UNNAMED FIGURES:

BLACK PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE EARLY AMERICAN NORTH

A Teacher's Guide for Grades 9–12

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Cover Image: **Edward Hicks (1780–1849),** THE RESIDENCE OF DAVID TWINING 1785., Newtown, Pennsylvania, 1846, oil on canvas, in original wood frame with paint and gold leaf, 30 1/2 x 35 7/8 x 1 3/8 in., American Folk Art Museum, gift of Ralph Esmerian, 2005.8.13.

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UNNAMED FIGURES: BLACK PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE EARLY AMERICAN NORTH

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Black figures and faces seldom appear in American art of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When represented, they are typically placed in secondary positions, subjected to marginalization and portrayed as lacking individuality and interiority. Often, they go unnamed, implicitly excluded from the story of the picture.

Although initiated by the works' makers and originally intended consumers, this compositional sidelining has been reinforced by histories of interpretation, with museums and art historians reinscribing, through narrative repetition, white representations as the dominant point of interest. Incorporated into portraits of elite white sitters, enslaved and free Black servants are continually described only as accessories to power. In landscapes, small Black staffage figures have been dismissed as incidental, their presence left without further exploration or interpretation. Countless unseen men, women, and children inhabited the spaces referenced by such pictures, but by art historical tradition, we speak first and often exclusively of those who can be seen.

What if we actively choose to refocus our attention, to center interpretation on questions about Black presence and absence, even though the answers may well elude us? In reorienting our approach to such depictions—demanding something new from old pictures—can we locate symbolic value in early American Black figures for the present moment, as cues to the historical presence of Black individuals and their overlooked experiences?

Who might these figures have been, and what could their lives have been like? Who is missing from these pictures and the stories spun around them? What can we uncover if we ask questions that have been previously set aside as unanswerable—or never even asked? In making these inquiries, *Unnamed Figures* seeks to disrupt the original racial politics behind the images, positing agency for the real historical people whose presence is indicated by those depicted, even though they have been represented—or misrepresented—through the lens of a white gaze.

This exhibition has been co-curated by **EMELIE GEVALT, RL WATSON,** and **SADÉ AYORINDE.**

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Featuring a selection of artworks from the exhibition *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North,* this guide is designed for those teaching at the high school level.

While classroom teachers across the city, state, and nation often teach similar content to their students, each educator has a distinct approach to engaging their learners in the material. In response to this, the American Folk Art Museum's education team has created a guide that we hope you will feel free to borrow from and build on to meet the needs of your specific classroom environment and teaching style.

There are multiple objectives in using this Curriculum Guide, designed in conjunction with the exhibition. One goal is to empower educators working with high school students and with varying abilities to teach from collection images presented here, and to foster the teaching of American history through an exploration of works of folk art. Another is to encourage students to ask critical questions when investigating visual art as a primary source. We hope that this material will support dynamic learning in your classroom and help your students draw parallels with subjects they are already studying.

For each work of art in this guide, you will find an accompanying color reproduction, background information on the object and its creator, and a list of resources that help to illuminate the work. In addition, each lesson plan contains questions to spark discussion as well as suggestions for related activities and projects for students meant to extend their learning even further. The questions section is separated into three categories: **Questions for Careful Looking** ask students to observe each object in great detail and then work together to decode what they see; **Questions for Further Discussion** tie in threads of background information on the objects to further the looking process; and **Questions for Context** help students identify and understand the cultural climate in which the object was created—unlike the Questions for Careful Looking, they encourage students to consider their responses independent of the artwork. Depending on the contextual information your students already have about the originating time and place of the object, you might want to ask these questions before or after students discuss what they see in the image. Please note that several of the following lessons also include images of simulated projects contained in the **Suggested Activities** heading—some are completed project demonstrations, while others offer detail or process shots of the activities you may want to try in your classroom.

Whether you are in the museum or your own classroom, we are certain that you will discover new and inspiring ways to integrate folk art into your teaching to make American history and culture come alive for your students!

TEACHING FROM IMAGES AND OBJECTS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Object-based learning, particularly from museum collections, activates students' powers of observation, interpretation, and analysis. At the American Folk Art Museum, our teaching methodology is inquiry-based and discussion-driven. Through facilitated discussions about objects, students construct their own interpretations of the works, thus establishing ownership of their ideas and cultivating confidence and pride in learning. As students link their observations and interpretations to those of their peers and bring their prior knowledge into the conversation, the class develops a collective body of knowledge, while individuals hone their critical thinking skills.

We recommend a few techniques that will help you guide students through the meaning-making process as you facilitate discussions about works of art:

INVITE STUDENTS TO LOOK CAREFULLY.

Start by asking students to take a minute to look silently at the work of art. This process might at first be uncomfortable for students not accustomed to silent looking, but it will become easier with each new image. This invitation to look is essential; we are rarely encouraged to *slow down* to make observations. By spending a few moments together examining the image, students will start the lesson with a shared experience.

USE REPETITION IN YOUR QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING.

Repeat questions you have posed to your students with different objects so they can anticipate the questions and feel comfortable responding. Repetition will not only help students better understand questions they might not have understood the first time; it will also provide them with a series of useful starting-point questions for when they approach an image on their own.

ENGAGE STUDENTS THROUGH OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.

Open-ended questions create space for multiple viewpoints and more than one "right" answer. In addition, open-ended questions encourage discussion as opposed to single-word answers. When asked to respond to an open-ended question, students are in effect invited to participate and share their ideas without fear of giving the "wrong" answer.

PARAPHRASE ALL STUDENTS' COMMENTS.

As students offer their ideas and interpretations, paraphrase their comments, thus ensuring that the whole group has heard each student's ideas. In addition, by voicing a student's comment in different words, you validate that comment and let the student know that not only have you heard the idea, you have understood it. Be sure to paraphrase all comments in a way that does not suggest that one comment is more valuable than another.

INTRODUCE NEW VOCABULARY IN AUTHENTIC WAYS.

As you paraphrase student comments, attempt to balance vocabulary that students already have with new words. Vocabulary is best acquired when presented in context, and a discussion about a work of art in which everyone is focused on a shared stationary image provides a perfect opportunity for this experience.

ASK STUDENTS TO SUPPORT ALL OBSERVATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS.

Ask students to back up their inferences and ideas with evidence from the work of art, thus legitimizing their interpretations. Ask for visual evidence even when an interpretation seems obvious.

POINT TO ELEMENTS OF THE IMAGE TO WHICH STUDENTS REFER.

If you have the opportunity to project an image of a work of art, point to areas of the picture that students address in their comments. This helps ground each comment and ensures that all students can see the element being discussed.

WEAVE BACKGROUND INFORMATION INTO THE DISCUSSION IN APPROPRIATE AND AUTHENTIC WAYS.

As students develop their interpretations about the work of art, you will want to share threads of background information with the group. Information about the object should further the looking process, contextualize the artwork for students, or appropriately challenge the group to push the limits of their thinking.

At the beginning of each lesson, you will find Questions for Careful Looking. At times these questions relate specifically to details in the work of art, while in other instances they have a more general scope and may appear in multiple lessons in this curriculum guide. Both types of questions are equally important in the discussion, but the latter—the more general question—is critical in order for all possible observations to be heard. However, if a general discussion seems to have tapered off, simply asking for further detailed observations can revitalize conversation, allowing students who haven't yet shared ideas to find new layers and meaning in the object, and leading the group in new directions.

