

Masterpiece: *Street Musicians*, 1940

By William Johnson

Keywords: organic & geometric shapes, contrasting colors, patterns

Grade: Kindergarten

Month: February

Activity: Geometric Instrument Painting



Meet The Artist:

- 1901 - 1970
 - Born in South Carolina. He always wanted to be an artist.
 - Moved to New York City in 1918 to study art because the south was segregated, no chance for a black person to pursue art. In spite of his achievements and awards, he faced many obstacles as a black artist, therefore his teacher raised money to send him to France to study. While in Europe, he met his Danish wife. They traveled back and forth several times.
 - In 1930, he returned to NYC and set up a studio in Harlem and later taught painting there. The Harlem Renaissance took place around this time - black artists and intellectuals gained recognition for their accomplishments.
 - First solo exhibition in 1941. He painted scenes from his southern roots - wooden shacks, cotton fields, farmers, wagons pulled by mules, as well as the sights and people of Harlem - people dancing and performing in colorful clothes (zoot suits, platform shoes, cocked hats).
 - He developed a brain disease in 1947. Spent the rest of his life (23 years) in a hospital and died penniless. His paintings, over 1,000, were almost destroyed. Many were donated to what would become the Smithsonian American Art Museum.
 - Johnson had a very distinctive style and painted in a bold and colorful manner. His shapes were simple and geometric.
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Possible Questions:

- Johnson used many different shapes - what are they? (squares, rectangles, ovals, diamonds, triangles)
- Do the people look real? Why or why not?

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- Explain the difference between organic and geometric shapes.
- Organic Shapes - irregular shapes of freely developed curves resembling those found in living organisms (people, animals, plants)
- Geometric Shapes - squares, rectangles, circles, etc)
- What colors do you see?
- Contrasting Colors - a large difference between the two: warm & cool, dark & light. Contrasting colors add excitement and interest to a work of art.
- What kind of music would come from this painting?
- What do you think the title should be?
- Who do you think these people are? Where could they be, since there is no background in this painting.
- Describe the pattern in the background.
- How do you feel looking at this painting?

Activity: "Geometric Instrument Painting"

Materials Needed: 9 x 12 White construction paper, students own pencils, tempera cakes, brushes, newspaper to cover desks, water containers.

***Play jazz music in the background while they are doing the activity if you like. Miles Davis is perfect.**

Process:

1. Discuss various kinds of musical instruments and their shapes. Draw simplified versions on the board using geometric shapes to demonstrate.
2. Ask the students to choose an instrument that they would like to draw.
Make sure it takes up most of the paper.
3. Have them make a pattern in the background.
4. They will paint their instrument using contrasting colors. The background should be done in lighter colors so the subject stands out. Remember to use the tempera cakes.
5. Don't forget to have them start by writing their name on their artwork.