

What Makes You Say That? | The Judgment Day by Aaron Douglas

Art: Expressing the Individual/Identity

Math: Geometry

Adapted from Avis Brock, National Gallery of Art Gallery Teacher with Cleveland Elementary School, Washington, DC

Target Thinking Dispositions: Reasoning with Evidence

Thinking Routine: *What Makes You Say That?*

Work of Art: Aaron Douglas, *The Judgment Day*, 1939

Disciplines: Math, Social Studies, History, English Language Arts, Art

Curricular Topics: Expressing the Individual/Identity

Grade Level/Age: Grade 4 or Ages 9-10 (adaptable for older or younger students)

Total Time: 40 minutes (adaptable for shorter time frames or two sessions)

Learning Objectives: Students will observe a work of art, interpret what they see, justify their interpretations using evidence-based reasoning, and make connections to math.

Materials Needed:

- Art reproduction of *The Judgment Day* by Aaron Douglas (poster, digital image, or individual prints)
- Photos of Aaron Douglas and James Weldon Johnson (optional)
- *What Makes You Say That?* templates (1 per student)

What Makes You Say That?

1. Observing, Interpreting, Justifying

~7 minutes

Introduce the work of art, the thinking goals, and connecting curricular topics. Have students look carefully at the painting and then ask: "What's going on in this work of art?" Ask them to provide their interpretations by sharing with a partner. Then one at a time have students share out their ideas to the whole class, and follow-up on each answer by asking "What do you see that makes you say that?" Allow students time to provide specific evidence from the artwork for their interpretations.

2. Curriculum Connection - Math

~5 minutes

Ask students: "What might be going on with math in this painting?" Have them Think-Pair-Share or answer in a whole group discussion. As students respond with lines, angles, and/or shapes in the painting, ask them to define the math terms. Encourage them to depict their observations (lines, shapes) using their hands or bodies.

Extending What Makes You Say That?

Provide Background on the Artist and Artwork:

~20 minutes

Explain to students that Aaron Douglas created this painting to illustrate a poem written by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson was a famous author, educator, lawyer, diplomat, and civil rights activist who wrote *God's Trombones*, a book of poems interpreting African American church sermons. Show students the picture of James Weldon Johnson.

Next, read the following lines from Johnson's poem *Judgment Day*:

"In that great day, [...]
God's a-going to call for Gabriel,
That tall, bright angel, Gabriel;
And God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,
Blow your silver trumpet,
And wake the living nations.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord
How loud must I blow it?
And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel
Blow it calm and easy.
Then putting one foot on the mountain top,
And the other in the middle of the sea,
Gabriel's going to stand and blow his horn,
To wake the living nations.
[...]"

Ask students to look again at the painting to find the choices Douglas made to illustrate the poem.

Have them choose one math detail and tell a partner how they think it helps Douglas tell the story. Then, invite students to share their reasoning with the class.

Next, tell the story of how Aaron Douglas and James Weldon Johnson met one another: the Harlem Renaissance. Play Duke Ellington's "*Take the A-Train*," a famous jazz song from the Harlem Renaissance era. Model and then invite students to respond to the song by moving their bodies in the shapes and angles they discovered in the painting.

Wrap-Up:

~5 minutes

Summarize the activity for students, highlighting links between the thinking routine (*What Makes You Say That?*), key dispositions (interpreting and reasoning), and any relevant curricular content. If time allows, reflect on the lesson together by having students write or discuss:

"What is one key idea you will remember from our lesson today?"

"What was it like to connect math to this work of art?"

Additional Suggested Works of Art:

This lesson can be applied to other works of art, such as:

- Marsden Hartley, *Berlin Abstraction*, 1914/1915

- Awa Tsireh, *Two Kossa*, c. 1925
- Ruth Asawa, *Umakichi*, 1965
- George Bellows, *Both Members of This Club*, 1909

For more works of art related to the subject of expressing the individual, identity, please refer to the Uncovering America resource on the National Gallery of Art website:

www.nga.gov/uncoveringamerica