

The Forgotten Artists

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## CRITICAL ISSUE

When comparing art history lessons from past decades, a pattern quickly begins to emerge in the artists of study. By that I mean — lesson plans predominately revolve around white males. This is an issue that I became increasingly cognizant of early on in my graduate studies at University of Florida, and ever since I've had this realization, it's become a passion of mine to research the artists lost in the expanse of American art history. In this paper, I will highlight both female artists and minority artists that have been forgotten in teachings. I will then propose an example of a lesson plan that can help break down these barriers and make up for these gaps in art history that by ignoring, we've provided tacit approval of.

At the beginning of my research, a classmate sent me a piece in the New York Times titled "Overlooked". The NYT has written obituaries for luminaries since the 1800's, but in recent years acknowledged that they'd made oversight errors in omitting notable minorities and females. Beginning in 2018, "Overlooked" set out to right these wrongs, giving *remarkable* African Americans and females the obituaries, they'd deserved, in some instances, more than a century later. I was inspired by the 2019 piece, which debuted during Black History Month, that highlighted Black Americans that weren't properly recognized for their lifetime achievements. The acknowledgement of the mistake made in neglecting artists that deserved recognition and a belated but noble effort to right those wrongs is a quality that we should strive for, not only as teachers, but as humans. How often are minorities or females relegated to the margins of our history, specifically the arts, due to past cultural circumstances rooted in racism and inequality?

After reading through these obituaries, I decided I wanted to provide a parallel to this piece, but with minority female artists specifically designed for a classroom setting.

## ACTION PLAN

The main goal of this project is to create a lesson that highlight artists that weren't rightfully recognized during their time, simply because they were a minority or a female. Art History is a subject littered with gaping holes because "Those who were keeping a record of artistic developments, works of art and the artists who created them often seemingly 'forgot' certain groups or individual people due to their gender, ethnicity, or social standing" (Fulleylove, 2019). Recognizing this and working to change it raises the bar for future generations and ensures wider recognition, and the promotion of acceptance and equality in the art world.

In my research, I have found artists that had remarkable and notable works during between the 17th and 20th centuries that weren't given the proper recognition or respect they deserved. Kelly Richman-Abdou and Sara Barnes (2021) compiled a list of African American artists that paved the way for future creatives. Joshua Johnson, a portrait painter, worked during the 18th and 19th century in Baltimore (Richman-Abdou & Barnes). "Pleasants located documents variously describing Johnson as a slave, a slave trained as a blacksmith, a Black servant afflicted with consumption, and an immigrant from the West Indies" (Walls, 2020). With his work unfortunately being neglected during his time until the mid-20th century (Walls),

Johnson is now historically known to be the first recognized African American professional artist, with his paintings distinctive in his classically styled portraits.

Harriet Powers, hailing from Athens, Georgia in the late 1800's, was an African American woman born into slavery (National Museum of American History, 2019). Not only did she survive unthinkable circumstances during her lifetime, but she was also an artist described as “a literate woman, who transformed well-known stories she'd read herself into pectoral masterpieces.” (Fulleylove, 2019). Quilting has become a common art practice, and Powers is said to have helped pave the way for this practice of art in the South during the 19th century. One of her two remaining quilts is now displayed at the National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. (Fulleylove).

During my own art history studies in high school and college, I did not study a single black or female artist that I discovered in my research. These are memorable artists with beautiful works that are highly regarded, and they should be taught alongside their white male peers that were recognized during those time periods. Lesson plans should be inclusive of all genders, races, cultures and ethnicities. In my experiences, curriculums have made reoccurring critical errors in revolving around the same white artists, and we as teachers can do extensive research to include minority artists that also deserve the spotlight in the classroom. Creating a lesson plan introducing these forgotten artists because of racism and inequality can open up the conversation of why it happened in the first place, and how to prevent history from repeating itself.

CONCLUSION

To conclude my critical intervention plan, this project will strive to include minority and female artists that have been *forgotten*. Learning about these artists in addition to their more frequently discussed counterparts helps to teach students that regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, or culture, they are deserving of the same platform in art education in the 21st century.

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