

# Somebody's Child: Paintings by Willie Birch

## Teacher Curriculum Guide



Fall 2002



# *Somebody's Child*

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**Additional Birch biography resources and the image transparency folders can be found in the main office.**

## **Standards Addressed Through Kidspace at MASS MoCA**

### Arts

- ξ Students will demonstrate knowledge of the media, materials, and techniques unique to the visual arts. (MA Standard 1)
  
- ξ Students will demonstrate their powers of observation, abstraction, invention, and expression in a variety of media, materials, and techniques. (MA Standard 3)
  
- ξ Students will use imaginative and reflective thinking during all phases of creating. (derived from MA Standard 4)
  
- ξ Students will use analytical and critical thinking to respond to and interpret works of art. (derived from MA Standard 5 & 6)
  
- ξ Students will apply their knowledge of the arts to the study of English language arts, mathematics, and science and technology. (MA Standard 10)

### English Language Arts

- ξ Students will pose questions [about works of art], listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions and interviews in order to acquire new knowledge. (derived from MA Standard 2)
  
- ξ Students will understand and acquire new vocabulary and use it correctly in reading and writing. (MA Standard 4)
  
- ξ Students will identify the basic facts and main ideas in a text [or work of art] and use them as the basis for interpretation. (derived from MA Standard 8)

- ξ Students will identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of a theme [or content] in [works of art] and provide evidence from the [art work] to support their understanding. (derived from MA Standard 11)
- ξ Students will identify and analyze how an [artist's work] appeal to the senses, suggest mood, and set tone, and provide evidence from the art work to support their understanding. (derived from MA Standard 15)
- ξ Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient detail. (MA Standard 19)

## **Social Studies**

*(Social Studies standards as of September 1997)*

**Chronology and Cause.** Students will understand the chronological order of historical events and recognize the complexity of historical cause and effect, including the interaction of forces from different spheres of human activity, the importance of ideas, and of individual choices, actions, and character. (MA Standard 1)

**Research, Evidence, and Point of View.** Students will acquire the ability to frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research; to collect, evaluate, and employ information from primary and secondary sources, and to apply it in oral and written presentations. (MA Standard 3)

**Society, Diversity, Commonality, and the Individual.** Students [will study] the broad diversity, in terms of race, ethnic traditions, and religious beliefs, [of the United States]...and above all the importance of our common citizenship and the imperative to treat all individuals with the respect for their dignity called for by the Declaration of Independence. (derived from MA Standard 4)

**Places and Regions of the World.** Students will identify and explain the location and features of places and systems organized over time. (derived from MA Standard 8)

## Introduction to the Curriculum Guide

*Somebody's Child*, the fall 2002 exhibition in Kidspace at MASS MoCA, features thirteen paintings by highly acclaimed artist and educator, Willie Birch. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, Birch studied art at Southern University in New Orleans and received his M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1973. Birch lived in Brooklyn, New York, for over twenty years before returning to New Orleans in 1994, where he now lives and works.

As a young man in the 1960s, Birch was active in the civil rights movement and believed strongly in the potential of art to provoke social change by raising people's consciousness. In the paintings on view in Kidspace, Birch represents contemporary scenes of African-American life in New Orleans that include children and adults from his community. These vibrant, beautiful figures, painted on a human scale, confront us as we look at them and compel us, in turn, to look back at ourselves.

Included in this curriculum guide are three lessons that are inspired by Birch's work. The first lesson, *Mapping the Life of Willie Birch*, serves as an introduction to Birch's life, art, and cultural heritage. In the course of his career, Birch has worked in many different media including papier mâché, found objects, and, most recently, acrylic and charcoal, but he has always been profoundly inspired by his community and his heritage. The second lesson, *Memory Jugs*, focuses on one of Birch's sculptures, which, though not featured in the Kidspace exhibition, is connected thematically to the paintings your students will see and discuss in Kidspace. The third lesson, *Looking at the World Around us: Point of View, Representation, and Portraiture*, gives students a chance to investigate the concept of *point of view* through a class discussion and by looking at a series of portraits painted by Birch and other artists.

### Tying Kidspace Projects to Your Curriculum

Each of the lessons in this guide provides an opportunity for your students to develop critical thinking skills, use their imaginations, and express their ideas through artwork and class discussions. Moreover, these lessons are intended to build upon the work you do already with your students. To this end, the curriculum is informed by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks – please see “Massachusetts Learning Standards Addressed through the Project,” pages 1-14 through 1-16.

