

REPRESENTING THE PAST,
PRESENT, AND FUTURE
GRADES 6-12



CREATE A PERSONAL HISTORY POEM

WICHITA ART MUSEUM

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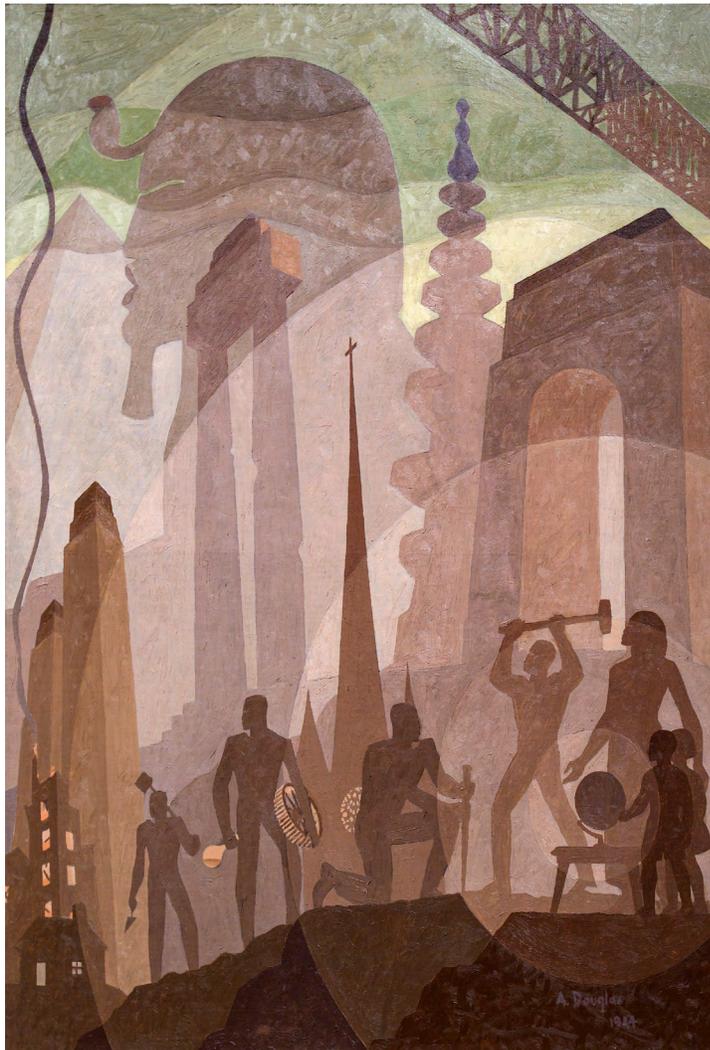
CREATE A PERSONAL HISTORY POEM

AMERICAN
ART DECO
DESIGNING FOR THE PEOPLE
1918–1939

This lesson can easily be adapted for lower and upper grades

Essential Questions

- How can artists and writers represent time in their work?
- What sources inspire artists and writers?
- How can you read a work of art like a text?



Questions for the Student

- What's going on in this picture? List the things you notice in the background, middle ground, and foreground.
- What kind of buildings or structures do you see?
- What figures do you see? What are the figures doing?
- Who does the job of building a society? Who gets the credit?
- What do you think the artist wants us to know or think about?

Aaron Douglas, *Building More Stately Mansions*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 54 x 42 inches. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee.

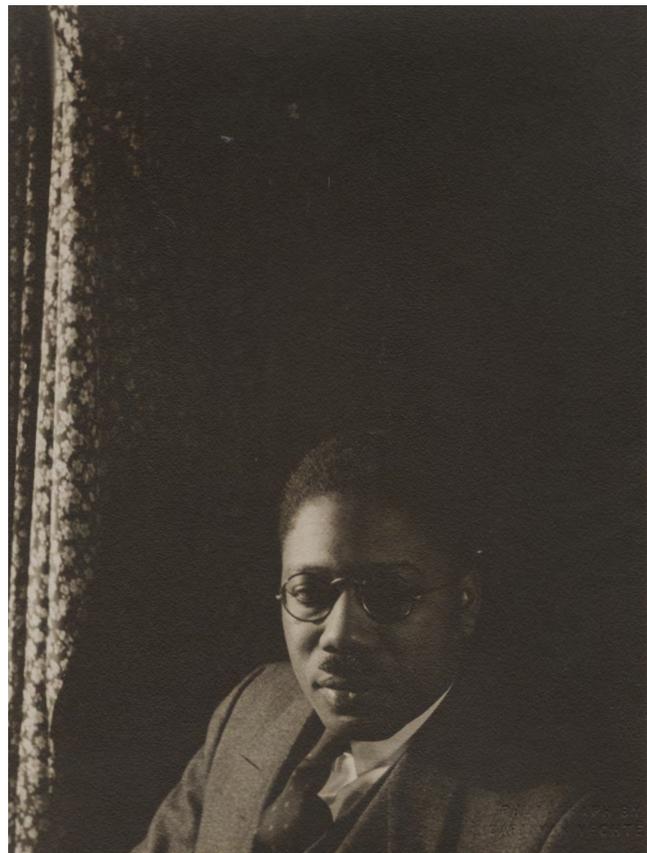
© 2021 Heirs of Aaron Douglas / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Jerry Atnip

