

African American Art and Artists

Tour dates: Ongoing

Grades: 4-12

Procedures

As with all tours, timing is critical. **Therefore please refrain from stopping at or discussing works that are not included on the tour plan.** If you are asked by the teacher or students to do so, invite them to return to the galleries after the tour or activity themselves. When the teachers sign up for this tour, they are informed that their students will not see the entire museum.

This tour takes the students chronologically through the collection. All groups will begin with a discussion of the Triangular Trade. Be sure to pace yourself at each stop so you do not hold up the group following you. Limit yourself to no more than 9 minutes per painting, and use a stop-watch if necessary.

Sample Tour Rotations:

Group One	Group Two	Group Three [Only use this rotation if there are three groups.]
Foyer: Discuss the Triangular Trade	Southern Stories: <i>The Price of Blood</i>	Contemporary Art in the South: <i>Nkisi</i>
Nineteenth-Century Portraits: <i>Portrait of an African American Woman</i>	Modernism in the South: <i>From This Earth</i>	Contemporary Art in the South: <i>Preacher</i>
Modernism in the South: <i>From This Earth</i>	The Southern Landscape: <i>Georgia Landscape</i>	Nineteenth-Century Portraits: <i>Portrait of an African American Woman</i>
The Southern Landscape: <i>Georgia Landscape</i>	Contemporary Art in the South: <i>Nkisi</i>	Southern Stories: <i>The Price of Blood</i>
Contemporary Art in the South: <i>Nkisi</i>	Contemporary Art in the South: <i>Preacher</i>	*Contemporary Art in the South: <i>From This Earth</i>
Contemporary Art in the South: <i>Preacher</i>	[This group will end a few minutes earlier than the first. If there is a significant amount of time, you can stop at the Shegogue. Otherwise it is not necessary.]	The Southern Landscape: <i>Georgia Landscape</i>

Tour Objectives

Students will...

- Discuss the history of African Americans in the American South.
- Determine how artists depict historical events in their artwork.
- Study a variety of paintings created during different time periods using varying techniques.
- Learn how artists infuse personal memories, values, or family histories in their paintings.
- Examine how the time period a person lived in, and the events taking place at that moment, affects their life.

Reproductions

Triangular Trade diagram
 Ben Shahn photograph
 Nkisi reproduction
 Old photographs (cabinet cards)
 Cotton Drag Sack
 Cotton examples

Before you begin your tour, place these items in the galleries near the works they reference.

Tour Stops

PLEASE NOTE:

You are not expected to relate all the content in the “Historical Background” sections to tour groups. The information is intended to provide docents with sufficient source material to craft a well-rounded tour.

Introduction [This can be done at any of the three starting points.]

The Morris Museum of Art’s permanent collection holds many stories. The South’s rich history can be found in the multitude of artworks that relate the memories and opinions of the artists using a variety of subject matter and styles. Included within these narratives is an extensive tale of the Southern African American experience. Some images are subtle reminders of where African Americans have been, or joyous representations and celebrations of cultural heritage, while others are depictions of the atrocities suffered throughout the region.

Interpretive Questions

1. Define the Triangular Trade using the reproduction. How did this process have an affect on the American South and the lives of the people who lived there?

Historical Background, The Slave Trade

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Southern United States was booming economically. Designated as an exemplary region for growing crops such as rice and tobacco, landowners had a rapidly increasing demand for cheap labor. As large rice plantations became widespread, plantation owners required inexpensive and permanent workers to clear swamps and cultivate crops. A highly profitable and easy solution to problem came in the trade and sale of humans.

Enslaved Africans brought in through port cities along the entire Eastern seaboard were routinely sold as goods through open slave markets. Many arrived as a result of the Triangular Trade. Although the African slave trade had been in existence since the early 1500s, the practice flourished in the continental United States during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, coordinated predominantly by Dutch, French, and English companies. European merchants arrived in the African Gold Coast with manufactured goods, which were exchanged for shiploads of captured African men, women, and children. The live cargo was transported to and sold through open markets in the Americas and Caribbean in exchange for sugar, tobacco, rum, rice, cotton, and other goods, which would then be sold throughout Europe. This one-way trip, referred to as the *middle passage*, was a veritable nightmare. Overcrowding was common, countless people died of hunger or disease while on board the ship. It is estimated that 11-12 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic into slavery until the practice was outlawed in the early nineteenth century. Countless others died during capture or transportation (www.understandingslavery.com).