In addition, the Kidspace program aims to promote arts-based, interdisciplinary learning in the classroom. Willie Birch's artwork provides a rich basis for exploring not only the visual arts, but language arts and social studies as well. We look forward to hearing about the interdisciplinary connections you make in your teaching this semester, using both the lessons in this curriculum as a point of departure.

## Your Feedback

Please let us know which projects you do with your students and which work the best in your classroom by **filling out a form included on page 1-4 of this guide**. The form will be collected during the December Teacher Workshop. We hope to visit your classrooms as often as possible to see and photograph your students' work, and we'd like to hear about any other projects that you develop on your own in conjunction with the Birch exhibition as well. You may also send any digital photographs, scanned work, or project ideas and feedback to Kidspace via E-mail, [MHack@massmoca.org](mailto:MHack@massmoca.org).

# Mapping the Life of Willie Birch

## **Grades preK-6**

*(preK-2 please skip to Part II)*

### **What?**

Students will create a “map” representing the life of Willie Birch. Using a list of terms and a series of images related to Birch’s life, culture, and artistic career, students will make a map in which the terms will stand for roads and the images for towns. Students will discover that the “roads” may connect many “towns,” learning, therefore, that there are a number of interconnected influences that have affected Willie Birch in his life and career. Students will also work with collage and practice using text, color, and shape as visual tools.

### **Why?**

This exercise will enable students to make cross-disciplinary connections and think critically about the sources of art, artist inspiration, history, family, tradition, the history of a place or a people, and geography and its effects. Also, by studying graphs, maps, and collage, your students will learn about various systems of visual organization.

### **When to do this activity**

Before or after you visit Kidspac

### **Time needed**

60 minutes

Several days may be spent discussing the terms and images.

#### Materials

overhead projector

1 large sheet white butcher paper

black magic markers

colored markers

Materials provided by Kidspac

transparencies for Part I:

bar graph

map

collage

image transparency for Part II

image information sheet

list of terms

Willie Birch biography

Teacher preparation

- Review Willie Birch biography
- Review image transparency and image information sheet
- Review list of terms for Part II

Key terms

color

symbol

visual language

*(3-6 grade only)*

### **Part I: Exploration of Visual Organization Systems**

1. Begin the lesson by showing students several images of maps, graphs, and collage (transparencies provided by Kidspace). First show the bar graph, then the map, and finally the collage. Explain that each image represents information in different ways: the bar graph is the most quantitative, the collage is the most abstract or chaotic, etc. Discuss aspects of each image, including both what it looks like and how it transmits information.
2. Discuss how each image consists of similar components including text, images, or symbols, but these elements are presented through a different “**visual language**,” or system of organization.
3. Explore the use of symbols in each image. Is there a “KEY”? How do the different images use color or shape to differentiate between types of objects or their meanings?

*(preK-6)*

### **Part II: Creation of Willie Birch Map**

1. Read the Willie Birch biography, provided by Kidspace, and, if time permits, look over the articles about Birch included in the Additional Reference Materials section at the end of this curriculum. Also, please look over the image transparency for Part II and its corresponding information sheet.
2. Set up the overhead projector with the image transparency provided by Kidspace, and tack up the large piece of butcher paper so that all the projected images are visible on the paper.
3. Write each term from the list provided by Kidspace on the chalkboard. (If you would like, read the Birch biography aloud to your class.)
4. Explain to your students that they will create a map about Willie Birch, the artist whose work they will see in Kidspace. They will use each of the terms to stand for a road and each image to stand for a town. Together the roads and towns will serve as a metaphor, representing the life of Willie Birch.
5. Discuss each term, especially ones with which students are not familiar.
6. Discuss each image (what is it, who is it, etc.). You may want to extend your discussion of the terms and images over several days before proceeding to the next part of this lesson.



7. Students will now make connections between text and image. Ask each student to choose one term and decide which image or images it best corresponds to. One or two at a time, students can write the term on the butcher paper near the image(s) that they think it matches best. (Younger students may need help with writing, or they can draw pictures instead.) When fitting, quote or paraphrase information from the Birch biography. Strongly encourage students also to consider using words multiple times and as connectors between images, explaining that the same road can connect many places. Students may also use shapes, colors, or **symbols** to create connections between the images, between the text, or to add any extra information they may find necessary. (As when following a road from one town to the next, one might encounter a body of water or a landmark.)
8. Once all of the terms have been mapped, have the students trace each of the projected images onto the butcher paper to make them permanent. They may take some liberty in their interpretation, but you may want to suggest that they attempt to maintain the integrity of the piece.

