Through the Lens: A Glimpse into the Art of African American Photographers

Curriculum Development Project

Betsy Ginther

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Professor Gordon

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Overview

Photographs capture still images of what is often a very dynamic world. Photographers are the people behind the lens recording those events and creating some of the most iconic images history has ever seen. Wars, record-breaking sporting events, natural disasters and wonders, and the faces that personify our most recognizable speeches, protests, triumphs and defeats are all frozen in time thanks to the vision of photographers. There are nature and landscape photographers, those who specialize in portraits, and those whose specialty lies in snapping images of everyday, “real” life. African American photographers have worked in all categories, transcending color lines with their art.

Art is a powerful medium through which to engage with social, political, and economic issues. Examining paintings and sculptures is a valuable way to encourage students to ask questions about their world, but diving into the world of photography brings an element of reality to art. When students can look at a photo of a rally or a demonstration, or see in a photo the devastation of poverty, they are provided an opportunity to glimpse into real situations where real people lived, worked, struggled, and succeeded. In many ways, photography is an ideal compliment to any history lesson, because of the connections photos are able to forge between their audiences and the subject matters they depict. For that reason, I feel it is important to introduce students to the photography produced by and focused on the African American community in the United States. History teachers especially will benefit from the inclusion of a unit on this subject. It is something different, yet something that expands the scope of what is already to be taught in a history classroom. In addition, students will enjoy learning about and through a different medium. We all know how refreshing it is to see students excited about what they are taught, and introducing a unit which centers on a new and different topic will hopefully encourage that student enthusiasm.
Photography dates back to the early part of the nineteenth century. According to National Geographic (2009), French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce is responsible for the first recorded permanent image. In 1826, he used a camera obscura to achieve production of an image of his estate. In 1839, a different Frenchman, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (a painter and chemist) used a camera obscura and his own invention of a daguerreotype process to produce a photograph including a person for the first time in history (National Geographic, 2009). At this point, moving objects did not make it into photographic productions, but still objects were able to be included (National Geographic, 2009). The first color photo was produced by James Clerk Maxwell in 1861. According to National Geographic (2009), this Scottish physicist started the process of making color images a reality. In 1878, English photographer Eadweard Muybridge created the first action photos. Muybridge’s photos depicted horses in motion, but they set the stage for further photos depicting humans and other animals, and eventually, leading to the development of cinematography (National Geographic, 2009). Needless to say, the art and science of photography have come a long way. The first commercial digital camera was introduced by Kodak in 1991 and today, twenty years later, digital cameras are everywhere (National Geographic, 2009). Film and the large, bulky cameras that used to be the go-to equipment for photographers are things of the past, to which many students today have had little to no exposure.

The “New Negro” movement and subsequent Harlem Renaissance stand as symbols of the creativity and artistic achievements of African Americans. Alain Locke, a Howard University professor of philosophy, wrote an essay in 1925 entitled “The New Negro,” in which he called for a recharging of the spirit of the African American. In the words of Locke (1925), “With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound
to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without” (p. 2). Statements such as this quickly encouraged artists to begin producing the musical, literary, performance, and visual art masterpieces that comprised the Harlem Renaissance. A new image of African Americans emerged during the Harlem Renaissance— an image that drew attention to the achievements of African Americans in areas that had previously been dominated by members of the white community.

Well-known African American photographers include figures such as Ernest C. Withers, James Van Der Zee, The Goodridge Brothers, and Winifred Hall Allen. These artists lived and worked at different times, and therefore were able to experience firsthand the subjects that fill their photographs. For instance, Ernest C. Withers, who was primarily based in Memphis, captured images of many of the key historical events featured in the exhibits at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). According to the NMAAHC (2011), Withers’s photos “cover in-depth the story of the Negro Leagues, especially the teams and athletes that played at black-owned Martin Stadium; THE Memphis music schen in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s; and the Civil Rights Movement” (NMAAHC website, Ernest C. Withers Photography Collection). John Jezierski’s book, Enterprising Images: The Goodridge brothers, African American photographers, 1847-1922, inspired an exhibit about the Goodridge Brothers at the Michigan Historical Museum. The exhibit also traveled to other locations in Michigan and Pennsylvania in order to showcase the work of the accomplished brothers. Wallace and William Goodridge built a solid reputation as photographers, documenting many aspects of life in the mid to late 19th century and into the 1900s (State of Michigan, 2011, Enterprising Images: Michigan Historical Museum, Time Line of Family and Studio History). Their reputation even spread into the white community, which frequently patronized the
Goodridge family business, even after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (State of Michigan, 2011, Enterprising Images: Michigan Historical Museum, Success in a Segregated World). Harlem remained a consistently chosen subject for many African American photographers because of its connection to the Harlem Renaissance and its plethora of photo-worthy people and events. James Van Der Zee and Winifred Hall Allen are two examples of photographers based in Harlem who took much of their inspiration from the scenes unfolding around them. Van Der Zee worked to capture images that “presented Harlem in the best light” (Sean McCollum, 2011, “Photographer James Van Der Zee”). This photographer worked especially with middle-class African Americans in the 1920s (Sean McCollum, 2011, “Photographer James Van Der Zee). Winifred Hall Allen accomplished a great deal as a female, African American artist in early to mid-twentieth century America. She too documented much of the activity in Harlem- everything from businesses, to social gatherings, to portraits (Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, 1986, p. 60-71).

