

A painting of a Black man with a crown of white flowers, set against a background of gold and blue stripes. The man has a dark brown face, a red beard, and is wearing a dark brown garment. The background consists of a blue field with gold diagonal stripes. The man's head is framed by a gold circular border.

Minneapolis Institute of Art

**In the Presence of
Our Ancestors**
Southern Perspectives
in African American Art
Teachers Guide

Mia

Teachers Guide

In the Presence of Our Ancestors: Southern Perspectives in African American Art

This teachers guide accompanies the special exhibition “[In the Presence of Our Ancestors: Southern Perspectives in African American Art](#),” on view at Mia until December 5, 2021. Acquired from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in 2017, the exhibition’s featured artworks remain in Mia’s collection and will be included in future gallery rotations.

This guide is designed to promote classroom discussion about six artworks, the innovative use of materials, and the impact of racism on the lives of the artists and the reception of their work over the last half century. Each image is supported with key ideas and discussion prompts. All of the discussions begin with close looking and an invitation to describe the artwork. More complex questions follow. Though we have provided grade ranges for each question, you are the best judge of which questions will best support your teaching goals. We recommend you review the content with your students in mind as you plan your discussions.

About the Souls Grown Deep Foundation

Founded in 2010 by the late collector and art historian William Arnett (1939–2020), the Souls Grown Deep Foundation is dedicated to documenting, preserving, and promoting the contributions of African American artists of the South and the cultural traditions in which they are rooted. [Learn more here.](#)

In honor of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation’s commitment to community, we recognize the contributions made by many to produce this exhibition. It was curated by inaugural Souls Grown Deep Foundation intern, Starasea Nidiala Camara, in collaboration with Mia’s BIPOC Curatorial Advisory Committee—Keisha Williams, Bayou Bay, Anniessa Antar, Tamira Amin, Frederica Simmons, Victoria Myers, Minna Jain, and Jeanine Pollard—with interpretation by visiting local artists through the [Transcontinental Dialogue Project](#).

In the Presence of Our Ancestors: Southern Perspectives in African American Art

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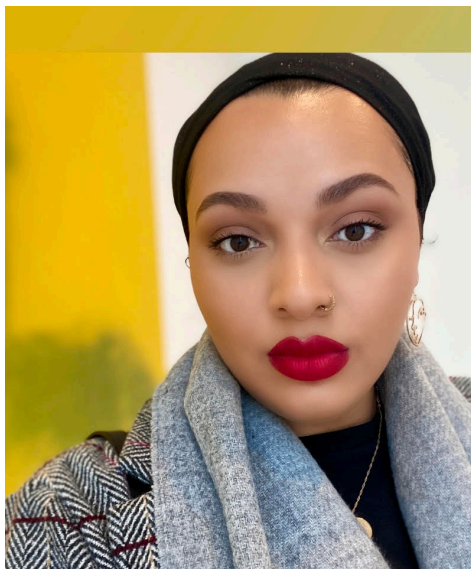
BANK OF AMERICA 

Cover: Leroy Almon, United States, 1938–97
Christ (detail), 1987, carved wood, paint, wood frame
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep
Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.5
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Introduction: Centering Black voices

The exhibition and this corresponding teacher guide bring together methods of visual storytelling and ancestral memory through the practices of individual artists from a region of the American South known as the “Black Belt.” The term refers to the region’s black soil, as well as the legacies of African Americans who shaped its social and agrarian culture. From Louisiana to Florida, and from the mid-1900s to the present, the highlighted artists document rural life and traditions in painting and drawing, metalwork, funerary and yard art, and quilt making.

These artworks are frequently called “folk” or “vernacular,” and the artists who made them are often described as “self-taught.” Within the context of art museums, which are institutions rooted in colonialism and oppression, such terms diminish the thoughtfulness and creativity of both artwork and artist. For this reason, we do not use the terms in this exhibition or guide. The artworks speak for themselves, centering Black voices, material traditions, and visions.