### **Part III: Reflection**

Turn on the lights and have your students review their map. Can they now imagine who Willie Birch is and what he is like? As an extension, have your students write about an aspect of Birch's life that they feel is important, have a personal connection to, or have questions about.

# Willie Birch

### **An Artist's Journey**

*"My mother was against it at first. She had heard about Van Gogh and didn't want me to end up like Van Gogh."*

Willie Birch is an African American artist and educator, who was born on November 26, 1942 at 2133 Tchoupitoulas Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. By the age of fourteen, inspired by a very special junior high school teacher named Mrs. Maxine Daniels, he knew that he would become an artist. Mrs. Daniels, with her father's insurance money, started an after-school art program for him and a few other talented

students, and proved to be a key force in his artistic and personal development. Before even graduating from high school Willie Birch was selling paintings to members of his family, church, and community.

Birch attended Southern University in New Orleans, where he came to know Oretta Castle Haley, and through her influence became aware of an artist's potential to provoke social change and raise consciousness. His involvement during the early 1960s in the civil rights movement—which led him to be jailed for participating in sit-in demonstrations at F.W. Woolworth and W.T. Grant stores—would significantly affect his later artwork.

In 1962 Willie Birch joined the Air Force and was sent to Holland, where he saw his first real paintings on the wall. The museum at home had been barred to him by segregation. He spent three years overseas before returning to the United States to complete his B.A., and in 1973 received his M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art.

### **Storyteller, Artist, Teacher**

*“As an artist, I do not live in a vacuum. I am constantly absorbing the life of my community, recording it in my public and personal works.”*

*“I see no difference; both making and teaching art are instruments in my ongoing struggle for self-determination, self-definition, and empowerment for myself and my community.”*

For twenty-seven years Willie Birch lived in Brooklyn, New York, where he was both an artist and a teacher. In intensive workshops at local schools, he sought to teach children about having a positive self-image, the importance of understanding the world, and the potential for art as a means of empowerment. Having returned home to New Orleans in 1994, he continues to be involved with and inspired by his community. He has said that he strives to document the world in which he lives, and that by painting his neighbors he both gives them immortality, and help others to see them and perhaps themselves in a new way.

### **Inspirations and Influences**

*“I wanted to put all of what I felt and believed on top and put all of my Eurocentric training underneath. I wanted to reverse the process.”*

*“All of a sudden, for the first time in my life, the only art that was energizing, that was honest, and that represented what I felt was the art of self-trained artists.”*

Willie Birch began his career as an abstract painter. But in the late 1970s he became dissatisfied with this approach and began making art inspired by the rich traditions of African-American culture and experience, and taking inspiration from

American folk art and the traditions of Africa's Yoruba and Congolese peoples. Willie Birch now works with many different media—including papier mâché, acrylic, charcoal, and found objects—exploring issues of home and family, identity, spirituality, symbolism, race, and ethnicity.

### Sources Consulted:

*Knowing Our History, Teaching Our Culture.* Essay by Willie Birch, edited by Mark O'Brien and Craig Little. New Society Publishers, 1990.

*Willie Birch: From Bertrandville to Brooklyn.* Essays by Susan Lubowsky, Terri Dowell-Dennis, Jeff Fleming and Richard J. Powell. Winston-Salem, NC: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 1996.

*Willie Birch: Transforming Identities.* Essays by Kalamu ya Salaam and Alan Govenar. Dallas, TX: McKinney Avenue Contemporary Museum, 1999.

### Terms for *Mapping the Life of Willie Birch*

<b>Africa</b>	memory
<b>African American</b>	New Orleans
<b>celebration</b>	paint
<b>color</b>	pattern
<b>flatness</b>	photograph
<b>folk art</b>	rhythm
<b>history</b>	storytelling
<b>influences</b>	symbolism
	tradition

*Grades preK-2*

**What?**

Willie Birch has made many tributes in his artwork to people who are important to him. Using his sculpture *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat* as inspiration, students will create a memory jug for an important person in their lives.