By beginning your discussion of an artwork with concrete observations, you ensure that all students have the same starting point. As the discussion progresses, students will naturally apply a historical context to the work; with markedly increasing ease, they will piece together what they see with what they know. At the same time, they will gain confidence in asking questions about what they see and seeking the information to answer them. As a result, students will use what they have taken from the conversation and apply it to the ensuing project. In the process, students will also gain experience scrutinizing primary sources and works of art in general, while at the same time cultivating their visual literacy and critical thinking skills.

NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

The lessons in this teacher's guide address a variety of New York State Learning Standards and all strands of the New York City Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, and Common Core Standards **(www.corestandards.org).** Because lesson plans are designed to be adapted and tailored by educators, they are not accompanied by individual lists of standards addressed. The standards listed below reflect those inherent in many of the lessons and programs in the museum.

The Arts Learning Standards

Standard 1: Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts and participate in various roles in the arts.

Standard 2: Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in arts in various roles.

Standard 3: Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought.

Standard 4: Students will develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communication and how the arts in turn shape the diverse cultures of past and present society.

Social Studies Learning Standards

Standard 1: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.

Standard 2: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

English Language Arts Learning Standards

Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.

Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

Standard 4: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.

New York City Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts

Strand 1: Artmaking

Strand 2: Literacy in the Arts

Strand 3: Making Social, Cultural, and Historical Connections

Strand 4: Community and Cultural Resources

Strand 5: Careers and Life-Long Learning in Visual Arts

Pedro Tovookan Parris
Autobiographical Landscape

Pedro Tovookan Parris (1833–1860)

Autobiographical Landscape

Paris, Maine
1856
Watercolor on linen or cotton
18 x 70 ¾ in.
Historic New England, Boston, Library and Archives purchase

This extraordinary autobiographical landscape represents a Black man's memories of his voyage to the United States as a young boy. **Pedro Tovookan Parris** was kidnapped from the eastern coast of Africa in the 1840s, when he was just ten years old. His ship was eventually seized for slave trading in Brazil, and Parris left for Boston, where he would serve as a witness in a trial against the ship's captain.

This leg of the artist's journey is reflected in the watercolor, reading from left to right. The dome of Boston's statehouse can be seen at the top of the city skyline at right. In the foreground is the Maine home of Virgil Parris and family, with whom Pedro Tovookan Parris lived until his premature death in 1860, becoming close with them and choosing to adopt their last name. His obituary noted that "few have gone from our midst, whose loss is more generally or sincerely mourned."

This watercolor survives as a singular pictorial document, recording firsthand the memory of the displacements caused by slavery. As scholar Martha McNamara has suggested, Parris may have made the work to support the political campaign of George Gordon, the U.S. consul in Brazil who championed his freedom. An ambrotype portrait of the artist also survives.

QUESTIONS FOR CLOSE LOOKING

- Study this artwork by Pedro Tovookan Parris. Describe what you see. What are some of the people, places, objects, and events he painted?
- Where did you start when you were describing the images? From the middle? From the left or right? Why do you think you "read" it the way you did?
- How did the artist use negative space—the space between and around what is painted—in this artwork?
- Can you tell what materials the artist used to make this painting? Does it look like he painted it on regular paper or canvas? Why or why not?

- This artwork is long and narrow. Look closely and you'll see a seam in the middle where the artist joined two pieces of fabric together. What does the painting's shape make you think of?
- You may not be able to tell by looking at it printed out or on a screen, but this artwork is painted on fabric and is over five-and-a-half feet long. Does knowing its size surprise you? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- This artwork is described as "autobiographical." As a ten-year-old, Pedro Tovookan Parris was kidnapped from his home in East Africa (scholars think he was from either Tanzania or Mozambique) and then sold to a Portuguese enslaver. He was transported to Brazil on an American ship with an American captain, Cyrus Libby. While slavery was still legal in the United States at the time, it was illegal for United States citizens to engage in the *international* slave trade, so Captain Libby was taken into custody when he arrived in Brazil. Pedro Tovookan Parris and two others were brought to Boston to testify against him at his trial. The exhibition curators write, "The dome of Boston's statehouse can be seen at the top of the city skyline at right. In the foreground is the Maine home of Virgil Parris and family, with whom Pedro Tovookan Parris lived until his premature death in 1860, becoming close with them and choosing to adopt their last name." What parts of this story do you see playing out in this artwork? What parts are missing?
- Pedro Tovookan Parris might have made this artwork as a banner in support of the unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign of George William Gordon, the US Consul to Brazil who had brought him to the United States to testify against Libby. Why do you think he supported Gordon? What might their relationship have been like? What about this artwork might have persuaded people to vote for Gordon?
- During the trial, Pedro Tovookan Parris was asked if he wanted to go back with the captain who had trafficked him. He said no. When asked where he *did* want to go, he said, "I desire to be a free man and go to the United States." He was a child being interrogated by grown men. What might that situation have been like for him? What might it have felt like for him to say that he wanted to be free?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Do you see Pedro Tovookan Parris in his "Autobiographical Landscape?" How would the artwork have been different if he had depicted himself in it?
- Know the story behind the artwork, what do you make of the animal facing the army on the left hand side of the artwork? Do you think it is symbolic in some way?
- Living with the Parris family, Pedro Tovookan Parris learned to read and write. Why do you think he might have painted his story rather than written it in words? What can art do that the written word can't and vice versa? How do you prefer to tell stories?

- The artwork is stained and marked by time. If you were in charge of taking care of it, would you clean it? Why or why not?
- A self-taught artist, Pedro Tovookan Parris expressed himself in his own way. Now that you've spent some time with this painting, how would you describe his style? What is unique about it? What about it might you remember most about the artist and the artwork going forward?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Pedro Tovookan Parris told his story using images. Write a description of the events depicted in the artwork, doing additional historical research into, for example the Slave Trade Act of 1794, to fill in the gaps.
- Pedro Tovookan Parris told a traumatic, dramatic, and complicated story in a simple yet specific way in his Autobiographical Landscape. Think of an episode in your own life that you'd like to share. Using watercolors on fabric as Pedro Tovookan Parris did, or another available material, create your own autobiographical landscape. What is lost when you tell your story in images rather than words? What is gained?

RESOURCES

- https://themainemonitor.org/maines-black-future-episode-2/
- https://www.historicnewengland.org/explore/collections-access/capobject/?refd=MS034
- https://www.pressherald.com/2018/07/15/story-of-paris-hill-man-connects-maine-to-complexities-of-slave-trade/

Sarah Ann Major Harris
Sampler

Sarah Ann Major Harris (1812–1878)

Sampler

Norwich Area, Connecticut
c. 1826–1828
Silk on linen
20 ⅜ x 19 ⅓ in.
Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, museum purchase with funds drawn from the Centenary Fund, 2017.0032 A, B

In 1832, the Black Connecticut needleworker who made this sampler took a remarkable step: at a time when few Black girls had access to formal education, **Sarah Ann Major Harris** contacted schoolmistress Prudence Crandall to request admission to her School for Young Ladies and Misses.

White parental backlash was swift. The schoolmistress was arrested for her radical decision. A white mob attacked the school and forced its permanent closure. Legislation was not far behind this violence, and in 1833, the Connecticut "Black Law" was passed to prohibit Black students from traveling to Connecticut to attend school.

With this turbulent context, Harris' genealogical sampler takes on an even greater meaning. Harris records the details of her family history, including the 1810 marriage of her father **William Monteflora Harris,** a Black man born in the West Indies, and her mother **Sally M. Prentice,** believed to be of African and Mohegan heritage. She also notes the names and birth dates of herself and her siblings in this quiet but powerful emblem of one young woman's bravery and perseverance in the face of racism.

