer Alain Locke, often called the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance,” encouraged African American artists to embrace their heritage and use art as a tool for social change. Photographer James Van Der Zee captured powerful images of Harlem life, preserving the spirit and pride of the community through his portraits. Together, these artists helped redefine American culture and laid the groundwork for future movements in civil rights and the arts.



James Van Der Zee, *Couple in Raccoon Coats*, 1932 (printed after 1980). Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Dr. Delano A. Willis

LEARNING TARGET

Through classroom and museum experiences, students will gain a better understanding of African American art history and broader history, making connections to Detroit today. As students celebrate and appreciate the lives, accomplishments, and resilience of African Americans and African American artists, they will recognize that art and writing are tools for self-expression, change, emotional processing, and release.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can art challenge injustice and reshape identity?
- How do African American artists draw from ancestral or cultural traditions to express themselves?
- In what ways did the Harlem Renaissance empower African Americans through creative expression?
- How does art survive and transform across generations?

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STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Participate in collaborative discussions on art expression and African American life during the Harlem Renaissance.
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view by inferring and analyzing an artist's purpose and objective.
- Interpret the relationship between art, racial identity, and social justice.
- Analyze how creative expression is used to resist oppression.
- Write argumentative claims by using evidence from informational texts and artifacts to support their written and spoken reasoning.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.3

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Student Handouts
 - Student Handout A: See, Think, Wonder
 - Student Handout B: See, Think, Me, We
 - Student Handout C: “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”
- Projector or printed image of [Couple in Raccoon Coats](#) by [James Van Der Zee](#)
- Audio setup for “[Lenox Avenue](#)” by William Grant Still
- Colored pens and highlighters for annotation
- Chart paper, sticky notes, or digital platforms for posting responses

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Pre-Visit Activities | 1–2 class periods

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Display: [Couple in Raccoon Coats](#) by [James Van Der Zee](#) and the questions below. Play William Grant Still's "[Lenox Avenue](#)" in the background to set the tone.
2. Journal: Use **Student Handout A: See, Think, Wonder** response to Van Der Zee's photo.
3. Share: Select one student per question to share with the class.
4. Connector: Tell students, "*This [photograph](#) is one of many taken by James Van Der Zee, an iconic Harlem photographer. While the images in the DIA gallery rotate, we may see photographs by Van Der Zee or other African American artists from this period when we visit.*"
5. Supplemental:
 - a. Watch [PBS Harlem in the 1920s](#).

Alain Locke Reading | 30 minutes

1. Read: Provide each student with a copy of **Student Handout C: "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts."** Use think-aloud strategy to model and scaffold text using **I do – We do – You do** strategy.
 - a. **I do** (teacher): first paragraph. Teacher thinks aloud a response to the following questions and annotates on the board:
 - i. What do I already know about legacy and ancestors? What do I think ancestral arts means? Star these key words.
 - ii. What does "aesthetic endowment" mean? Circle words I'm unfamiliar with and look them up.
 - iii. How did only rhythm carry over from Africans to African Americans? Write a note in the margins.
 - iv. Why does Locke say there's "little evidence" of direct connection between African Americans and African art? Write a note in the margins.
 - v. In summary, it seems like Locke is arguing that art survived through generations of Africans and African Americans even through slavery and forced displacement.
 - b. **We do** (student pairs): second paragraph
 - i. In pairs, students annotate the second paragraph together.
 - ii. Select 1–2 pairs to share their annotations with the class on the board.
 - c. **You do** (independent): third paragraph. Call on one or two students to share their annotations verbally or on the board. Have students continue independently until complete.

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Writing Response | 30 minutes

1. Tell students, “You will now write a 1-2 paragraph commentary explaining whether you agree or disagree with Locke’s perspective on ancestral arts. Provide textual evidence to support your answer.”
 - a. Scaffold with sentence starters:
 - i. I agree/disagree with Locke’s perspective because...
 - ii. For example, Locke states...
 - iii. This evidence suggests...
 - iv. _____ (in the text) reminds me of _____ (in my life or the world).