**Why?**

This lesson is designed as a way for students to explore the connection between themselves and someone whom they admire, using symbolic reference and self-expression. Students will also learn about African symbols through a discussion of a sculpture by Willie Birch.

When to do this activity

Before or after you visit Kidspace

**Materials**

one vessel for each student (e.g.: detergent bottle, juice bottle, etc.; preferably plastic)  
found objects (feathers, rocks, wood, nails, trinkets)

glue	papier maché
paint	wax/sand

**Materials provided by Kidspace**

transparency of *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*  
Teachers Information Sheet (TIS) for

discussion

*of Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*

Time needed  
60 minutes

**Teacher preparation**

- Collect one vessel for each student.
- Collect **found objects**.

## Part I: Discussion of Willie Birch's *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat* and Symbolism

1. Project the transparency of Willie Birch's sculpture, *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*, and discuss this artwork as a class. (See the Teacher Information Sheet provided by Kidspace for discussion of *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*.)
2. Willie Birch uses symbols in his sculpture to pay tribute to Uncle Nat. Discuss the concept of **symbolism** with your students. Explain that a symbol is something that makes people think of something else. Talk about how a symbol can be an object that stands for an idea—a dove for some people represents the idea of peace; iron for some people represents the idea of strength (we see it used this way in Willie Birch's work). Ask your students for other examples of symbols.

## Part II: Creation of Memory Jug

1. Have each student select a person they would like to honor. It can be a relative, a musician, an artist, a historical figure, or a sports figure—anyone who has influenced and inspired them. After selecting this person, ask students to describe the actions and characteristics of this person that prompted them to choose him/her.
2. From the assortment of found objects, each student may choose a few objects that remind him/her of the chosen person. Explain that, for each student, these objects **symbolize** the person they have chosen. Going around the classroom, discuss the choice of objects. Why are the chosen objects appropriate symbols? Are the colors of the objects important? The texture? What they are made from?
3. Distribute a vessel to each student. Before beginning their final piece, allow your students to explore the different ways to use the wax, sand, and papier maché in conjunction with their found materials. Throughout the creation period, encourage students to use all the materials they have gathered, to decorate the jug, covering the inside as well as the outside.

## Part III: Presentation and Reflection

Display the students' memory jugs around the classroom and ask students to present their work to the class. Ask students to comment on each other's work. What did they learn from this activity?

## Memory Jugs

*Grades preK-2*

### **What?**

Willie Birch has made many tributes in his artwork to people who are important to him. Using his sculpture *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat* as inspiration, students will create a memory jug for an important person in their lives.

### **Why?**

This lesson is designed as a way for students to explore the connection between themselves and someone whom they admire, using symbolic reference and self-expression. Students will also learn about African symbols through a discussion of a sculpture by Willie Birch.

When to do this activity

Before or after you visit Kidspace

Materials

one vessel for each student (e.g.: detergent bottle, juice bottle, etc.; preferably plastic)  
found objects (feathers, rocks, wood, nails, trinkets)

glue

papier maché

paint

wax/sand

### **Materials provided by Kidspace**

transparency of *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*  
Teachers Information Sheet (TIS) for

discussion

*of Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*

Time needed

60 minutes

### **Teacher preparation**

- Collect one vessel for each student.
- Collect **found objects**.

## Part I: Discussion of Willie Birch's *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat* and Symbolism

3. Project the transparency of Willie Birch's sculpture, *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*, and discuss this artwork as a class. (See the Teacher Information Sheet provided by Kidspace for discussion of *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*.)
4. Willie Birch uses symbols in his sculpture to pay tribute to Uncle Nat. Discuss the concept of **symbolism** with your students. Explain that a symbol is something that makes people think of something else. Talk about how a symbol can be an object that stands for an idea—a dove for some people represents the idea of peace; iron for some people represents the idea of strength (we see it used this way in Willie Birch's work). Ask your students for other examples of symbols.

## Part II: Creation of Memory Jug

4. Have each student select a person they would like to honor. It can be a relative, a musician, an artist, a historical figure, or a sports figure—anyone who has influenced and inspired them. After selecting this person, ask students to describe the actions and characteristics of this person that prompted them to choose him/her.
5. From the assortment of found objects, each student may choose a few objects that remind him/her of the chosen person. Explain that, for each student, these objects **symbolize** the person they have chosen. Going around the classroom, discuss the choice of objects. Why are the chosen objects appropriate symbols? Are the colors of the objects important? The texture? What they are made from?
6. Distribute a vessel to each student. Before beginning their final piece, allow your students to explore the different ways to use the wax, sand, and papier maché in conjunction with their found materials. Throughout the creation period, encourage students to use all the materials they have gathered, to decorate the jug, covering the inside as well as the outside.