Self-portrait by Starasea Nidiala Camara

Meet the curator

Starasea Nidiala Camara is an emerging curator, scholar, and aspiring linguist. “I always knew that I wanted to work in the arts,” she said. “My mother is a lifelong artist, and in many ways she passed down her passions to me. It was when I realized that I didn’t have to choose between the arts and scholarship that my mind opened to the possibilities ahead of me.”

A full-time student at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, College of Liberal Arts, she is completing a B.A. in African diasporic history and visual culture. As the Souls Grown Deep intern in Mia’s Department of Painting, she was directly involved with the museum’s acquisition of 33 works, researching, collaborating, and ultimately curating the exhibition [“In the Presence of Our Ancestors: Southern Perspectives in African American Art.”](#) Currently, she holds a 2020–21 fellowship with the [Emerging Curators Institute](#), and works for the Souls Grown Deep Foundation as a curatorial assistant on the Gee’s Bend Cultural Trail reinstallation and expansion.

To those interested in curating, she has these words of encouragement: “Spend time at your local library, indulge in that topic that no one else chooses for their class project, and take advantage of as many extracurriculars as you can to build your skills and interests. If you don’t see yourself represented in a space, pursue your interests anyway.”

The root of curator is *cura*—Latin for “care.” Camara takes that meaning to heart. “There’s no rule book on how to curate, but you should care about the people and the communities behind the art,” she says. “Making these lasting connections makes this work more than just project based—you are applying your lens to the human story.”



Lola Pettway, United States, 1941
"Housetop" variation quilt, 1970s, corduroy
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep
Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.16
©2021 Lola Pettway / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Lola Pettway, “Housetop” variation quilt

Key Ideas

1. Lola Pettway learned how to quilt from her mother, Allie, using leftover fabric. Following a collaboration with Sears designing pillow shams, Lola used the scraps to assemble this corduroy quilt. Lola and Allie were resourceful innovators who used what they had available to quilt beautiful works of art.
2. Quilt making is often passed down through the generations. Just as Lola learned from her mother, Allie, her mother likely also learned from hers. Sometimes we call artists “self-taught,” but in the case of these women, we could consider them “family-taught.”
3. Lola’s quilt is inspired by a classic quilt-design style, called “housetop.” Traditional housetop quilts use alternating strips of color to form concentric squares, radiating out from the quilt’s center. Lola used her creativity to rethink tradition, creating nine small housetops of green, red, gold, brown, and beige. By creating this energetic, beautiful quilt, she shows us how you can honor tradition through innovation.

Lola Pettway shows us how you can honor tradition through innovation.

Discussion

All ages

Look closely. What do you first notice? Close your eyes if you want, or look away for a moment. Look again. What do you notice now?

3rd and 4th grade

Imagine you are floating above your neighborhood. Below you are streets, apartment buildings, stores, and homes. Take that image and imagine your own housetop quilt. What colors would you use? Why? How many squares would you need? What do they represent?

5th-12th grades

Think of a time when you were creative or approached an idea a new way. Did you make a work of art? Did you solve a problem? What about that talent or skill of yours do you want to teach future generations? Why is it an important piece of knowledge or skill for them to have?

Lola Pettway took tradition and built upon it with her own creativity. She made something that could be uniquely hers. Look closely at the quilt. What question would you want to ask Pettway about her artistic choices? Why?

Curator’s comment

Community is an important part of quilting, especially for the quilters of Gee’s Bend. Most quilters learn from one another, especially their elders, from a very young age. Girls, and in some families, boys, begin learning to sew as young as 6 years old. Skills, traditions, and styles are passed down from generation to generation. It’s like helping your grandma in the kitchen and learning a family recipe or working with your mom to sew a new dress. I remember my mom helping my cousin sew a dress for her school dance. This family or community process is important to continue and pass down to new generations.



