

Mini Murals

An Art With Kids Art Making Workshop based on the Art of Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) by Trish Maunder, Creative Programs Director 2005/2006



Aspects of Negro Life I: The Negro in an African Setting 1934. Mural panel, oil on canvas. 72 5/16 x 78 5/8 ins. © Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Ctr. For Research in Black Culture, The NYPL, Astor, Lenox & Tilden Fdts. Used with permission of the Aaron & Alta Sawyer Douglas Fdt., Topeka, KS.

This art making workshop is designed for students Grades 2–6 and is based on the series *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934) by Aaron Douglas.

Background Information

Aaron Douglas is known for his large murals, which depict scenes from African and African American life. In his 1934 series *Aspects of the Negro* he created four murals on canvas highlighting African life and culture; images of slavery and emancipation in the United States; life for African Americans in the Southern states and finally the frustrations of African Americans after the Great Depression of 1929.

In each mural Douglas used a similar style and technique, creating single or multiple sets of concentric circles showing tonal gradations of color within the circles. In each case silhouetted figures are seen against the light and colors that emanate from the painting.

Douglas placed the figures and images deliberately and carefully to create a balanced composition, often putting important or significant objects and images at the center of the smallest, inner circle. In the case of *Song of the Towers* it is the saxophone and the Statue of Liberty that appear in the center.

After studying the slides and posters of Douglas's work, students should prepare to create their own 'Mini Mural' highlighting an important aspect of their own lives by using a similar style that includes concentric circles, graduated tones of color and simple

silhouettes. Ample time should be given to examine all four murals in this series, but for the art-making project itself the focus should be upon the two smaller pieces that tell a simpler narrative and include only one set of concentric circles.



Aspects of Negro Life II: Slavery through Reconstruction 1934. . Mural panel, oil on canvas. 139 x 60 ins. © Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Ctr. For Research in Black Culture, The NYPL, Astor, Lenox & Tilden Fdts. Used with permission of the Aaron & Alta Sawyer Douglas Fdt., Topeka, KS.

Objectives

To engage students by having them recreate a unique painting of their own in a similar style to that of Aaron Douglas.

To encourage students to examine the details and underlying reasons why artists choose certain styles and images, i.e., that they could be telling a personal story, documenting history, or bringing attention to the public something important or interesting. It may also be a way for the artist to express his/her own feelings and emotions about a situation.



Aspects of Negro Life III: An Idyll of the Deep South 1934. Mural panel, oil on canvas. 139 x 60 ins. © Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Ctr. For Research in Black Culture, The NYPL, Astor, Lenox & Tilden Fdts. Used with permission of the Aaron & Alta Sawyer Douglas Fdt., Topeka, KS.

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To create their own personal "Mini Mural" about something that is important in their own lives.

Mini-Mural Topics

Students should consider who and what they wish to include as silhouetted images against their set of concentric circles. Practice drawing silhouettes by looking at the outlines of body shapes in magazines and newspapers or by drawing people from real life.

Students might focus on an aspect of school or family life and feature a favorite sport such as soccer, skiing, tennis, ice-skating, swimming or an activity such as playing an instrument, singing, painting or building. They may wish to highlight an event they have read, heard about or seen in a movie or perhaps show an event from their family history.

Materials for the Mini Mural

medium sized sheets of white paper (14" x 17")
sets of compasses for creating concentric circles
markers
tempera paint of assorted colors
paintbrushes of assorted sizes
posters of *Negro in an African Setting* and *Song of the Towers*
for direct reference



Aspects of Negro Life IV: Song of the Towers 1934. Mural panel, oil on canvas. 108 x 108 ins. © Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Ctr. For Research in Black Culture, The NYPL, Astor, Lenox & Tilden Fdts. Used with permission of the Aaron & Alta Sawyer Douglas Fdt., Topeka, KS.

Activity

With time to consider their work prior to the workshop students can collect images from newspapers and magazines to refer to in their paintings.

Students will draw out their designs and begin to paint in their images. Older students can incorporate their images into color gradations whereas younger students might find it easier to paint the silhouetted images over the top.

Students should select at least six images, including those of the human form, to include in their painting, with a special or significant image or object appearing in the center of the smallest circle.

Students should select a color palette to work with e.g., tones of greens and browns as shown in *Song of the Towers* or warmer tones of pinks, reds and oranges. Choice of palette should be left to the student so as to complement the subject matter.

If photographs can be taken throughout the workshop they will serve as an exciting stimulus, particularly if taken with a digital camera and shown to the students at the end of the workshop. Children love to see themselves at work and photos serve as a great reinforcement for the value of the project.