SUGGESTED OPENING ACTIVITY

Before you start talking about this artwork in detail, ask the students to use paper and pencil to copy it as best they can. This will slow down their looking and help them read the words and dates. They can work alone or in pairs or groups.

QUESTIONS FOR CLOSE LOOKING

- Look closely at this artwork. What do you see?
- How was this artwork made? How can you tell?
- Which words can you read? Which ones can you guess?
- What kind of document is this? How can you tell?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- This kind of artwork is called a sampler. It was stitched with needle and thread by a school girl. In the 18th and 19th centuries, many students at girls' schools created samplers. Why might learning to sew have been part of their school instruction? What practical skills would creating a sampler like this have taught its artist?

- Meticulous, careful work like stitching samplers also reinforced certain feminine ideals of the time period. What qualities might one assume about the artist of a beautiful sampler? Why would their teachers, families, and society value patience, attention to detail, and neatness?

- Do you think boys were taught similar artforms? Why or why not?

- This sampler was created by a Black young woman named Sarah Ann Major Harris who, in 1832, asked a schoolmistress named Prudence Crandall for admittance to her School for Young Ladies and Misses in Connecticut. She wrote:

  > **Miss Crandall, I want to get a little more learning, if possible, enough to teach colored children, and if you will admit me to your school I shall forever be under the greatest obligation to you.**

  At a time when very few Black girls had access to formal education, what might it have meant for Harris to go to the kind of school normally reserved for affluent white girls? What is the reasoning she gave for wanting that education?

- When Crandall admitted Harris, white parents expressed outrage and withdrew their children, forcing the school's temporary closure. With the support of both Black and white abolitionists, Crandall recruited other Black students and reopened the school serving "Young Ladies and Misses of Color," which prompted the state of Connecticut to create a law, called the "Black Law," barring schools from educating Black students from other states. Crandall was arrested and eventually had to close the school for the protection and safety of her students. What might have been behind these racist reactions? Why might these white families have objected to integrating the school?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- With her delicate stitches and detailed embellishments, Harris demonstrated the qualities educators were looking for in a sampler: patience, neatness, and carefulness. Knowing her story and the story behind this sampler, what other qualities can you attribute to Harris?

- Samplers often took the form of the ABCs, or a patriotic scene, or a generic decorative template. Harris's work is a record of her family. How do you view her choice to document her family in this way? The curators of the exhibition *Unnamed Figures* describe her work as an example of "bravery and perseverance in the face of racism." Can you explain how noting her parents' marriage date, as well as her and her siblings' birth dates, can be seen as a courageous act of resistance?

- Harris became a lifelong activist, fighting for her rights and the rights of Black people. She named her first daughter Prudence Crandall. How does it seem like her experience trying to enroll in school influenced her going forward?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Using needle, embroidery floss, and a piece of muslin, teach students the technique of back-stitching. The backstitch is one of the simplest stitches, useful both for sewing and for embroidering, especially for embroidering letters.

  1) Thread your needle with an arm's length of embroidery floss and tie a knot at the end.

  2) Starting on the underside of your fabric, poke the needle through to the top and pull it until you reach the knot.

  3) Move the needle forward ¼ inch then poke it through the top of the fabric to the bottom and pull it taut.

  4) Move the needle forward ¼ inch, then poke it through the bottom of the fabric to the top.

  5) Move the needle BACK, and poke it through the top of the fabric to the bottom, right at the point where the last stitch ended. It will look like there is no space between the two stitches.

  6) Continue on like this—it will feel like going two steps forward and one step back.

  Discuss: what does it take to make neat, even stitches? Is it fun? Why or why not?

- Give the students a print-out of Harris's sampler and ask them to use the internet to research Harris and her family, then annotate the family tree with information they find about various family members. Ask them to extend the family tree by adding Harris's husband and children.

RESOURCES

- https://visitnewlondon.org/black-heritage-trail/the-fayerweathers/
- https://twonerdyhistorygirls.blogspot.com/2018/10/embroidery-as-thread-of-womens-history.html
- http://museumcollection.winterthur.org
- http://needlesi.winterthur.org/sarah-ann-major-harris/

Edward Hicks (1780–1849)
The Residence of David Twining 1785.

Edward Hicks (1780–1849)

The Residence of David Twining 1785.
Newtown, Pennsylvania
1846
Oil on canvas, in original wood frame with paint and gold leaf
30 ½ x 35 ⅞ x 1 ⅜ in.
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Ralph Esmerian, 2005.8.13

This farmscape reflects the artist Edward Hicks' memories of his eighteenth-century boyhood in Newtown, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. Founded, at least in theory, on principles of equality, this region was settled by Quakers, whose religious strictures called for pacifism and anti-slavery—although believers, including William Penn himself, did hold people as slaves. Pennsylvania would later emerge as one of the first states to abolish slavery, through gradual emancipation, and Philadelphia would become home to a thriving free Black community following the Revolution—a destination for many free and self-emancipated African Americans.

Included in this scene from the artist's youth, set during these post-Revolutionary years, is a lone Black figure guiding a horse-drawn plow. This may well be a representation of **Caesar,** a free Black man known to have worked for the Twinings on their farm. Hicks carried the Quaker values instilled in him by the Twinings into his adulthood. This peaceful pastoral scene—much like the Peaceable Kingdom series for which Hicks is best known— suggests the possibility of harmony across species and racial lines. Significantly, however, even within this vision, Caesar is cordoned off and kept apart from the white family members shown in the scene.

QUESTIONS FOR CLOSE LOOKING

- Study the painting carefully. What kind of place do you see? How can you tell?
- Talk about the people in the scene. Who are they and what are they doing?
- What is the mood of this painting, or the feeling it gives you? Would you want to visit this place? Why or why not?
- Notice the writing on the frame of the painting. What information does it give you? Would you be able to guess the time period shown in the painting if the artist didn't give you the date? Why or why not?
- The artist of this painting, Edward Hicks, included himself in this scene. Which person do you think he is? What makes you say that?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- The date on the picture frame is 1785, but the painting was made in 1846. The artist, Edward Hicks, lived from 1780–1849. Do some math! How old was he in 1785?
- Knowing that he was five years old in 1785, revisit the question of which person in the artwork he might have been. Who do you think he is now?
- More math: how old was he when he painted the painting? Why might a 66-year-old paint a scene of themselves at age five? As you study the painting, what can you say about how he might have felt about his childhood? About the farm? About the people surrounding him?
- When Edward Hicks was small, he lost his mother. His father sent him to live with the Twinings, who were members of the same Quaker religious community as the Hicks family. The Twining family aren't the only people depicted in this painting, though–there is a Black man operating a plow in the middle-ground of the painting. He is likely a free Black man named Caesar who worked for the Twinings. How would you describe the way Caesar is shown here? What are the similarities between the way he is depicted and the way the white people in the scene are depicted? What are the differences?
- Quakers are well-known for their belief in peace and equality. In what ways do you see those values portrayed in this painting? How is what you see here at odds with those values?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/ACTIVITY

One of the goals of the American Folk Art Museum's exhibition *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North* is to reframe how audiences look at and understand artwork they may have seen before. "The Residence of David Twining, 1785," is a painting that has been shown at the American Folk Art Museum many times over the years. Read the included label that appears alongside the painting on the Museum's website, and which was written for a 2014 exhibition entitled *Also on View: Selections from the Collection*. Then read the label that accompanies the painting for the exhibition *Unnamed Figures*.