Thornton Dial, United States, 1928–2016

Royal Flag, 1997–98, American flag, toy doll, toy bull, string, fabric, industrial sealing compound, oil, enamel, spray paint on canvas mounted on wood

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.8

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Thornton Dial, *Royal Flag*

Key Ideas

1. Thornton Dial came from a family of sharecroppers and was raised on the same plantation where they worked. A sharecropper was contracted, often with few other options, to farm the land of a landowner in return for a share of the crop. This meager income typically left workers in debt. Dial represents his family's hardships through his art. In this context, plantation refers to the lands where enslaved people were held captive and forced to labor prior to emancipation. This means that, after the abolition of slavery in the United States, Dial's family (like many African Americans) were farming on land once worked by his enslaved ancestors.
2. Dial expressed his emotions, recorded his family history, and reflected on current events through his art. *Royal Flag* is part of a series honoring the death of Princess Diana in 1997. The English princess, the mother of Prince Harry and Prince William who had a much publicized divorce from Prince Charles, later died in a car wreck after being chased by photographers (called paparazzi). He saw Princess Diana as a victim and related it to his own family's oppression. He turned his frustration into art.
3. Like many artists who recorded the death of Jesus Christ through images of the stations of the cross, Dial created his own four stations to tell Princess Diana's story. From the series' third station (or artwork), *Royal Flag* is Dial's interpretation of the United Kingdom's flag and the state of the nation at that time.

Thornton Dial expressed his emotions, recorded his family history, and reflected on current events through his art.

Discussion

All ages

Look closely. What do you notice? Look deeper. Where do you see the flag? Where do you see a blonde doll? Where do you see a bull? How did the artist show you those things?

3rd and 4th grade

Dial used paint pigments—in the red, white, and blue of the United Kingdom's flag—to build up the painting. He was inspired by current events. Think about something that inspires you. If you could make an artwork about it, what materials would you use? Why? What story would you want it to tell?