Calling attention to social issues through photographs is not an uncommon practice. Photography, of all the arts, is one way through which to connect, in a very real sense, subjects and audiences. Photographs offer a tangibility, a sense of reality. It is understandable, then, why many photographers use their skills to capture images of events such as marches, demonstrations, and protests. Additionally, images of housing crises, poverty, and acts of discrimination and racism carry the power to stir audience emotions- with the intention of inspiring productive action. African American photographers, such as James Presley Ball, Marvin and Morgan Smith, and Gordon Parks took up this torch in their artistic endeavors. Institutions such as the Smithsonian and the Schomburg Center have collections that document the work of African American photographers and the various historical, social, cultural, and political events that were captured by these artists and their visionary lenses.
It is the intention of this curriculum unit to introduce students to an additional side of African American history that is not often included in school lessons. Photographs provide important perspective and photographers continue to add to the presentation of history in creative and tangible ways. Included below is a sampling of images related to this unit. The books and websites listed in the References/Bibliography section of this paper provide a wide range of sources of images.

Helen Ann Smith at Harlem House, Beale St, Memphis, TN, c. 1950, © Ernest C. Withers,
Courtesy Panopticon Gallery, Boston, MA
Wallace Goodridge- “In the early 20th century, many middle-class women belonged to informal clubs and amateur theatrical groups. At least a dozen such Saginaw groups turned to Wallace and his new magnesium flash process to record their evening productions” (State of Michigan, 2011, Enterprising Images: Michigan Historical Museum, Success in a Segregated World).
William Goodridge- “William’s lumbering images went beyond simple documentation to capture the impact of logging railroads and technology, as well as the magnitude of the lumber industry in the Saginaw Valley in the mid-1880s” (State of Michigan, 2011, Enterprising Images: Michigan Historical Museum, Photographers of Choice).

James Van Der Zee (Phillips Exeter Academy website)
Marvin and Morgan Smith, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. leads pickets against unfair hiring practices of Harlem 125th Street McCrory’s, ca. 1940 (Image from Deborah Willis & Howard Dodson, 1989, *Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest*)
Activities

Classroom activities should supplement the material presented in ways that encourage students to make connections with the material. In the case of a unit focusing on African American history 1700-1950, the purpose of activities should be to forge a better understanding of the experiences of real people in real, day to day (and extraordinary) situations. Including a special section on African American artists, namely photographers, is an excellent way for students to see not only the artistic work of historical figures, but also images that provide a sense of historical conditions and events.

*The activities included in this section are ideally designed to be done in sequence, but they certainly can be used separately.*

Activity #1 Word search

Even high school students enjoy activities like word searches. This fun, lightened learning exercise is a good way to introduce students to many of the commonly used terms associated with photography, as well as some of the important figures and subjects in African American photography. Students will learn a great deal from this exercise, often without realizing they are learning. See below for a model word search. Teachers may create their own puzzles, or find resources for other puzzle games at

http://puzzlemaker.discoveryeducation.com/WordSearchSetupForm.asp
African American Photography Through History

ARTIST
GOODRIDGE BROTHERS
LANDSCAPES
PORTRAIT
VAN DERZEE
AUTOCHROME-CAMERA
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
DEMONSTRATION
EXHIBIT
FILM