- Compare and contrast the two labels.
    - ◇ Which aspects of the painting does each label focus on?
    - ◇ Which elements of the artist's biography does each label include?
    - ◇ Which people are described in each label? Who is left out?
    - ◇ Which pieces of historical context does each label discuss?
- Labels in museum exhibitions usually aren't written by the artist of the work but by people who work at or are hired by the museum. How do you think they choose what to include in their label?

- When an artwork is included in a museum exhibition, a curator might write a label for that artwork geared specifically toward that exhibition. Information can be included or left out to emphasize what is important about the artwork in regards to the theme or focus of the exhibition. Do you think it is appropriate to omit mention of the Black man in the Hicks painting when it is in an exhibition where race is not the main focus? Why or why not?
- As a museum visitor, it is important to consider the point of view from which the artwork's labels are written. Why might that matter?
- How might a diverse museum staff with a wide range of experiences influence that museum's exhibitions and text? How might that then influence a visitor's experience of the artworks?
- What can be gained when museums seek to tell stories outside of what has been considered the dominant narrative?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Imagine that the American Folk Art Museum decided to update the label for "The Residence of David Twining, 1785" on their website and asked the students for their help. Using the two provided labels, as well as any additional research, have them write their own label for the artwork.
- Invite the students to make a drawing of this same scene, but seen through Caesar's eyes. What would be the focus of the scene? Who and what might he include and omit?

RESOURCES

- http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/3374/the-residence-of-david-twining-1785?ctx=bf12b0ad-f2b9-4b38-9666-2cb6b139f784&idx=0

Prudence Punderson

The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality

Prudence Punderson (1758–1784)

The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality
Preston, Connecticut
c. 1776–1783
Embroidery
12 ¾ x 16 ¾ in.
Connecticut Historical Society, gift of Newton C. Brainard, 1962.28.4

This unique autobiographical needlework presents the life of Prudence Punderson in three stages: her death, adulthood, and infancy and all appear in a single, well-appointed room. From the sumptuous curtains and carpet to the framed artwork on the wall, the Connecticut family's material affluence surrounds the figure of the artist at the center of this composition. Presented among the trappings of wealth is a single Black figure, serving as nursemaid to a baby Prudence—possibly identifiable as **Jane or "Jenny" Cato,** one of the Pundersons' enslaved servants.

At the time this work was made, Connecticut was the largest slaveholding state in New England, with many prosperous households like that of the Pundersons relying on enslaved labor to facilitate their daily lives. Punderson and Cato may have shared a close relationship—significant enough to merit Cato's inclusion in the needleworker's self-portrait. Yet, the Black figure sits in the margins of the picture, positioned among the family's material goods, and acting as an adjunct to the central subject.

This depiction assigns a limited identity to the Black woman, defined exclusively in relationship to the care of her white enslaver. But Jane Cato did not rely on the Pundersons to define her own personhood: she would go on to live her own life after securing her freedom, moving to New London and marrying twice. Remarkably, she produced a will, which begins with a simple assertion of self: "I Jane Cato". This precious trace of an unnamed figure—one who might have been otherwise absorbed into the life of another—insists on recognition, then and now.

QUESTIONS FOR CLOSE LOOKING

- Look carefully at this artwork. What is happening here? Describe the place and the people in it. What kind of place is it? How can you tell? Who are the people? What are they doing?
- How was this artwork made? What are the materials?
- It is embroidered: stitched using needle and thread. Look closely—can you see the stitches? What might it have been like to create this artwork?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- This needlework is called "The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality." It is autobiographical and depicts the artist, Prudence Punderson, three times: in death inside her casket, in her adulthood seated at a table, and as a baby in a cradle. Do you "read" the artwork in the same order that the title suggests? Why do you think the artist might have depicted her life events backward, with the casket first and her babyhood last?
- The second person pictured in this needlework is possibly Jane, or "Jenny," Cato, an enslaved woman who was listed as "property" in Prudence Punderson's father's will. Based on what you see here, how would you describe the relationship between Punderson and Cato?
- Compare the level of detail Punderson used to render herself versus Cato.
- Cato is not shown as an individual with her own personality and personhood—she doesn't have the specific facial features Punderson gave herself as an adult or even as a baby. She is also half-obscured by the baby's cradle. How does Punderson's depiction of her define Cato, and Cato's role in her life? Why might Punderson have chosen to include her in this artwork at all?
- Prudence Punderson was incredibly skillful and talented at embroidery. Many contemporary descriptions and articles about this artworks focus on these elements and its white artist's story, mentioning the Black woman included in it only as an aside in a line or two. Read—either aloud as a class or printed out individually—the description of the artwork by the curators of *Unnamed Figures*. What information do they prioritize?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Imagine a museum visitor viewing this artworks with the traditional description, that prioritizes information about the white artist, versus viewing this artwork with the description that emphasizes the personhood of the Black woman depicted. How would their experiences be different?
- Often, artists show what is most important in an artwork by placing it at the center. In this work, a Black woman is literally marginalized—placed at the edge. Imagine that the artwork was rearranged so that Jenny Cato was at the center. What would change? What wouldn't? Why?
- Talk about depictions of femininity in this artwork. How does race influence these depictions?
- One could say that there is both a sense of intimacy and emotional distance in this artwork. Do you agree? Where do you see intimacy? Emotional distance?
- Do you think it is important to look at and think about artworks like this two hundred years after they were made? Why or why not?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Print a full-page image of the artwork and provide the students with the printout, scissors, glue sticks, and a blank sheet of paper. Using no additional materials, challenge them to reimagine the artwork. Once they're done, ask them to write a title and label to explain their work.

- Using a print-out of the artwork's label from *Unnamed Figures,* ask students to create an erasure. An erasure is a poem in which some words of an existing text are crossed out and obscured, leaving other words visible. The visible words become a new text, a poem created by the student.

RESOURCES

- http://emuseum.chs.org/emuseum/people/68/prudence-punderson;jsessionid=D800E003A22179 6C5AD0F3AE1F4E38CA

- https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/10453/

- https://connecticuthistory.org/prudence-punderson-ordinary-woman-extraordinary-artist-needlework-in-connecticut/#:~:text=In%201963%2C%20the%20Connecticut%20 Historical,depicts%20Prudence%20herself%20as%20a

Attributed to Ethan Allen Greenwood

Charles Lee Jones

Doctored portrait formerly catalogued as:

Attributed to Ethan Allen Greenwood (1779–1856)

Charles Lee Jones
United States
1815
Oil on wood
26 x 18 ¾ in.
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, gift of William Vareika, 2005.6

Look closely. This portrait, previously identified as a likeness of a Black American named Charles Lee Jones, has been more recently discovered to be a composite image. While the original portrait is dated to 1815, there is a top layer of paint that changes the race of the sitter from white to African American. X-rays reveal the presence of another complete portrait of a white man beneath the top layers of paint. Paint analysis further shows these top layers to contain pigments invented after the 1920s.

Charles Lee Jones, the purported sitter of this doctored portrait, was previously posited as the son of prominent Black American religious leader **Reverend Absalom Jones,** a co-founder of the first African American church in the nation in Philadelphia. However, there are no records of the existence of this Charles; Absalom Jones seems to have had no children.