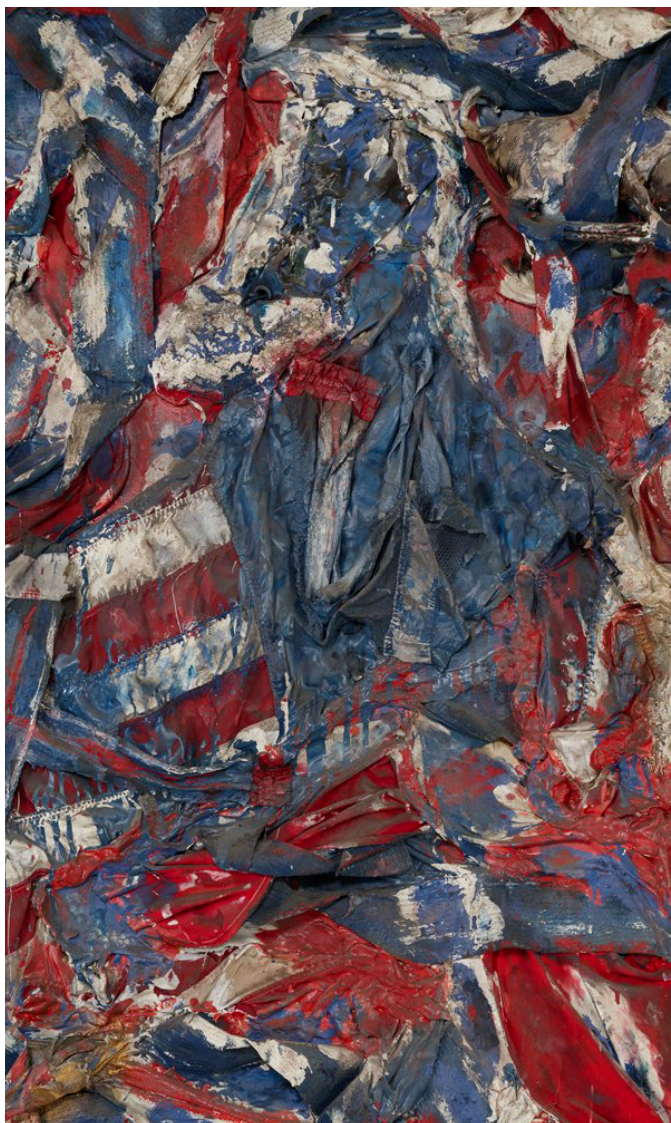
5th–12th grades

Royal Flag represents the idea of a power dynamic. Think: Colonizer and colony. Royal family and common people. Celebrity and paparazzi. Which current event would you turn into an artwork? Why? What message would be most important for you to tell? How would you represent that in your art?

Art is powerful. Art can tell powerful stories. Dial represented people who were treated unfairly, who were bullied and oppressed. If you could raise awareness through an artwork, what issue would you want to call attention to? What type of art would you make? Why?

Curator's comment

One thing that stands out to me about Thornton Dial is the sense of empathy he includes in his artworks. This work reminds me of a search-and-find or a puzzle where you're looking for his message. Once you learn about the story Dial is telling you, you end up taking a step back to really take it in. During the installation of this exhibition, it took Registration (the people who help install artworks) three tries to safely hang it on the wall. It's a very heavy artwork! I encourage you to visit the artwork in person and view it from all different angles so you can see how Dial's layers build upon one another.





Joe Minter, United States, 1943

Old Rugged Cross, 1998, found wood, nails

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation
from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.15

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Joe Minter, *Old Rugged Cross*

Key Ideas

1. Joe Minter (Joe Wade Minter, Sr.) grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, the eighth of 10 children. He witnessed the ways racism prevented his father, a World War I veteran, from using his skills as a mechanic. Minter also joined the U.S. military and worked in metal and construction, among other jobs. When his eyesight failed and his workplace shut down, he turned to God to figure out how to bring people together. The answer was art!
2. Minter understood that, because art is universal, art would be his way to help heal wounds between Black and white people, and among members of his own Black community. He drew on his experience in metals and construction to create assemblages (sculptures made by putting together discarded objects and materials) to teach about the 400-year journey of Africans in America.
3. Minter displayed many assemblages in his yard. He named his yard installation The African Village in America. He also created artworks for sale in order to tell the history of African descendants to a broader audience. In 1998, Minter made *Old Rugged Cross* in memory of the four Black schoolgirls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, a 1963 white supremacist terrorist attack in Birmingham. He pieced together rusted nails and planks of wood to form this enormous group of crosses.

Joe Minter understood that, because art is universal, art would be his way to help heal wounds between Black and white people.

Discussion

All ages

This artwork, *Old Rugged Cross*, is about six-and-a-half-foot tall. Look closely at the image of the *Old Rugged Cross*. What do you see? Keep looking. What else do you notice about it? How do you feel when you are looking at this artwork? What do you see that makes you feel that way? What do you wonder about when you look at *Old Rugged Cross*?

3rd and 4th grade

Joe Minter has dedicated his art to tell the stories and keep memories alive of the history of African descendants in the United States, ranging from slavery to civil rights activism. He uses discarded materials to symbolize that what is thrown away or invisible could be made into something powerful and spiritual. Minter's art tells stories of Black Americans often left out of the nation's version of history. What story of invisibility from history would you like other people to know about? Take some time to look around to see what kind of discarded items you could reuse to create an artwork that tells that story. What materials would you use? Why?

5th-12th grades

Minter made *Old Rugged Cross* to tell the story of four young Black girls (Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley) who were killed in Birmingham. The 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, where they died, was a white-supremacist terrorist attack. Why do you suppose Minter wanted to tell this story, some 35 years after this tragedy? Why do you think he created an image of rugged crosses to tell their story? Research the history of the bombing and murder of the young girls. How would you tell the story through an artwork? What medium (for example, paint, video, or wood) would you use? Why?

