

History
UNFOLDING

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

The Spirit of Harlem

During and after World War I, tens of thousands of African Americans made their way to the North in search of a better life. Like other immigrants of the time, they left less-developed rural societies for a hectic existence in the modern industrial city. City life was exciting yet confusing for them. In adjusting to it, they adopted its ways while adapting them to their own unique cultural styles. The largest and most exciting black urban community of all was Harlem in New York City. There, black artists, scholars, writers, musicians, actors, political leaders and many others helped bring to life a new African American spirit known ever since as the Harlem Renaissance.

In this booklet we use 12 visual displays to tell the story of the Harlem Renaissance. These 12 displays focus on some of the key themes and many of the most important figures of the Harlem Renaissance. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Moving North

The illustrations here focus on the “Great Migration” of blacks to the North during World War I and the impact of the war on their hopes and dreams. A painting by Archibald J. Motley, Jr. focuses attention on the sometimes bewildering encounter by African Americans with the cities of the North.

The Political Context

A look at the views of W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Father Divine, three figures who helped define a new, more assertive African American political spirit.

The “New Negro” in Words and Song

Of the many Harlem Renaissance writers and performing artists, the illustrations here focus on Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday.

Harlem’s Canvas

This final set of illustrations will enable students to get a sense of the wide range of vibrant styles characteristic of the many artists who helped define the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Harlem Renaissance***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand some of the social and economic roots of the cultural movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Moving North

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

As of the first decade of the 20th century, the vast majority of African Americans still lived in the U.S. South. Most were poor tenant farmers or sharecroppers in rural areas. Here, artist Ellis Wilson captures the slow and easy pace of life in a black neighborhood in *Old Charleston*. As the painting suggests, strong family and community ties eased the hardships of life for African Americans in the Deep South. Poverty alone was not the worst of those hardships. The early 1900s were a time of increasing racial tension. “Jim Crow” segregation was, if anything, getting harsher. Horrible lynchings were a growing problem. And in the 1920s, a revived Ku Klux Klan only added to the sense blacks had of being under constant threat.

Illustration 2

Blacks had already begun leaving the South before World War I. But the war gave a huge boost to what soon was called the “Great Migration.” The drama of this historic development in black life in America was captured by artist Jacob Lawrence in his famous *Migration of the Negro* series of paintings, one of which is shown here. Hundreds of thousands of blacks moved North seeking jobs in factories short of manpower during the war. About 400,000 other African Americans served in the army, some fighting heroically in segregated units. On the right are some men from the much-decorated all-black 369th Regiment arriving back in New York in 1919.

Illustration 3

Thousands of blacks poured into the cities of the North during and after World War I. In many ways, they were like other immigrants arriving from less-developed rural societies. City life was exciting yet confusing for them. Both aspects of their urban experience are captured in this painting by African American artist Archibald J. Motley, Jr. Motley, Ellis Wilson and Jacob Lawrence were three of many black artists who began recording black life in America in these years and the rapid changes brought by the Great Migration. This painting is of Chicago, but the largest and most exciting black urban community of all was in New York City—Harlem. There, black artists, scholars, writers, musicians, actors, political leaders and many others helped bring to life a new African American spirit known ever since as the Harlem Renaissance.

Lesson 1—Moving North Illustration 1



Artist Unknown, *Texas 100 Percent American*.
From *Cartooning Texas*, by Maury Forman
and Robert A Calvert (Texas A&M University
Press, 1993).



Old Charleston, by Ellis Wilson.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustrations

1. Life was hard for African Americans in the early years of the 20th century. The 1922 cartoon here suggests one of the reasons for this. What organization is the cartoon about, and how did this organization make life difficult for American blacks?
2. Aside from the KKK specifically, what else made life especially hard for African Americans in the early decades of the 20th century?
3. This editorial cartoon is sympathetic to the Ku Klux Klan. How can you tell this? The KKK actually revived in the 1920s and even spread to many Northern states. From your general knowledge of the history of this time, can you explain why?
4. In spite of their problems, black Americans were able to develop strong and supportive communities in many places in the South. Some say the painting of *Old Charleston* here by black artist Ellis Wilson, hints at the strengths of those communities. Do you agree with this view of the painting. Why or why not?

Follow-up Activities

1. Do some reading on the Ku Klux Klan and its big revival in the 1920s. Find out what groups were targets of the Klan in those years, and think about what fears motivated its members. Now, pretend you are living in Texas in 1922 when the above editorial cartoon appeared in a newspaper there. Write a long letter to the editor of the newspaper commenting on the cartoon and expressing your opinion of it. Keep in mind that you are someone in Texas in 1922. You can express your own opinion, but try to do it as someone from that time period.
2. Ellis Wilson is one of many African American artists often linked with the Harlem Renaissance. Wilson was from Kentucky, and he painted many scenes having to do with black life in the South and elsewhere. Learn more about Wilson. Try to find some copies of his paintings. Share these with the class and give a brief talk on Ellis Wilson and his creative work.