## Part III: Presentation and Reflection

Display the students' memory jugs around the classroom and ask students to present their work to the class. Ask students to comment on each other's work. What did they learn from this activity?

## Memory Jugs

Grades 3-6

### What?

Willie Birch has made many tributes in his artwork to people who are important to him. Using his sculpture *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat* as inspiration, students will create a memorial object of their own choosing to honor a person who has greatly influenced them.

### Why?

This lesson is designed as a way for students to explore the connection between themselves and someone whom they admire using symbolic reference and self-expression. Students will also learn about African symbols through a discussion of a sculpture by Willie Birch.

When to do this activity

Before or after visiting Kidspace

Materials

one vessel for each student (e.g.: detergent bottle,

juice bottle, etc.; preferably plastic)

found objects (feathers, rocks, wood,

nails,

trinkets)

glue

papier maché

paint

wax/sand

### **Materials provided by Kidspace**

transparency of *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*

Teacher Information Sheet for

discussion of

*Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*

Time needed

**Part I:** 30 minutes

**Part II:** 20 minutes + one day or more for



## **Part I: Discussion of Willie Birch's *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat* and Symbolism**

1. Project the transparency of Willie Birch's sculpture, *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*, and discuss this artwork as a class. (See the Teacher Information Sheet provided by Kidspage for discussion of *Memory Jug for Uncle Nat*.)
2. Willie Birch uses symbols in his sculpture to pay tribute to Uncle Nat. Discuss the concept of **symbolism** with your students. Discuss what a symbol is: an object that makes someone think of something else. Talk about how a symbol can be an object that stands for an idea—a dove for some people represents the idea of peace; iron for some people represents the idea of strength (We see it used this way in Willie Birch's work.). Ask your students for examples of other symbols.
3. Discuss the difference between symbols that are more universal and those that are more personal. For instance, while a dove might symbolize peace to most students in the room, they might also have individual, or personal, ideas about what could stand as a symbol for peace. The symbols that they will use in the next part of this lesson will be a combination of *universal* and *personal* symbols.

## **Part II: Research, Collection of objects, and Creation of a Memory Jug**

1. Have each student select a person they would like to honor. It can be a relative, a musician, an artist, a historical figure, or a sports figure—anyone who has inspired and influenced them. After selecting this person, ask students to describe the actions and characteristics of this person that inspired them to choose him/her.
2. Ask your students to list in writing a few objects that remind them of the person they have chosen to honor. Explain that, for each student, these objects are *personal* symbols of the person they have chosen. Going around the classroom, discuss the choice of objects. Why are the chosen objects appropriate symbols? Are the colors of the objects important? The texture? What they are made from?

3. Help your students research the cultural heritage of the person being honored. They may ask this person questions, do research in the library, or on the internet. Willie Birch uses iron in his memory jug because in African tradition, iron symbolizes strength. What symbols can the student find from that person's cultural heritage to honor him/her with? Ask them to add these cultural symbols to their lists. Does the person being honored have the same cultural background as the student?
4. Ask each student to bring in (or choose from your supply) a vessel for his/her artwork that is also symbolic in some way. For example, the vessel could be something that is symbolic in their person's culture. Or, perhaps it could be an object that the person would find useful, or a gift. Or perhaps the vessel could be considered a symbol of the person him/herself.
5. Using the list of personal and cultural symbols they have written down, students can also collect as many of those objects as they can and bring them to class.
6. Once students have collected their vessel and objects, they can begin to create their own Memory Jug. Before beginning their final piece, allow your students to explore the different ways to use the wax, sand, and papier maché in conjunction with their found materials. Throughout the creation period, encourage students to use all the materials they have gathered, and to use all aspects of the vessel (inside, outside, etc.).

### Part III: Presentation and Reflection

Display the students' tribute vessels around the classroom and ask students to present their work to the class. Ask students to comment on each other's work. What did they learn from this activity? Have they gained a greater understanding of the person they chose and the culture from which he/she comes?