Many artists and writers today use their voices to call out systemic racism and promote social justice. What stories from U.S. history do you want to make sure get told so that no one ever forgets? Minter chose sculpture as his medium for telling the history of African descendants in the United States. What media would you use? What symbols might you include? What might you do to ensure the story you are teaching reaches as many people as possible?

Curator's comment

*Looking at this piece immediately takes me back to visiting Joe Minter at his home in Birmingham, Alabama. Artists are everyday people who also happen to create art. He was so excited to talk with us and show us around his installation, *The African Village in America*, taking the time to really walk us through his yard show. These artworks have been weathering the elements, and in *Old Rugged Cross* you can even see the moss growth. This personal tour allowed us to see how much time and care he has taken in his creative decisions. His yard is one large artwork, and we were able to walk through and hear his process. Everything has such a specific significance; it teaches you to not overlook even the smallest detail. Everything matters, no matter how small!*





Georgia Speller, United States, 1931-88
House up the Hill off the Highway, 1987, tempera and pencil on paper
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep
Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.24

Georgia Speller, *House up on the Hill off the Highway*

Key Ideas

1. The daughter of a blacksmith, Georgia Speller grew up in northeastern Mississippi. She remembered having a happy childhood despite their family's tough circumstances and used her art to capture memories. Though she learned to draw as a little girl, Georgia didn't fully explore her art until she married Henry, also an artist.
2. Georgia's painting *House up on the Hill off the Highway* appears cheerful because of her choice of colors and painting style; however, this artwork was full of things she knew she'd never have herself: a big house high on a hill, away from highway noise. Georgia was realistic and knew her and Henry's social and financial status would never give them the life depicted in this picture.
3. Through Georgia's masterful use of tempera paint and other basic materials, she represents her dreams and aspirations in colorful scenes. She focused on everyday social life, looking closely at the society around her and lifting up her own community.

Discussion

All ages

Look closely at this painting. Look at all the details the artist included. What do you see? Look again. What else did you notice?

3rd and 4th grade

Georgia Speller painted a large house, high on a hill, far away from the highway. An airplane flies overhead, and two people stand next to the house. She imagined living here, though it was a place she never visited. Use your imagination and think of a place you'd like to visit. It can be a real place or an imaginary place. Where is it? How would you paint it? What colors would you use? Why? What details would be most important? How so?

5th-12th grades

Georgia understood the social, economic, and racial barriers that made many things inaccessible to her community, so she decided to paint them. What is something you think people should have access to that could be communicated through art? What is the value of ownership in community to you? How do you think she might have felt? Why? Look closely at this painting. How does it make you feel? What do you see that makes you feel that way?

When you take the time to look slowly, what details do you see now that you did not see before? Why are they important to telling Georgia's story? What connections can you make to Georgia's story? If you were to make an artwork that tells about your own experience, what would it look like? Describe it.

Curator's comment

*Georgia had a very realistic perspective but also a unique critique on life that I admire. She had a way of identifying her dreams, but also making note of things she did not want around her. It's important to be honest with yourself, and she brings a healthy dose of honesty to her creativity. Georgia also represents real values in human relationships within her artworks, not just in *House up on the Hill off the Highway*. She does a great job of interpreting relationships amongst people, possibly drawn from her marriage to Henry. Her husband was also her studio mate, working together in their creativity. It likely had an influence on what she wanted her art to have commentary on.*

Georgia Speller focused on everyday social life, looking closely at the society around her and lifting up her own community.