Once in the United States, the enslaved people’s fates were in the hands of their new owners. They tended fields, worked in factories, or acted as house servants. There were few laws protecting the treatment of slaves, and those that existed were easily ignored by owners who knew there were negligible consequences for breaking them. Physical and emotional abuse was widespread, and slaves had little protection. By 1808 the

international slave trade ended. However, this move neither condemned nor slowed the practice within America. Instead the country turned to its existing self-reproducing slave population and developed its own domestic slave trade (Franklin, 1980, p. 123). This had a devastating impact on enslaved African American families, as individual members were sold as property, never to be seen again.

During the beginning of the 1800s, the South experienced a new economic transition with the widespread availability of the cotton gin. The device, coupled with the growing demand for cotton from industrialized Northern mill towns, sparked a dramatically increased need for slaves to tend the new cash crop. King Cotton became the premiere harvest of the American South. The number of slaves grew, with almost 2 million by 1830, an increase of 1.3 million in just over 40 years. The institution of slavery came to dominate the political and economic thinking of the entire South. (Franklin, 1980, p.133).

By the mid-seventeenth century, Colonists were yearning to gain independence from England, a monarchy they believed was withholding their freedom as independent Americans. Many Colonists recognized that their acceptance of slavery was contradictory to their fight to gain independence from England (Franklin, 1980, p. 83). This idea was further reiterated with the passage of the Declaration of Independence, and its assertion that all men, being created equal, were endowed with certain unalienable rights, including freedom. The words stirred uneasiness between Northern and Southern states. Abolitionists and anti-slavery individuals, who were mainly located in the American North, believed that slavery went against new American ideals. Pro-slavery leaders found in the South, where the practice was tightly intertwined in the region's economic stability, desired to maintain the rights of each individual state to create laws governing slavery. Over the next several decades, the contentious disagreement grew, and eventually led to the American Civil War in 1861.

James Hamilton Shegogue

Portrait of an African American Woman, between 1825–1833

About the Work

At first glance, this work is no different than other antebellum portraits commonly produced during the nineteenth century. It portrays an elegantly dressed individual in a formal, contrived setting. However, considering that the work was rendered in Charleston when slavery was a common practice throughout the South, it is highly unusual that an artist would create such a sentimental image of an African American. A note once attached to the back of the portrait exposes the maker's motivation: "*Colored Slave—whom my grandfather James Hamilton Shegogue—the artist, raised and of whom they were all very fond—he painted this portrait*" (Pennington, 1992). Completed in a miniature style, the artist prized the finished work, as it originally included a delicate red velvet traveling case so it could be carried in one's belongings. Although it is apparent that the woman was highly regarded by the Shegogue family, the inscription underscores the fact that she was still property.

Interpretive Questions

1. [Ask before introducing the work.] Look around the gallery. Which painting is different from the others? What makes it different? How is it the same?
2. Slavery was not abolished until the Thirteenth Amendment was enacted in 1865. This portrait was painted between 1825 and 1833. Why is the subject so unusual? Why do we not normally find many formal Southern portraits of African American people created during this time period?
3. This portrait was kept in a specially-made velvet traveling case. Why would someone want to carry a painting with them? How do you think the artist felt about the woman in the portrait? How can you tell?

Thomas Satterwhite Noble

The Price of Blood, 1868

[If you began with this work, do not go back to the Shegogue painting.]

About the Work

Although Noble served as an officer in the Confederate army during the Civil War, the artist was a self-professed proponent of abolition. However his stringent belief in the South's right to determine their own laws overrode his desire to end slavery. Perhaps the atrocities of the war combined with his early childhood experiences with slaves working in his father's rope factory, prompted Noble to begin a series of paintings depicting the inhumane treatment of African Americans at the hands of white owners. This work portrays a slave owner selling his mixed-race son. The elegantly-dressed man stares coldly at the viewer, while the boy stands barefoot, hopelessly resolved to his fate. Even though men are united by blood, they are disconnected by race, underscoring the relationship of the slave and the master. Although tame by modern standards, this image was highly inflammatory and offensive to Northern nineteenth century audiences, as it highlighted the coldness and inhumanity of the institution of slavery.

Interpretive Questions

1. Considering that Noble created a series of paintings depicting the inhumane treatment of enslaved individuals in the South, what do you think is going on in this scene? Who are the different people?
2. Which character do you look at first [i.e. who is the focal point]? How does the artist draw your eye to this individual? What are some other methods Noble used to move your eye around the scene?
3. Describe the mood [taking the subject matter into account]. What techniques did the artist use to heighten the mood? If the painting had been rendered in a brighter, lighter palette, how would it have affected the mood?
4. Although Noble proclaimed himself to be a proponent of abolition, he chose to serve as a Confederate soldier during the Civil War. Why might he have done this?