### **Teacher Information Sheet for discussion of Memory Jug for Uncle Nat, a sculpture by Willie Birch**

-Preparation for Memory Jug Project-

*Following is a series of questions to aid in the discussion of Willie Birch's sculpture "Memory Jug for Uncle Nat." All questions are marked by the bold "?". Key*

*information is also in bold. These points can be worked into the discussion as they are placed here, or as seems natural within the discussion framework.*

Begin by showing the slide of *Memory Jug* **without revealing its title**. Encourage students to use their imagination in answering the questions. Explain that through this process they will learn more about Willie Birch and his cultural heritage.

? What is this?

? What do you think it is used for?

? Where do you think this jug might come from? (Country? Part of the world?)

? How big do you think it is?

**Its dimensions are 30" tall x 15" x 16"**

? What is on the jug's surface?

**-nails**

**-shells**

**-words**

**-pictures (person, car)**

**-there is a tree coming out of the top**

? What do you think these objects might mean or symbolize?

Next, reintroduce the piece, telling the students its title. The following is a series of questions that prompt further evaluation of the jug's objects, meaning, and purpose.

? Has the meaning of the jug changed in your mind? How?

? Why do you think this is called a memory jug?

? How has the meaning of the objects changed in relation to the jug?

? Do you think the nails, etc. actually **symbolize** something beside themselves?

**Nails:** a West African Spirit and power

**Shells:** travel

**Tree:** growth

? What characteristics can we surmise about Uncle Nat from observing the memory jug?

? And, what do you think the relationship between Willie Birch and Uncle Nat is?

? Who is the jug a tribute to? Why might Willie Birch make a tribute to Uncle Nat?

**Through his personal tribute Birch shares his experiences, giving us insight into a more collective and cultural experience.**

? How does the memory jug tell a story?

**Storytelling is a big part of Birch's work.**

**Birch has created this memory jug as a tribute. It is covered with particular objects that remind him of Uncle Nat. These objects, as well as the jug as a whole, are symbols; each one carrying meaning for Birch himself, his Uncle, and for the viewer. As with all of Birch's work, this piece is a reflection of his cultural history and his personal and collective experience.**

? What does the *Memory Jug* make you think about?

? Is there someone to whom you would like to pay tribute through an artistic expression?

For further discussion:

**Using found objects is part of many cultural traditions including artistic traditions from Africa.**

**Listed below are several examples of African symbolism. You may want to refer to these in your lesson.**

**nkisi** (plural, **minkisi**): a charm which protects the soul, guards against illness; a chosen companion; a hiding place for people's souls, to keep and compose in order to preserve life. (p. 117)

*Containers for **minkisi** include leaves, shells, packets, sachets, bags, ceramic vessels, wooden images, statuettes, cloth bundles, and other objects. Each contains medicines and a soul, which combine to give it life and power. (117)*

***Ne Kongo**, the progenitor of the kingdom, prepared the primordial medicines in an earthenware pot. Clay pots have always been classical containers of **minkisi**. (121)*

*Feathers connote ceaseless growth, plentitude.  
Earth affirms the presence of the spirit of the dead. (121)*

**n'kondi**: Kongo statues bristling with half-inserted pins, nails, and wedges, each of which may represent a vow or legal agreement. (130)

*Twisted roots* are associated with enormous reserves of power. (130)

**Bottle trees**: Kongo-derived tradition of garlanding tress with bottles, vessels, and other objects, for protecting the household through invocation of the dead (related to grave decoractions). (142)

### **Sources Consulted:**

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit, African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*  
(New York: Random House Inc., 1983).

# Looking at the World Around us: Point of View, Representation, and Portraiture

*Grades preK - 2*

## **What?**

In this lesson, students will investigate questions concerning *point of view* and *representation*. Students will first use their imaginations to envision an object and a person from different perspectives, expanding their understanding of and feelings about that subject. Students will then look at two portraits of children by two artists and discuss how a different point of view is represented in each picture. Finally, students will interview an adult from the community and, individually and as a class, create a portrait of him/her that combines each students' point of view about this person.

## **Why?**

This lesson is inspired by themes of tolerance and social awareness that Willie Birch addresses in his work by emphasizing that there are many different, and yet valid, ways of looking at the world around us. Moreover, through an investigation into the art of portraiture, students will gain insight into how point of view informs an artist's process. Your students will likewise develop and reflect a "personal vision," or specific way of seeing and interpreting, by creating representations of their own.