The reasons for the alterations to the original portrait are unknown. This racial metamorphosis took place in the twentieth century and was later discovered to make unlikely claims about the identity of the sitter. This portrait's creation and its positive reception are indications of the wider hunger for images of early Black Americans, even if only through invention.

NOTE

To discuss this artwork, it is helpful to know the context from the outset. Look at the portrait and the x-ray first, and then we recommend having your students read the short, accessible essay from the exhibition catalogue about it: "Imaginary Ancestors and Blacked-Up Imposters" by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw. Alternatively, or for younger students, share with them the story behind the artwork before you start to discuss it in detail.

This X-ray composite image reveals the painting discovered beneath the surface of the doctored portrait on view.
Addison Gallery of American Art, Art Resource, New York.

QUESTIONS FOR CLOSE LOOKING

- Look together at the portrait of Charles Lee Jones and the x-ray accompanying it. What is the relationship between the two images?

- The x-ray of this painting shows that, beneath the Black man depicted, there is a portrait of a white man. Analysis of the paint reveals that the top painting of the Black man contains pigments—the colored part of the paint—that were not invented until after 1920, over a hundred years after the painting was supposed to have been made. What's more, genealogical records show that Charles Lee Jones never existed. When you look at the painting, do you see any clues that it is fake?

- If you didn't know the story, would anything about how the painting looks have made you suspicious? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- In the opening to her essay "Imaginary Ancestors and Blacked-Up Imposters," Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw writes:

  > **... Frederick Douglass (1817/18–1895) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) ... recognized the power of images and were keenly interested in the potential of positive representations of African Americans to counter the negative racial stereotypes characteristic of so much American art and popular culture, both historical and contemporary.**

  How can you put that into your own words? Why does Shaw say there was, and is, an interest in positive representations of Black people in art?

- Shaw continues:

  > **Since the 1970s, American museums have been purchasing, borrowing, or relocating representations of Black people and portraits of Black sitters—both named and unknown—from storage to more visible spaces in their permanent collections. Because of these efforts to increase African American representation in historically white museum spaces, there has been a dwindling number of appropriate objects on the market and, in line with laws of supply and demand, an increasing number of Blacked-up imposters and imaginary ancestors have begun to appear.**

  Can you explain in your own words what she means? What are "Blacked-up imposters and imaginary ancestors?" How does she explain why this phenomenon came about?

- As Shaw describes it, she was so excited about this painting that she didn't question its authenticity enough at first. Knowing what you know now, what steps might you go through to make sure a painting is real? What kind of research would you do?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Now that we know this painting is a fake, what do you think should be done with it? Should it continue to hang in museums? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the person or people who faked this painting did it? Why would they have chosen to pretend this was an 1815 artwork of a historical figure rather than present a new painting of a fictional Black man?
- Who benefits from passing off this fake painting as real? Who is harmed? Why?
- Of the painting, Shaw writes, "Blackness itself was being used as a tool to add value to an otherwise unremarkable portrait." Have you seen "Blackness…used as a tool to add value" in any other contexts?
- If you worked for a museum that wanted to increase representation of Black people in its collections and on its walls, how might you suggest they do it?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Write a letter to the person who created this fake portrait, explaining to them in your own words why what they did was wrong.
- Run an internet search and see how and where this portrait is referenced online. Make sure to notice if it is being presented as an authentic portrait or if it is being acknowledged as a fake. Take notes on what you find, then share back and discuss.

RESOURCES

- "Imaginary Ancestors and Blacked-Up Imposters," Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw
- https://www.facebook.com/fashioningtheself/photos/a.456027407925979/1322631011265610/?type=3&locale=zh_CN

Imaginary Ancestors and Blacked-Up Imposters

GWENDOLYN DUBOIS SHAW

In 1916, when Freeman H. M. Murray (1859–1950) published *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation,* it was the beginning of art historical interest in the presence of Black figures in the art and visual culture of the United States.[1] Murray's efforts to understand Black representation in relation to white hegemony were in sync with those of African American activist scholars like Frederick Douglass (1817/18–1895) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) who also recognized the power of images and were keenly interested in the potential of positive representations of African Americans to counter the negative racial stereotypes characteristic of so much American art and popular culture, both historical and contemporary. As art historian Patricia Hills has argued, these men, and Murray in particular, sought "to educate both African Americans and Euro-Americans about art, its origins, and the historic representation of black people."[2] A century later, as *Unnamed Figures* demonstrates, scholars are still parsing the many complications of Black presence and absence in American art, but as interest has grown, the stakes have changed. Today, historical scholarship must contend with material fabrications that threaten to obscure access to and understanding of these legacies.

Since the 1970s, American museums have been purchasing, borrowing, or relocating representations of Black people and portraits of Black sitters—both named and unknown—from storage to more visible spaces in their permanent collections. Because of these efforts to increase African American representation in historically white museum spaces, there has been a dwindling number of appropriate objects on the market and, in line with laws of supply and demand, an increasing number of Blacked-up imposters and imaginary ancestors have begun to appear.

When I initially saw the portrait of Charles Jones (at left), the supposed son of Absalom Jones (1746–1818), the first African American to become an ordained Episcopal priest, it was in the form of an advertisement for a commercial art gallery. The full-color ad, which had been torn from an arts and antiques magazine, was pressed into my hand by Marilyn Richardson, a Boston area–based historian of African American literature and art. I had known Marilyn since the early 1970s, when she and my father had been among the half dozen Black artists living commune-style in an old Brattle Street mansion in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Thirty years on, I was now a young art history and African American studies professor at Harvard, and Marilyn and I crossed paths regularly at the weekly colloquium held by the university's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American

Research (now the W. E. B. Du Bois Research Institute at the Hutchins Center). I remember looking down at the glossy page and seeing a gilt-framed, painted portrait of a young, brown-skinned man. According to the text, this nineteenth-century work was being offered for sale by a dealer in nearby Newport, Rhode Island. "I know you are curating a Black portraiture exhibition," Marilyn said with a smile. "I thought you might find this interesting." Indeed. I did.

At that moment, I was working hard to identify and locate portraits of named African American subjects to include in an exhibition that I had conceived titled *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*. My original inspiration for the show was sparked by the late Guy C. McElroy's groundbreaking exhibition *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940,* which had been mounted by the Corcoran Gallery of Art and Brooklyn Museum in 1990.[3] I saw *Portraits of a People* as both an homage to and extension of McElroy's project. Whereas *Facing History* had included many objects and images of Black figures or unnamed individuals, *Portraits of a People* would define itself through an organizing structure of known sitters, enhanced with biographical information on both the subject and the maker, paying special attention to the ways that sitters and artists often crossed the color line. Each of the portraits in the exhibition would be of somebody who was known and named, or at the very least had once been a knowable sitter. I was purposefully excluding generic types to focus more clearly upon the ways that freed and freeborn African Americans had commissioned portraiture to help construct personal and public images of themselves and their families.

In 2003, I began assembling my checklist by selecting the most impressive portraits from those exhibited in *Facing History,* along with examples I had found while exploring the holdings of the Image of the Black in Western Art archive at Harvard. I moved out from there, visiting archives, libraries, and museums, relying upon recommendations and tips from colleagues to find interesting and relevant portraits. This was hard but satisfying work. At one moment, I thought I had discovered two eighteenth-century portraits of African-descended individuals in a house museum on the island of Bermuda only to realize, when examining them under bright lights, that they weren't Black sitters, they were just dirty old paintings!