Historical Background, Sharecropping

After the Civil War ended in 1865, although the region had been ravaged, both physically and economically by the years of warfare, the South still needed inexpensive laborers to tend fields, clean houses, and work in factories. In response to the constant demand for farm workers, the idea of sharecropping emerged. This agricultural labor system, which was used by both white and black populations, became widespread throughout the South during Reconstruction, the time period that immediately followed the Civil War, approximately 1865–1877. Under the arrangement, landowners allowed individuals to farm their property in return for a share of the resulting crop. Initially developed as a resolution to the failed Land Reform Program, in which the federal government would divide Confederate-owned plantations into smaller plots to be given to former slaves, sharecropping was considered a solution to providing freed slaves the opportunity work, while giving the landowner a cheap labor force.

In addition to renting the land, the sharecropper was often required to purchase the seed, tools, and fertilizer directly from the landowner, usually on a line of credit. After the harvest, the tenant received a small portion of the crop, while the landlord retained the majority. Oftentimes the sharecropper had to sell his portion directly to the landowner at a fixed rate as well. Any outstanding debts also had to be settled at this time, which resulted in the tenant being left with little or no income. Although the system was meant to provide employment to freedmen and poor white families after Emancipation, it was quickly corrupted, and essentially became a legal form of slavery. The tenant's life was more or less possessed by the landowner through a vicious cycle of debt. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of the New Deal in 1933, coupled with later mid-century advancements in farming technologies that replaced laborers, virtually ended the institution of sharecropping.

Lamar Dodd

From This Earth, 1945

Props

Cotton Drag Sack
 Cotton (optional)
 Reproduction of the Ben Shahn photograph

About the Work

Four African American field workers hunch over the red earth as they pick the remaining bits of cotton from the thin stems. The clay underneath their feet throbs with heat, as the sparse stalks give up only a scant number of white blossoms. The figures have been abstracted into rhythmic shapes. They are faceless. The heavy bags have become part of their bodies, as their lives are bound to the fields. Lamar Dodd repeatedly experienced scenes such as this firsthand, and created several versions of the same.

Although we uncertain if the individuals depicted in this painting are sharecroppers or simply field hands, the work does portray the everyday life of a typical sharecropper. Each worker carried and filled two cotton drag sacks with their harvest, which was picked in the heat of the summer. They were under intense pressure to meet weight quotas. The average tenant was expected to pick 200 pounds a day, and entire families, including children, worked the fields to accomplish the goal (www.slaveryinamerica.org).

Interpretive Questions

1. Compare and contrast the painting with the photograph by Ben Shahn. How are the images the same? How are they different?
2. Demonstrate how the drag sack works. Imagine yourself as one of the workers in the painting. How would you feel? What is the temperature? How does the ground feel? Describe the techniques the artist used to help you make these determinations.
2. Why did Dodd call this work *From This Earth*? Do you believe the artist supported the system of sharecropping? Why or why not?
3. Can you identify the individuals portrayed? Why do you think the artist left their identities ambiguous?
4. Is this a beautiful painting? Why or why not? Why would the artist choose to create a painting that may not be considered pretty? What was his underlying message?
5. Lamar Dodd often painted in an American scene style. American scene artists depicted snapshots of life in the United States. They were divided into two subgroups, regionalism and social realism. Social realism often explored social and political issues that the artists felt strongly about. Regionalist art tended to celebrate scenes of rural American life. Considering that Dodd was an advocate for Southern art, which category would *From This Earth* fit best? Explain your reasoning.

Historical Background, Jim Crow Laws and the Civil Rights Movement

During Reconstruction freedmen in the South were protected by Federal law. However by the 1870s, white Democrats gradually returned to power in most of the Southern states. Strongly opposed to civil rights for African Americans, the Democratic Party legislated Jim Crow laws aimed at segregating black people from the white population (Franklin, 1980, p. 266). These laws affected many of the rights African Americans had been granted with the Emancipation Proclamation, including voting, education, and freedom of movement. Required literacy tests and residency requirements prevented many freedmen, as well as poor whites, from participating in elections. Although segregated schools for black children were federally mandated, they were severely underfunded and neglected. African Americans were restricted from businesses and segregated from white society. Consequences for disregarding segregation rules were stiff and severe, often resulting in inflated jail sentences or vigilantly justice.