### **When to do this activity**

Before or after you visit Kidspace

### **Time needed**

Part I: 60 minutes  
Part II: 30 minutes  
Part III: 40 minutes  
Part IV: 40 minutes

### **Materials**

overhead projector  
1-10"x10" (approx.) sheet heavy weight paper  
per student  
1 large sheet white paper or bulletin board  
collage materials (cut magazines,  
newspapers, found objects, etc.)  
glue  
markers  
push pins

### **Materials provided by Kidspace:**

Transparencies:  
#1 Diego Velazquez, *The Infanta Margarita*  
#2 Nellie Mae Rowe *What It Is*

### **Teacher preparation**

## Part I: Finding a New Point of View

1. To begin, introduce your students to the phrase **point of view**. Explain to them what this expression means. Do they consider having more than one point of view a positive or negative quality? Why?
2. Explain that in order to expand their way of understanding a given subject, they now will consider one object or place from many different points of view.
3. As a class, have the students choose one topic. Listed below are a few suggestions but feel free to choose something else that might address issues of tolerance and awareness more directly.
  - tree
  - cat
  - North Adams
4. Together, explore a few different points of view of the chosen subject. Encourage your students to imagine points of view that are more experiential than literal. For an example, ask your students to orally describe:
  - how rain would experience the tree
  - how an elderly person might see North Adams
  - how a mouse would see the cat
5. If they need help suggest that if they were a mouse looking up at a cat, the cat might look:
  - Huge
  - Scary
  - Hungry

## Part II: An Exploration of Various Representations

Before beginning this section, please read the Teacher Information Sheets for Velazquez and Rowe, where you will find a detailed description and interpretation of each image that you may use to guide the following discussion.

1. Tell your students that they will now examine the way that two different artists have chosen to represent a child in a painting. Explain that just as students considered the different points of view that one could have of a tree/cat/etc., artists inevitably have a point of view when they represent someone or something. Choosing how to represent this point of view is part of the artistic process. An artist's point of view will be guided by, among other things, his or her relationship to the person portrayed in the artwork.

2. Show each transparency on the overhead projector, **without giving the title, artist's name, or background.**
3. Use the Basic and Comparative Questions listed below to facilitate a discussion of both images, concentrating on the ideas of point of view and representation.

### Basic Questions

- Who or what is **represented** in this picture?  
Is it easy to tell who or what this is? Why?  
What is happening in the painting? Be specific.  
Is this portrait representational? (Does this look like a child might look in real life?)  
Or is the picture more abstract?  
Are there any "symbols" in the painting?  
Is this a picture of the inside or the outside of the person?  
What does this painting say about the subject's insides?  
What emotions do you think the person in the painting feels? Why?  
Why do you think the artist painted this picture the way he/she did?  
How has the artist interpreted what the child is like?  
How does the artist feel about this person?  
How would you describe the artist's **point of view**?  
What makes you say that?  
What experiences might have the artist shared with the subject?  
What emotions does the painting create in you?

### Comparative Questions

- How is this portrait different from the last one?  
How is the person represented differently than the person in the other painting?  
What is each artist's point of view of the children he depicts?  
How is it different from the previous artist's point of view?

## Part III: Getting to Know Your Community



## A. Interview with a Community Member

1. Explain to students that in this lesson, they will expand their understanding of the idea of representation by interviewing someone from their community, and creating a portrait individually and as a class.
2. Begin by selecting an adult member of your community for the students to interview.
3. Arrange for that person to visit the class for about 30 minutes.
4. Prior to the visit, ask your students what they already know about this person and what they would like to know. Help them compile a list of questions. They should be encouraged to ask questions that will give them new insight into that person's past (professions, schooling, family, geography, hobbies, interests), present, and future.
5. After the interview, ask your students how their point of view of that person has changed.

## B. Translation of the interview into a portrait representation

Explain to your students that they will now create a portrait of the person they interviewed. Using his/her own point of view, each student will represent one characteristic or aspect of the person interviewed, which he/she finds most interesting.

1. Using their notes from the interview, ask each student to choose the characteristic or aspect of the person's personality, hobbies, etc., they want to represent. Suggest to your students that they write a few sentences about that particular quality in their sketch or notebooks.
2. Pass out the square piece of heavyweight paper (10"x10" approx.) and collage materials to each student. They will use this paper to create a **representation** of the characteristic or experience they selected. Encourage students to avoid drawing a physical characteristic literally and to use their imaginations to represent an aspect of this person in a more abstract manner. Suggest that they try to make a more emotional **interpretation** and *representation* by using the collage material, specific color choices, and expressive mark making.