Exit Ticket | 5 minutes

Ask students to respond to the following prompts using a digital platform (Padlet, Microsoft Forms, Teams). Alternatively, write each prompt on a separate sheet of chart paper and have students place their sticky notes on the corresponding sheet. **Note:** You can encourage anonymous posting for honesty and emotional safety.

Prompts:

1. Before this lesson, I used to think...
2. After this lesson, I now think...
3. Bonus: One thing I’m excited about for the gallery visit is...

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!](#)

Self-Guided Experience | 45–60 minutes

Before you visit: print copies of **Student Handout B: See, Think, Me, We**. Invite students to self-explore the *Reimagine African American Art* galleries, using the handout. For contemporary African American art, direct students to Kresge Reception near Special Exhibition South.

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Post-Visit Activities | 1-2 class periods

Hook | 10 minutes

1. Display before students enter:
“Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid.”
– Alain Locke, 1885–1954, Writer, scholar, philosopher, and leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance
2. Turn and Talk: What does this quote mean to you? What does prejudice and caricature mean?
3. Provide definitions of prejudice and caricature.
 - a. Prejudice (n.): preconceived judgment or opinion; an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics (Merriam-Webster). Synonyms: bias, discrimination, hatred, bigotry
 - b. Caricature (n.): exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics (Merriam-Webster). Synonyms: parody, mockery, joke, cartoon

Historical Framing | 7 minutes

1. Watch: [PBS Racist Images and Messages in Jim Crow Era](#) (2:25 minutes)
 - a. Why were racist caricatures created during the Jim Crow era?
 - b. In what ways can art be used to oppress people?

Reading and Discussion | 30 minutes

1. Read: [“A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance.”](#) Read independently or as a class.
2. Discussion: In groups of 3–5, discuss the following questions:
 - a. What were key factors that led to the Great Migration? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
 - b. How did the Harlem Renaissance respond to racism and Jim Crow laws?
 - c. What does Alain Locke mean by a “spiritual coming of age”?
 - d. What does Langston Hughes mean by “expression of our individual dark-skinned selves”?
 - e. How does Harlem Renaissance art (and the artworks in the *Reimagine African American Art* galleries) contrast with racist imagery (Jim Crow character, minstrel shows, blackface)?
 - f. Choose an artwork from the *Reimagine African American Art* galleries. How does it reflect the themes of identity, pride, and resistance?
 - g. How can these artists empower or inspire you, personally or within your community?
3. Share: Select a representative from each group to share insights with the class.

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4. Supplemental resources for further learning:

- a. Watch this [video](#) (22:48 minutes) about the Jim Crow era. Check out dozens of other videos from the [Jim Crow Museum](#) at Ferris State College, in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.
- b. [Virtually explore](#) the galleries of the Jim Crow Museum.
- c. Writing: Write a short essay explaining how African Americans from the Harlem Renaissance used art as a form of resistance and empowerment. Use evidence from the article and/or *Reimagine African American Art* at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Exit Ticket | 5 minutes

1. How might artists use art as a tool for social change? How is that reflected in the *Reimagine African American Art* galleries at the DIA?

Extensions for Pre- or Post-Visit

The following activities can be used for homework, a longer lesson, or to differentiate learning.

1. Watch: James Van Der Zee's [biography](#), *If Beale Street Could Talk* [film](#), *A Raisin in the Sun* [drama](#), Zora Neale Hurston [PBS documentary](#)
2. Listen: Sound Thoughts on Art [podcast](#) about *Couple in Racoon Coats* with Celeste Headlee
3. Write: Select a photo from The Met's [collection](#) of James Van Der Zee's photographs and write a compare/contrast analysis to "Couple in Racoon Coats."
4. Research: Research another artist from the *Reimagine African American Art* galleries or from the Harlem Renaissance, such as Elizabeth Catlett, and create a brief presentation.
5. Read: Alain Locke's [biography](#)
6. Watch: Ryan Coogler [interview](#) (mature content). Discuss how he was inspired by his predecessors.
7. Read the full chapter of "[The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts](#)" (pg. 254–267) or a different chapter from Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, 1925.

CREDITS

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