Henry Speller, United States, 1900-97
Steamboat Katie Adam, 1987, marker, crayon, and pencil on paper
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown
Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.32

Henry Speller, *Steamboat* Katie Adam

Key Ideas

1. Henry Speller spent most of his life along the Mississippi Delta. He was raised by his grandparents, who were sharecroppers. He wanted a formal education and a change of life, but the grueling schedule of being a sharecropper prevented him from attending school. Henry was always creative and began exploring his imagination as a young child, making trains in his bedroom.
2. Henry's creativity mixed with his curiosity. Technology always intrigued him. First, he was fascinated by large steamboats plying the river as he installed telegram posts. Later in life, he lived beside a railroad track and watched the large coal-run trains chug past. Henry sold candy along the railroad to earn money for art materials. This dedication to his art and the riverside excitements kept his mind occupied while working hard jobs. What he witnessed influenced his art, like *Steamboat Katie Adam*.
3. For inspiration, Henry drew on his first-hand experiences. Working along the river in various jobs, he watched these large, lively boats steam by. His steamboat cross-section is full of sights and sounds he may not have been a part of, but that he witnessed.

Discussion

All ages

Take a quiet moment to look closely at this cross-section of a steamboat. It is as if Henry Speller sliced the boat in half, and we are glimpsing what is going on inside. What is happening in this drawing? What do you see that makes you say that?

3rd and 4th grade

Like his wife, Georgia, Henry made art from his imagination and lived experiences. He watched these steamboats sail by the river bank daily. Compare this drawing to Georgia's painting. What is similar? What is different? What do you think the artists wanted you to notice first? What do you see that makes you say that?

5th-12th grades

Artists often use color to express emotion. Think about what you know of Georgia and Henry's artworks. The artists created scenes of lives they witnessed from a distance, recognizing the limitations of their social and economic circumstances in American society. Look at the colors. How do they make you feel? What emotions do you associate with them? How do your responses align or conflict with the narratives being told?

The Spellers: Individual artists, stronger together

1. Georgia and Henry Speller were artistic individuals who became more committed, curious, and creative as a couple. Their artistic partnership flourished as they challenged each other to tell stories, learned from and encouraged each other, and talked about and compared their art.
2. The Spellers made deeply expressive art. They told stories of people and places that felt far from their own reality. Having seen large homes on hills and working alongside steamboats with music, their experiences expanded their imaginations.
3. For inspiration, Georgia and Henry drew on their personal experiences. Hers were formed by imagining the worlds she saw around her, but were unable to access, while his were firsthand.
4. This documentation of life from the Spellers is a record of the social, economic, and racial divides—and artistic unity—they experienced.

Think of a time you felt a strong emotion. Were you happy? Frustrated? Sad? Close your eyes if you'd like and try to see that emotion as a color. What do you see? What colors do you associate with certain emotions? Why do you think that is? If you were going to turn that emotion into an artwork, what materials would you use? Why? How large would your artwork be? Would you want it to be narrative (telling a story) or more abstract (open to interpretation)? Why?

Georgia and Henry Speller had a vision and opened it up to us through their art. Think of something you're curious about, or a place that lives in your imagination. How would you turn that idea or place into an artwork? What materials would you use? What details would you want to incorporate into your art? Why are they important? If possible, sketch your idea.

Henry Speller's creativity mixed with his curiosity. Technology always intrigued him.

Curator's comment

Even though Henry's artwork is displayed with Georgia's in the show, what I like about this installation—and what keeps your eye going back and forth—are the similarities in materials and color. It's as if they gave one another critiques as they created. Henry emphasizes texture and relies heavily on primary colors. He created a perspective for viewers that allows you to look directly into the ship and then observe how people lived and occupied those spaces. This cross-section of the ship reminds me of my experience walking through the Souls Grown Deep's warehouse in Atlanta, Georgia, where they keep their collection. Seeing all of the artworks that would eventually make their way into museums across the country was overwhelming and exciting at the same time.