I wasted no time in bringing *Charles Jones* to the attention of my colleagues at the Addison Gallery of American Art, where *Portraits of a People* was being organized. The curatorial team shared my excitement over the painting, which bore the signature of Ethan Allen Greenwood (1779–1856), a vernacular painter from Massachusetts. The Addison reached out to the dealer offering it, and a couple of weeks later, we were standing in the gallery's storage room, examining it together and discussing its condition, including the uneven nature of the cleaning job someone had undertaken, the gray undertones of the sitter's face, and the awkwardness of his shirt ruffles. It turned out that the dealer had a preexisting relationship with the Addison and had generously offered to give the painting to the gallery. We were so excited by the portrait, and the fortuitous way that it had arrived in our presence, that we decided to put it on the cover of the exhibition catalog. I remember saying, "This painting is so great, it's just too good to be true." As I learned a few years later, it was indeed.

In 2006, while *Portraits of a People* was on tour and installed at the Delaware Art Museum, I began to suspect that there might be something not quite right with my friend Charles Jones, that he might be an imaginary ancestor, in fact, a person who didn't exist. One day, a historian at the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia called my office at the University of Pennsylvania, where I was now teaching, with questions about the painting. He was primarily interested in learning what I knew about the sitter's identity and what archival sources had been found to confirm it. There were no records of Absalom Jones having had any children, he said. I told him that the identity of the sitter in the painting had come with the painting, but clearly it must be wrong. Appalled that, in my initial excitement about the painting, I had trusted the dealer's research and had failed to confirm this simple genealogical fact, I immediately examined a list of paintings by Ethan Allen Greenwood published by the American Antiquarian Society in 1946.4 I quickly saw that out of the dozens of portraits made by the artist in 1815, none were of a man named Jones, nor had any been made farther south than Rhode Island, making it unlikely that the artist would have encountered the Absalom Jones family, who lived in Philadelphia. Who was the man in the painting? And why had we been told it was "Charles Jones," the nonexistent son of Absalom Jones?

Just a few weeks later, I had my answers when a curator from a major art museum that had purchased the very same painting a few years prior shared with me an internal file assembled when the painting was examined in their state-of-the-art conservation laboratory—the Addison has no conservation facilities and had not sent the painting out for analysis. This larger museum's well-equipped lab had conducted an extensive examination of the painting, including making X-rays, which had revealed an entirely different face beneath the one that had been painted onto its surface. The face of the original sitter had been damaged at some point, and an enterprising individual had decided to rework the canvas by repainting the face and inventing an identity for the newly Blacked-up imposter. When this museum's curators had discovered the true condition of the painting, rather than destroying or exiling it to their storage vaults, they had returned it to the seller, who in turn, had resold it to someone else. It had quickly made its way to the dealer in Newport and then on to the Addison, which had no inkling that it might be anything other than what it was pretending to be.

As I sat there holding this evidence in my hands, I wanted to cry. Could I have been any more naive? This painting had been upcycled to pander to the emerging trend of acquiring early images of Black subjects. Not only was "Charles Jones" a fake identity that had been manufactured to create interest in a painting of an anonymous Black man, but Blackness itself was being used as a tool to add value to an otherwise unremarkable portrait. My colleagues at the Addison were similarly mortified. Citing condition issues, they removed the painting from the exhibition tour and placed it in storage. But our Blacked-up imposter remained on the cover of the exhibition catalog, and every time I looked at the book, my heart sank, as it still does.

Although devastated by these developments, I had learned a tremendous amount from the experience. The file on the painting that I had received from my curator colleague had also included information on another Blacked-up painting of an imaginary ancestor that had been offered to

that same institution. One of the things that had flagged this second painting as a fake was the purported biography of its sitter, which linked it to the imaginary Charles Jones and cited *Portraits of a People* as part of its bona fides. A few months later, I read an article in the *New Yorker* magazine about the revelatory cleaning of the "Black Admiral," a privately owned painting of an African American sailor that had been painted over in a similar way to hide the face of a white sitter (below).[5] There was, it appeared, a very active and organized effort to manufacture, market, and sell fraudulent portraits of Blacked-up imposters to gullible museums seeking to exhibit imaginary ancestors.

This market remains quite hot, and every time I hear about a nineteenth-century portrait of an unnamed Black sitter that has emerged from obscurity, I can't help but think that another Blacked-up imposter has been manufactured to distort our understanding of the Black presence in historical American visual culture.

With the impending 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, now is a critical moment to engage entrenched myths of early Black history and representation in British colonial and nineteenth-century American art and culture. Not only must we reconsider the familiar narratives around early Black makers and thinkers who worked to innovate within complex traditions and under challenging circumstances, but art historians and curators must also seek fresh paths through long-standing professional ambivalence regarding the presence and legacy of slavery in American art. Only by traversing this terrain will space be made for more detailed and potentially recuperative understandings of our material past. *Unnamed Figures* reveals that it is crucial to explore new routes if we are not only to locate the imaginary ancestors and Blacked-up imposters, but also to begin to recover the identities and life experiences of the many purposefully forgotten and misremembered African American makers and subjects who have always been present, even when they were not seen.

1 Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation,* Black Folk in Art Series (Washington, DC: Murray Brothers, 1916).

2 Patricia Hills, "'History Must Restore What Slavery Took Away': Freeman H. M. Murray, Double-Consciousness, and the Historiography of African American Art History," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Art History,* ed. Eddie Chambers, Routledge Handbooks Online (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 4.

3 Guy C. McElroy, with an essay by Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940,* ed. Christopher French, exh. cat. (San Francisco: Bedford Arts in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990).

4 "A List of Portraits Painted by Ethan Allen Greenwood," in *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 56, part 1 (April 1946): 129–53, https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44817413.pdf.

5 Erik Baard, "A Painting's Secret," *New Yorker,* May 7, 2006, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/05/15/a-paintings-secret.

Moses Williams or Raphaelle Peale

Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles

Moses Williams (1777–c. 1825) or Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825)

Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles
Philadelphia
c. 1803
White laid paper on black stock
Library Company of Philadelphia, (3) 5750.F.153b

Moses Williams was a skilled maker of highly popular silhouette portraits. Known for his meticulous attention to detail, Williams crafted cut-paper profiles at the Philadelphia museum operated by Charles Wilson Peale, the well-known artist to whom Williams—along with his parents, **Lucy** and **Scarborough**—had been enslaved.

Though Williams grew up alongside Peale's children, he was excluded from their training in visual art and science. While the Peales followed in their father's footsteps to become naturalists and painters, Williams was limited to less prominent tasks such as taxidermy, object display, and silhouette cutting. He nonetheless played an integral role at the Peale museum, cutting upward of eight thousand portraits during his time there. The one seen here may have been a self-portrait, or it may have traced Peale's son, Raphaelle. In either case, the inscribed title, *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles,* asserts a name and a profession, a powerful record of Williams's sense of identity.

QUESTIONS FOR CLOSE LOOKING

- Look closely at this artwork. What materials were used?
- How was this artwork made? What visual and textual clues might help answer this question?
- Examine the details of the sitter's face and outfit. What stands out to you?
- What might this image reveal about the artist's process?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- In the first half of the 19th century, before the invention and widespread use of photography, silhouette portraiture was an extremely popular form of representation. What similarities do you think silhouettes share with photography? What are the stark differences?

- Moses Williams was known as a master silhouette cutter, known for his meticulous attention to detail and ability to capture the likeness of his subjects. He used a machine known as a physiognotrace to outline the sitter's head and would then use scissors to cut out the profile. Looking at "Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles," what might the details this tell us about the person in the portrait? Can you make guesses about class, race, or character? Which elements support your impressions?