Jim Crow laws existed well into the mid-twentieth century. After World War II, black Americans began to actively challenge segregation. Many had served in the military, fighting alongside white counterparts, defending America. They believed they had the right to be treated as full citizens (Franklin, 1980). As a result, the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. Initially the courts were used to attack Jim Crow statutes,

however in the South, the system was dominated by white politicians determined to maintain segregation. Courageous African Americans individuals joined in the fight for racial equality, often risking their own lives and personal safety to conduct public sit-ins of white only business and peaceful protests.

The first major court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the pivotal 1954 decision, legally mandated that schools be desegregated (Franklin, 1980, p. 409). Many other Jim Crow laws were overturned in the Federal court system based on constitutional grounds. However small local businesses, political parties, and private individuals countered these rulings by creating their own Jim Crow arrangements, barring African Americans from doing such things as buying property or entering white-only areas. Additionally vigilantes, who were growing in number and strength, simply ignored laws. Some groups, such as the Klu Klux Klan, were highly organized, while others were simply angry mobs. Regardless of their make-ups, the groups were exceedingly sadistic. Lynchings and mob violence against blacks was common and widespread throughout the South until the early 1960s.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which was a concerted government effort to end racial discrimination (Franklin, 1980, p. 473). Considering the long history of disenfranchisement, African Americans continued to face racial discrimination long after the bill passed. Unfortunately no law can change individual beliefs. As a result, pockets of intolerance and inequality still exist today. However there is also a lengthy, valuable legacy created by African Americans. They have contributed to every facet of Southern life, from music to food, to technological advances and innovative discoveries. This rich cultural heritage is often depicted in the artwork of many influential and established Southern black artists.

Henry Ossawa Tanner **Georgia Landscape, 1889-1890**

About the Work

In 1879 Tanner enrolled at the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and studied under Thomas Eakins. Between 1882 and 1887, Tanner lived in Philadelphia with his parents, attempting to establish himself as a painter and illustrator. Although he gained confidence as an artist and began to sell his work, racism was a prevalent condition in Philadelphia. Although painting became a therapeutic source of release for him, lack of acceptance was painful. In his autobiography *The Story of an Artist's Life*, Tanner describes the burden of race:

"I was extremely timid and to be made to feel that I was not wanted, although in a place where I had every right to be, even months afterwards caused me sometimes weeks of pain. Every time any one of these disagreeable incidents came into my mind, my heart sank, and I was anew tortured by the thought of what I had endured, almost as much as the incident itself."

Tanner moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1887. He briefly taught drawing at Clark Atlanta University and opened a small photography studio and gallery. While there Tanner met Bishop and Mrs. Hartzell, who became his primary patrons over the next several years. In the summer of 1888 Tanner sold his small gallery and moved to Highlands, North Carolina, where he hoped to study and earn a living by selling his photography. He returned to Atlanta in the fall of 1888. After discussing his ambitions to travel abroad with the Hartzells, they arranged the first solo exhibition of Tanner's works in Cincinnati in the fall of 1890. When no paintings were sold, the Hartzells bought the entire collection. This endowment allowed Tanner to sail for Rome in January 1891, eventually making his way to Paris. In France the artist developed a reputation as an academic and religious painter and won some of the country's most prestigious art awards. Paris was a welcome escape for Tanner; within French art circles the issue of race mattered very little. Tanner acclimated quickly to Parisian life. Except for occasional brief returns home, he would spend the rest of his life there.

It is believed that Tanner painted this work in the fall of 1889 while living in Atlanta. However, some scholars argue that this work was created while the artist still resided in the Philadelphia area. Whether or not the work is indeed Georgian, it does provide a link to the artist's brief Southern sojourn. (www.themorris.org)

The Académie Julian was part of the European Art School located in Paris, France, and founded in 1868. At this formal art education institution, students would start with the study of model casts then move on to drawing from a live model. The goal was to become familiar with the ideal proportions of the human figure, known as the ancient canon. Students were encouraged to enter the School of Fine Arts, to compete for the Prix de Rome (scholarship for art students), or to present their work at the Paris Salon. The Julian Academy is considered to have trained the avant-garde artists in Paris. What is unique about the academy is that women were accepted but were trained separately. The characteristics of the Académie Julian were the focus on the human figure and the ancient scenes.