Leroy Almon, United States, 1938–97
Christ, 1987, carved wood, paint, wood frame
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown
Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.5

Leroy Almon, *Christ*

Key Ideas

1. Woodcarver Leroy Almon was born in Tallapoosa, Georgia, and grew up in Ohio. After high school graduation, Almon became a shoe salesman and later an employee of the Coca-Cola Company in Columbus. There, at Gay Tabernacle Baptist Church, he befriended Elijah Pierce, a renowned woodcarver. Later, he apprenticed himself to Pierce and took on organizing—also known as curating—exhibitions in the artist's barbershop gallery.
2. Almon's art was a reflection and expression of his religious practice/ministry. When he moved back to Tallapoosa, Georgia, he built an art studio in his basement and began his work as a nondenominational evangelical preacher. His wood carvings are inspired by religion, politics, and history, and especially by the life of Jesus, whom he consistently represented as a Black man.
3. Almon began carving highly personal interpretations of spiritual and secular themes while apprenticing with Elijah Pierce, a well-known Black American lay minister and woodcarver in Columbus, Ohio. Pierce taught him the technique of relief carving, in which he cut away wood to leave the images raised above the panel surface. Almon used the tools he had on hand—a chisel and pocketknife—to cut away the soft wood. He then decorated his carvings with acrylic paints and other materials.

Leroy Almon's wood carvings are inspired especially by Jesus, whom he consistently represented as a Black man.

Discussion

All ages

Look closely at this wooden sculpture depicting Jesus Christ, the son of God in the Christian faith. Notice the details Leroy Almon included. What do you see? Look again. What else did you notice?

3rd and 4th grade

Almon was a preacher who made his art in service to the Christian faith and God. Based on his reading of the Christian Bible, he believed Christ was a Black man. Almon once said: "Everybody sees God as they are. The Bible says we're made in his image. I hold true to that." How does his sculpture show this? How can seeing reflections of ourselves be a good thing? What ideas or beliefs are very important to you? How might you show what is important to you in a drawing or sculpture? If you'd like, make a sketch (a simple drawing) of what you might show in your artwork.

5th–12th grades

Look closely at Almon's *Christ*. How is Jesus Christ feeling? What do you see that makes you say that? How has Almon invited viewers to understand Christ's emotions? How do you feel as you look at this image? What about the artwork most affects how you are feeling? What artistic decision has Almon made to elicit feelings from the viewer? How do the colors influence them? What about the lines? What are some details that evoke emotions?

Almon begins each artwork by sketching the image he has in his mind. He transfers that to a soft wood panel, which he then carves with a pocketknife and chisel. Look closely at the image to see how he removes wood from around Christ to create an image in relief. He then adds color with acrylic paint. Compare and contrast Almon's *Christ* with Thornton Dial's painting *Royal Flag*. Dial's painting is also a relief. How has he created depth in his relief work? Dial mounted his relief on a wooden frame. Almon built a frame over his relief. How do these

decisions enhance the sense of 3-dimensionality of their artworks? How do these decisions shape your experience of each artwork?

8th-12th grades

Almon believed Jesus was a Black man and decided to represent him as such in Christ. He said: "Everybody sees God as they are. The Bible says we're made in his image. I hold true to that." What was your initial reaction to seeing Christ depicted as a Black man? What was at the core of your response? In European art history, Christ is usually represented by white artists as a white man. How does Almon's and other Black artists' decision to represent Christ as a Black man address or challenge centuries of systemic justification of white supremacy and racism? What might Almon be saying about the interconnections among race, religion, politics, economics, and representation?

Curator's comment

Initially I was very drawn to Leroy Almon's carving technique. You can see where the artist very strategically carved the lines from Christ's halo emanating outward, contrasting the gold and the periwinkle paint into a very soft composition. I didn't think wood could look soft, but this artwork has a delicate aura to it. Almon's carving emphasizes the emotions and strain seen in this moment right before Christ's execution, while the lightness of the background works to balance the heaviness you see in Christ's face. It is a beautiful, regal portrait of a tragic, heavy moment. Growing up, I was most often exposed to white depictions of Christ, and even though I have seen portrayals of a Black Christ since then, this was a new experience for me to see such an intimate portrait.