- Williams who was mix-raced, lived and worked in Philadelphia crafting silhouette profiles at a natural sciences museum owned and operated by Charles Wilson Peale, the white man to whom he was once enslaved. Though Williams grew up alongside Peale's children he was excluded from their training in science and visual art. While they went on to hold well-respected jobs as naturalists and painters, Williams was relegated to basic museum tasks that were not valued as highly such as taxidermy, object display, and silhouette cutting. What does this context reveal about social and artistic hierarchies in the northern region in the early 19th century?

- The physiognotrace could be operated by either the customer or the silhouettist. While some patrons attempted to trace their own likeness, most sat for the artist. Scholars estimate that during his time at the museum Williams cut more than eight thousand profiles, including "Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles," which some believe could be a self-portrait. Does knowing that it could be a self-portrait change the way that you read this image?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- This silhouette includes text, which was not always the case. What is even more significant is that the text identifies the sitter by name and profession. How does the inscribed title impact how you read the image? What does it tell you about the sitter's sense of identity?

- Silhouette portraits were small, quick, inexpensive, and easily reproduced, making them a popular gift for friends and family. How is this similar or different to our experience of self-representation today? What makes creating and sharing our own images so satisfying?

- A close-up look at this work reveals the trace lines made by the physiognotrace and the slight alterations made by the artist. This is what leads scholars like Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw to believe this could be a work of self-portraiture. In her essay "Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles": Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic", she writes:

  > **There is a significant deviation of the cut-line from this [the machine] path that indicates what was changes by the artist during the cutting process. Here, the remaining race-lines reveal that the "cutter" altered the length of the hair by extending it nearly one centimeter from the original trace line, causing it to lie closer to the head.**
  >
  > **Although the rounded nose and full lips of Williams's African blood remain to dominate his facial features, the European part of his "Molatto" identity crowns him in the form of long, straight hair ... By deviating from the original form line,**

I believe that Moses Williams purposely created an image in which his own features would connote tropes of whiteness rather than blackness. But was it an attempt to deny the African Part of his racial heritage? I would argue that it records the anxiety and confusions that he had about his positions as a person of mixed race within a white society that despised his heritage.

DuBois Shaw suggests that Williams may have changed his silhouette to make his appearance better fit or seem more acceptable in the racist society he was living in. Today it is very common for people to modify their photos though apps and programs. Why do we do this? Once altered, can we still call selfies, for example, self-portraits? Why or why not?

- This portrait is included in the exhibition section "Speaking Back: Early Black Makers and Subjects," among a group of objects that demonstrate that despite oppressive systems that worked to limit their access, productivity, and identities, Black people in the 18th and 19th centuries, "persevered in pursuing creative aims." Do you see this silhouette as a form of response? Why or why not? In what way?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Consider self-portraits by Mose Tolliver in AFAM's collection alongside "Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles." Choose one Tolliver portrait and write a one-page response comparing it to Moses Williams's image. Describing what you see in each image and what you do not see. Which one are you most drawn to? Which one do you feel gives you the most information or helps you understand the artist's identity more?

    1) Mose Tolliver, *Self Portrait,* 1980
    http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/996/selfportrait?ctx=e4fe6bc7-9c11-4b7d-95e9-0206174c5ad6&idx=0

    2) Mose Tolliver, *Self Portrait,* 1980
    http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/998/selfportrait?ctx=e4fe6bc7-9c11-4b7d-95e9-0206174c5ad6&idx=1

    3) Mose Tolliver, *Self Portrait at 84*, 1978
    http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/202/selfportrait-at-84?ctx=e4fe6bc7-9c11-4b7d-95e9-0206174c5ad6&idx=2

- Create a self-portrait in your preferred medium. Just like a silhouette does, obscure, erase, or leave out a part of your face or body. Just like Moses Williams, write a five-word caption to describe the image.

RESOURCES

- https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/digitool%3A130124
- https://www.thepealecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Gwendolyn-DuBois-Shaw-on-Moses-Williams-APS-149-1-Mar-2005.pdf

Ammi Phillips

Rhoda Goodrich (Mrs. William Northrop) Bentley and Daughter

Ammi Phillips (1788–1865)

Rhoda Goodrich (Mrs. William Northrop) Bentley and Daughter
Lebanon Springs, New York
1815–1820
Oil on canvas
34 x 27 in.
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Ralph and Bobbi Terkowitz, 2019.3.1

Though he painted hundreds of portraits in rural New York and New England, the iconic folk artist Ammi Phillips is not known to have painted any Black sitters. In the course of this decades-long career, did Phillips truly not encounter *any* Black townspeople with the means to commission a portrait? Or did personal or systemic racism keep him from soliciting or securing such customers? Did historical norms of oil portraiture as a white format create an unspoken climate of discomfort for prospective Black patrons?

There may have been an element of each of these factors. Frederick Douglass' 1849 suspicion may also have been an underlying sentiment beneath a reluctance among Black sitters to commission likenesses from predominantly white painters: Black people, Douglass believed, "can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their features."

While there are no visible Black figures in these portraits, they nonetheless reference Black presence indirectly. Rhoda Bentley and her daughter each hold products—a slip of cotton and a slice of watermelon—associated with enslaved labor in the South. Most pointedly, William Bentley holds a book titled *The Horrors of Slavery*. Were the Bentleys abolitionists? We can only speculate, but their portraits seem to express anti-slavery sentiment, even as they leave Black people literally out of the picture.

William Matthew Prior
Mrs. Nancy Lawson

William Matthew Prior (1806–1873)

Mrs. Nancy Lawson
Boston
1843
Oil on canvas
30 ⅛ x 25 in.
Shelburne Museum, Vermont, museum purchase, acquired from Maxim Karolik, 1959-265.34

These extraordinary portraits of husband and wife are among the most striking Black representations of the antebellum North. At a time when the commission of Black oil portraits remained a rarity, a convergence of favorable circumstances, including the sitters' affluence and social networks, paved the way for these momentous fashionable likenesses.

Nancy and William Lawson may have known the artist through common religious, and possibly abolitionist, connections. Amid a society rife with racism, William Matthew Prior was unusual as a white artist who painted several sitters of African descent—including members of the **Copeland family,** who, like the Lawsons, operated a business on Blackstone Street in Boston.

William Lawson was a clothing dealer, a prominent profession among the Black community that would have brought middle-class prosperity to him and his family. Although Prior was known to offer a range of portraiture options, including plainer styles, the Lawsons notably chose to represent themselves with a high degree of finish and sophistication.

Nancy Lawson's dress, jewelry, and beribboned cap are depicted with particular richness and texture. Significantly, her thumb is tucked into a book, highlighting her literacy. Though this was a standard accessory among educated sitters, here it takes on even greater power during a time when literacy held special symbolism for Black aspirations to equality.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY FOR CLOSE LOOKING

Ask students to use scrap paper to make a list of at least five similarities and five differences between these two paintings. Once they've got their lists, ask them to share with a partner. Then, have the partnerships share out with the class. What were some observations almost everyone had? What were some small details only one or two people noticed?

RHODA GOODRICH (MRS. WILLIAM NORTHROP) BENTLEY AND DAUGHTER QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- Now study each painting individually. These paintings were commissioned by the people in them, meaning the subjects hired and paid an artist to make these portraits. They likely were in charge of how they were depicted, so we can make guesses about how they *wanted* to be seen based on what we see now. How would you describe Rhoda Goodrich Bentley and her daughter Maria Louisa's style of dress? What do you think Bentley hoped to convey about her family through her choice of clothing and the painting's background?