FRANCE
HARLEM
NEGATIVES
SCHOMBURG CENTER
WINIFRED HALL ALLEN
CAMERA OBSCURA
DAGUERREOTYPE PROCESS
DIGITAL CAMERA

Activity #2 Exhibit pitch

*It would be really beneficial if at some point prior to this unit/activity, students had the opportunity to participate in a museum field trip (of any kind). This trip is not necessary, but should the opportunity be available, it would be a rewarding experience and one that would provide some additional perspective.*

Students will be responsible for designing a museum exhibit that shows works by African American photographers. This is a group project that is designed to build creative thinking as well as presentation skills. Students will work together to design a museum exhibit and
creativity develop a persuasive pitch to the museum board of directors. Visual materials are of significant importance to this project, whether they are in the form of PowerPoint presentations, booklets, handouts, and/or presentation boards. Students are encouraged to dress for the part and really embrace the idea of making a professional pitch to their employers. Group presentations should be 3 to 5 minutes.

**Logistics**

- Depending on the size of the class, students should be put into groups of 3 to 4
- Groups will turn in a written exhibit proposal, as well as provide visual materials for their presentation
  - The written proposal should be 2 to 4 pages in length (typed, double spaced) and will include:
    - Description of the students’ museum of choice and how the proposed exhibit will fit with the mission of the museum and potential audience interests
    - Explicit reasons *why* the students believe the artists/artwork should be included in the exhibit
    - Ideas about how the exhibit will be organized
    - Ideas about flyers/any supplemental materials the museum should produce to accompany the exhibit
    - Suggestions for how the museum’s education department can incorporate the exhibit into its programming (aka if/how the education department can market the exhibit to school groups?)

**Activity #3 Writing as a reporter**

Students will have the opportunity to improve their writing techniques through this activity. Each student will be responsible for writing a newspaper or magazine article from the
perspective of a reporter assigned to cover an exhibit of African American photographers. Print media style and techniques should be incorporated into the article.

Project specifics

- The first page of each student’s assignment will be a short description of the newspaper/magazine for which the article is written. This description should include information about such things as where the publication is based, who the audience is, etc.

- Articles should be formatted accordingly and should be approximately 2 to 3 pages in length.

Brainstorming questions for students

- Who can I “interview” for this article?
- What is the history of the gallery/museum where the photography exhibit is on display?
- What kind of brief, informational background can I provide about African American photography/photographers?
- What were the responses of the African American and white communities to the artist?
- Where did the artist find inspiration?
- What subjects did the artist typically photograph?
- Any information about patrons or audiences?

Activity #4 In-depth portrait of an African American photographer

As a culminating project in the unit, students will be asked to uncover as much as they can about an African American photographer of their choice. Any African American photographer who produced work during the period of the 1820s to the 1950s is acceptable for this project. This research project requires students to choose an artist and support their choice: Why is this person of interest? What does the artist’s work represent for the student? How is the artist’s work relevant to the student’s life? Projects will be typed, double spaced and should
range from 8 to 10 pages, with images and visual materials to support their work. Primary historical documents should be consulted and cited, when available. Students may choose to create a visual aid to accompany their research project. For example, students may put together a chronological “album” of their artist’s work. Creativity, of course, is encouraged!

Points of investigation include:

- How did the artist get his/her start?

- Did they study photography at a school or institute? If so, where? If not, how did they learn their craft?

- Was the artist seen as breaking with stereotypical crafts/trades by becoming a photographer?

- If so, how did they earn this distinction?

*The Michigan Historical Museum website also lists some activities that teachers may wish to consider. These activities are associated with the exhibit about the Goodridge Brothers, but the ideas themselves could be applied to other photographers. Also, some adjustment may need to be made for a high school classroom.*

http://www.hal.state.mi.us/mhc/museum/explore/museums/hismus/special/goodridg/activities/activities.html
References/Bibliography


http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photographers/photography-timeline.html


http://www.photographersdirect.com/professionals/united_states/african-american-photographers.asp


http://photography.si.edu/default.aspx


http://www.hal.state.mi.us/mhc/museum/explore/museums/hismus/special/goodridge/activities/activities.html

http://www.hal.state.mi.us/mhc/museum/explore/museums/hismus/special/goodridg/saginaw/choice.html


http://www.hal.state.mi.us/mhc/museum/explore/museums/hismus/special/goodridg/saginaw/success.html


http://www.hal.state.mi.us/mhc/museum/explore/museums/hismus/special/goodridg/timeine.html


http://www.exposuregroup.org