Interpretive Questions

1. Study this work, comparing it to others nearby. Can you determine the artist's race by the subject matter? [The answer is no.] Why or why not? [The point is that Tanner was a preeminent artist, who was highly praised in Europe, but not readily accepted in the United States during the late 1800s due solely to his race rather than his painting ability.]
2. Why was Tanner's work not appreciated in the United States during the late 1800s? Why do you think he choose to go to Europe instead of staying in America to paint? What would have been the differences between the two continents that made one more accepting of his work than the other?
3. Describe the painting's mood. How has Tanner conveyed it? Imagine

Whitfield Lovell

Nkisi, 2001

(If your tour begins at this work, begin with the introduction of the Triangular Trade, but inform the students that they will be moving backwards in history.)

Props

Old photographs (cabinet cards)

Reproduction of a Nkisi

About the Work

Whitfield Lovell's multi-media piece *Nkisi* (nn-KEE-SEE) addresses the passage of time and remembrance, directly referring to African American history. The near life-sized charcoal portrait of a man rendered on old wooden planks, stares expressionlessly at the viewer. Below the figure is an antique wool comb, a device used to prepare fiber for spinning into yarn. Lovell's nameless figure is drawn from his personal collection of mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century tintypes and photographs of anonymous African Americans. The work's title, *Nkisi*, refers to a variety of fetish objects which contain mystical powers or spirits, and originated from the Congo Basin in Africa. Nkisi come in several forms, including containers or figures, and were specifically used to harness the power of the dead, an important part of the region's cultural beliefs. In the case of sculptural figurines, the works are generally studded with nails and spikes, as a means to awaken and release the spirits they represent. Lovell's artwork pays homage to African American ancestors, and speaks to the power of history and memory.

Interpretive Questions

1. Who is the man depicted by Lovell? What does the image remind you of? [Looking for the answer "a photograph."]
2. Compare the old portrait photographs [cabinet cards] with the drawing of the man. At the time these photographs were made, sitters had to stay still for several minutes as the image was exposed in the camera.

Some studios even used special metal apparatus to hold the subjects in one place. [This explains why the subjects are generally very stiff and do not smile.] Pretend you are getting your photo taken and have to stand completely still for a minute. Describe how your body felt while you posed.

3. Study the reproduction of a Nkisi. Why did the artist include the wool comb in the composition? How does it relate to a traditional Nkisi? What, if anything, is the artist trying to say?

4. Why did the artist make this work on old pieces of wood instead of a canvas? How does this choice affect the overall work? How is it different from a painting? How is it the same?

Benny Andrews *Preacher, 1994*

About the Work

Benny Andrew's collage *Preacher* is part of the artist's "Revival Series," which is made up of works based on activities that occurred during the Plainview Baptist Church's annual summer revival. Pieces in this series evoke strong, personal childhood memories including the artist's own conversion and baptism in the 1940s. Andrews himself described the event:

"A revival meeting has a particular set-up; the Deacons (male) are seated over in one corner. The Sisters (older women) sit in the opposite corner. The Preacher is in the pulpit and the Congregation (general members) are in the main area of the church. In front of the congregation on what was called the 'Mourners Bench' sat the ones (sinners) not yet baptized, facing the pulpit. The preacher, Reverend John Henry, had the job of getting us sinners to come off the 'Mourners Bench' and take a chair, which was placed between us and the pulpit. Coming forward and sitting in this chair meant a sinner had made peace with God and wanted to be baptized. Getting up from the 'Mourners Bench' and taking a seat in that chair was not easy. One was to have been praying for forgiveness of one's sins in privacy (often during the day out in the woods) and to have received some sign from God that he'd heard your prayers and forgiven you."

Although difficult to tell from a distance, *Preacher* is a collage. Both the chair and the main figure have been painted in oil on canvas, then carefully cut out and attached to a secondary surface. Andrews has captured the minister's intensity and focused energy, as he calls towards the heavens, as if asking for the power to move the sinners into the empty chair. The elongated figure's thrown back stance, along with the flying necktie, all allude to a strong sense of movement. This is in contrast to the wooden chair and the heavy, static shadows.

Interpretive Questions

1. Read the quote. What do you think is going on in this work? Who is the man? What is he doing with the chair? Besides the title of the work, does the artist provide any visual clues as to his identity or profession?
2. What is the focal point? How does the artist move your eye around the canvas?
3. Andrew's artwork was often inspired by his personal memories. How can you tell this? Was the event portrayed in this collage a happy or sad memory? How can you tell?
4. Locate *Andrew's Family Tree* by George Andrews. This work was done by Benny Andrew's father, who was also an artist. How is the work different? How are they the same? Why do you think the two styles vary so drastically? [Benny was academically trained, George was self-taught.]
5. How have the two artists related personal memories, feelings, and values? List things that you believe were important to the Andrews family, and explain your reasoning.

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