- While their dresses might project a certain social status and give a glimpse into the style of the times, other elements of their dress have more specific meanings. The little girl is wearing a coral necklace. During a time when many young children died of illnesses, coral was believed to help protect them. The necklace also may hold a clue to the child's age. How old do you think she was here? (The two strands of her necklace might suggest she was two.)

- Every part of this painting has meaning. What are the Bentleys holding? Of the three objects in their hands, one is common in a 19th century portrait like this one. Two are less expected. Which do you think is which?

- The blooming flower in Maria Louisa's hand was a typical symbol of girlhood at the time. The other objects are more unusual. Bentley holds a small piece of cotton and Maria Louisa, a slice of watermelon. Coupled with the fact that, in the companion painting to this one, a portrait of Bentley's husband, he holds a book with the plainly visible title *The Horrors of Slavery,* it seems clear that these objects are meant to evoke enslaved labor in the South. Why do you think the Bentleys chose to include these objects in their portraits? What message might they have been hoping to send?

- It is possible that the Bentleys wanted to project anti-slavery sentiments in their portraits. Why do you think they might have chosen cotton and watermelon to do so—symbols of slavery in the South—when they were from New York, where slavery was also still legal at the time?

MRS. NANCY LAWSON
QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- Describe Lawson's clothing. With her clothing choices, Lawson was showing her affluence and style. Her husband, subject of another portrait by the same artist, was a successful clothing merchant. What other signs of wealth can you find in this painting?
- Nancy Lawson's portrait is filled with symbolism. What are some of the symbolic elements you can decipher?
- What do you make of the book in Lawson's hand? Why might it be particularly powerful for a Black woman in 1843 to include a book in her portrait?
- It is likely that the room where Nancy Lawson sat for her portrait didn't actually look just like the setting pictured. William Matthew Prior, the artist from whom the Lawson couple commissioned their pair of portraits, charged less for simple backgrounds and more for more elaborate backgrounds. Why might the Lawsons have chosen the fanciest and most expensive of Prior's backgrounds?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- The artist who painted the Bentleys was a prolific white portrait painter named Ammi Phillips. Of the many people he painted across New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, he is not known ever to have painted a Black subject. What are some possible explanations for this?
- William Matthew Prior, the artist who painted the Lawsons, was also a white portrait painter from the Northeast. Along with many white subjects, he is known to have painted at least nine Black people. While he didn't often sign his portraits, notice that he did sign Nancy Lawson's portrait—his name is large and in gold. What does that tell you about how he might have felt about painting the Lawsons? What message might he have been hoping to send?
- William Matthew Prior and the Lawsons were part of a religious group called the Millerites that believed in gender and racial equality. How might knowing each other and being in the same community have affected the experience Nancy Lawson had having her portrait painted? How might her experience have been different if she'd hired Ammi Phillips instead?
- Which portrait do you find most powerful in how it expresses anti-slavery sentiments? Would one or the other be more convincing to different audiences? At different time periods?

CLOSING ACTIVITY

- Have students return to the lists of similarities and differences that they made earlier and revise it by adding, crossing off, or changing some of their earlier observations. When they share out, ask them to explain the additions, subtractions, or changes they made.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Visit the American Folk Art Museum's website, search the collections for other portraits by Ammi Phillips and William Matthew Prior, and select one. Without reading the label, and using the skills you developed studying the portraits for this lesson, write down as many observations, interpretations, and thoughts about it as you can. Then, read the label and add to or revise your notes as necessary.

- Each of the two portraits in this lesson is half of a pair. Look up images of the portraits "William Northrop Bentley" by Ammi Phillips and "William Lawson" by William Matthew Prior. Select one of the couples and then write an imagined conversation between them where they discuss commissioning—or hiring someone to paint—their portraits. What might they say about which portrait painter they'd like to hire? About how they plan to dress? What props they want to hold? What background they'll select?

RESOURCES

- https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/25/arts/design/william-matthew-prior-war-of-1812-and-queen-victoria.html

- https://courses.bowdoin.edu/there-is-a-woman-in-every-color-2021/patterns-of-visibility/mrs-nancy-lawson/

- http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/6731/rhoda-goodrich-mrs-william-northrop-bentley-and-daughter?ctx=7538aa1e-3fe0-4645-8a07-871e7f2bb9ad&idx=8

IMAGE LIST
IN THE EXHIBITION

MOSES WILLIAMS (1777–c. 1825) **or RAPHAELLE PEALE** (1774–1825)

Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles
Philadelphia
c. 1803
White laid paper on black stock
Library Company of Philadelphia, (3) 5750.F.153b
[PAGE 34]

SARAH ANN MAJOR HARRIS (1812–1878)

Sampler
Norwich Area, Connecticut
c. 1826–1828
Silk on linen
20 ⅜ x 19 ⅓ in.
Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, museum purchase with funds drawn from the Centenary Fund, 2017.0032 A, B
[PAGE 13]

PEDRO TOVOOKAN PARRIS (1833–1860)

Autobiographical Landscape
Paris, Maine
1856
Watercolor on linen or cotton
18 x 70 ¾ in.
Historic New England, Boston, Library and Archives purchase
[PAGE 9]

AMMI PHILLIPS (1788–1865)

Rhoda Goodrich (Mrs. William Northrop) Bentley and Daughter
Lebanon Springs, New York
1815–1820
Oil on canvas
34 x 27 in.
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Ralph and Bobbi Terkowitz, 2019.3.1
[PAGE 38]

WILLIAM MATTHEW PRIOR (1806–1873)

Mrs. Nancy Lawson
Boston
1843
Oil on canvas
30 ⅛ x 25 in.
Shelburne Museum, Vermont, museum purchase, acquired from Maxim Karolik, 1959-265.34
[PAGE 40]

Doctored portrait formerly catalogued as:
Attributed to ETHAN ALLEN GREENWOOD (1779–1856)

Charles Lee Jones
United States
1815
Oil on wood
26 x 18 ¾ in.
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, gift of William Vareika, 2005.6
[PAGE 25]

IMAGE LIST IN THE EXHIBITION *(continued)*

EDWARD HICKS (1780–1849)

The Residence of David Twining 1785.
Newtown, Pennsylvania
1846
Oil on canvas, in original wood frame with paint and gold leaf
30 ½ x 35 ⅞ x 1 ⅜ in.
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Ralph Esmerian, 2005.8.13
[PAGE 17]

PRUDENCE PUNDERSON (1758–1784)

The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality
Preston, Connecticut
c. 1776–1783
Embroidery
12 ¾ x 16 ¾ in.
Connecticut Historical Society, gift of Newton C. Brainard, 1962.28.4
[PAGE 21]

IMAGE LIST IN THE PUBLICATION

Doctored portrait, previously cataloged as:

The Black Admiral
United States
Late 18th century
Oil on canvas
Private collection
[PAGE 33]

VISITING THE AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM

STUDENT PROGRAMS

The American Folk Art Museum offers a range of free, thematic and discussion-based gallery and artmaking programs for students, including single visits and multisession museum–school partnerships. For more information on current programs for students or additional educator programs, please call 212. 595. 9533, ext. 381, or e-mail grouptours@folkartmuseum.org. Information about all programs can also be found on the museum's website, **www.folkartmuseum.org/resources/students-and-educators.**

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Bus: M5, M7, M11, M20, M66, M104

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