## Part IV: Reflection and collaboration

1. Once students have completed their individual portraits, have them present their pieces, explaining
  - What it was they were representing

- Why they chose the materials they did
  - Why they composed their piece the way they did
  - Why they felt this accurately represented their chosen characteristic
  - What their point of view was (that this person was kind, funny, etc.)
2. After each student has presented his/her work, the class will **collaboratively** make a new, larger portrait of the person by arranging the separate parts into a grid pattern on the wall or a larger piece of paper or board. You might even arrange the pieces in the shape of a human outline.
  3. You may want to allow one or a small group of students to rearrange the pieces weekly. This continuing interactivity and rearrangement can serve as a metaphor for the ever-changing perspective we can have on the world around us.

## Looking at the World Around us: Point of View, Representation, and Portraiture

### *Grades 3-6*

#### **What?**

In this lesson, students will investigate questions concerning *point of view* and *representation*. Students will first use their imaginations to envision and represent an object and a person from different perspectives, expanding their understanding of and feelings about that subject. Students will then look at four portraits of children by different artists and discuss how a different point of view is represented in each picture. Finally, students will interview an adult from the community and,

#### **When to do this activity**

Before or after you visit Kidspace

#### **Time needed**

Part I: 30 minutes  
Part II: 60 minutes  
Part III: 40 minutes  
Part IV: 40 minutes

#### **Materials**

sketchbooks  
overhead projector  
1-10"x10" (approx.) sheet of heavyweight paper per student  
collage materials (cut images from magazine or newspapers, colored paper, found objects)  
glue  
markers  
push pins

#### **Materials provided by Kidspace:**

transparencies:  
#1 Diego Velazquez *The Infanta Margarita*  
#2 Nellie Mae Rowe *What It Is*  
#3 Joan Miró *Portrait of a Young Girl*  
#4 Willie Birch *Young Man with Blue Hair*

#### **Teacher preparation**

Read Willie Birch biography  
Read Teacher Information Sheets

individually and as a class, create a portrait of him/her that combines each student's point of view about this person.

Why?

This lesson is inspired by themes of tolerance and social awareness that Willie Birch addresses in his work, by emphasizing that there are many different ways of looking at the world around us, each one equally valid. Moreover, through an investigation into the art of portraiture, including the work of Willie Birch, students will gain insight into how points of view inform an artist's process. Your students will likewise develop and reflect on a "personal vision," or specific way of seeing and interpreting, by creating representations of their own.

Part I: Finding a New Point of View

6. To begin, introduce your students to the phrase **point of view**. Ask them to describe what this expression means. Do they consider having more than one point of view a positive or negative quality? Why? In what areas of their own lives do they think that it is important to consider more than one point of view?
7. Explain that in order to expand their way of understanding a given subject, they now will consider one object or place from many different points of view.
8. As a class, have the students choose one topic. Listed below are a few suggestions but feel free to choose something else that might address issues of tolerance and awareness more directly.
  - tree
  - cat
  - North Adams
9. Together, explore a few different points of view of the chosen subject. Encourage your students to imagine points of view that are more experiential than literal. For an example, ask your students to orally describe:
  - how rain would experience the tree
  - how an elderly person might see North Adams
  - how a mouse would see the cat
10. Next, ask each student to choose his/her own way of viewing the chosen subject, explaining that in making their work artists also have to decide which point of view they want to represent.
11. Now students will represent their point of view as a picture. Ask your students to write a few descriptive sentences to help develop their idea. **Note that when Willie Birch creates his pictures, he too first has to decide how**

**he sees and feels about the subject, and then he figures out a way to tell US about it through his representation.**

12. If they need help suggest that if they were a mouse looking up at a cat, the cat might look:

- Huge
- Scary
- Hungry

Again, encourage your students to create a representation that is a

## **Sources Consulted**

Pallucchini, Ragghianti, Collobi. *Prado Madrid.*, New York: Newsweek, Inc. & Arnold Mondadori Editore. 1968

Kogan, Lee. *The Art of Nellie Mae Rowe Ninety-Nine and a Half Won't Do.*, Seattle: Marquand Books, Inc. 1998

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### *Acknowledgements*

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