CONNECT

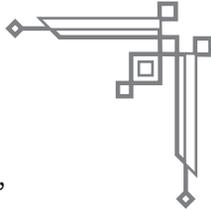
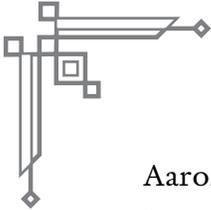
Art deco was a new and exciting approach to design in the 1920s and 1930s. Not a singular style, but an intertwining of various styles—streamlined and sleek forms, geometric shapes, and patterns, to name a few—art deco left its mark worldwide. Its abstract and stylized design used symbols of the past and technology of the future. A blending of the ancient and the modern, although seemingly contradictory, makes for a visually striking style. During this time, groundbreaking discoveries were happening—excavations in Pompeii, Troy and, the most famous, King Tut’s tomb in Egypt—alongside booming industry and technology. Art deco combines, borrows from, and takes inspiration from the past and present while looking to the future.

Aaron Douglas grew up in Topeka, Kansas, and later studied art in Nebraska, New York, and Paris. He was an active artist, illustrating the editorials of civil rights leaders during the Harlem Renaissance. His work often reflected African Americans’ intellectual and artistic achievements. The artwork *Building More Stately Mansions* demonstrates that black labors were essential to making great civilizations.

In *Building More Stately Mansions*, the figures in the foreground are flattened and silhouetted against their background, almost ghost-like in nature. In the background, forms resemble monumental structures from different societies across the globe throughout time. They symbolize the values of the most powerful members of these societies. The singular structure in the foreground appears decrepit and underwhelming when contrasted with the other monumental structures.



Carl Van Vechten, *Aaron Douglas*, 1933. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee. Image courtesy Carl Van Vechten Papers Relating to African American Arts and Letters, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. © Van Vechten Trust



Aaron Douglas titled his work from the last stanza of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s poem, “[The Chambered Nautilus](#),” first published in 1858.

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!

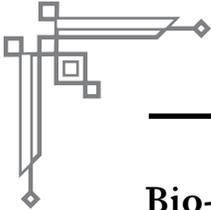


The poem is about a sea creature, the nautilus, who lives in its shell’s outermost ring. As it grows, it builds larger chambers in its shell, leaving the smaller ones behind—an ode to the passing of time, as we grow and change throughout our lives.

CREATE

“Who am I?” is a question many young people grapple with. Writing a bio-poem is an excellent way to explore their personal identity. A bio-poem is a poem about a person; in this case, that person is the student. It follows a predictable pattern and does not necessarily rhyme. Bio-poems help students get beyond the more apparent aspects of identity (like their ethnicity, gender, and age) and instead explore what shapes their identity, like experiences, relationships, hopes, and interests.

1. Explain what a bio-poem is to your students. Students will write three separate sections for this writing activity, reflecting on their past, present, and imagined future. You may want to extend this lesson over three separate writing sessions, allowing students time to think and reflect.
2. Follow the attached worksheet for each section: My Past, My Present, My Future. Each section will begin with the student’s name. Suggestions are given for completing each line of the poem. However, the format can be adaptable if students want to include specific memories or important phrases. Students can work separately or in groups to brainstorm ideas for each section.
3. Have students share their poems. Some sharing examples include posting them around the room as part of a gallery walk, sharing them with a partner, or reading their poems to the whole class.



Bio-Poem Example

My Past

Alex
Small, timid, shy
Sibling of Charles and Shayla
Who loved climbing trees, roller skating, and eating Oreos
Who felt anxious when we moved to a new town
Who feared millipedes, the dark, and thunder
Who made perfect attendance, rescued Princess Peach,
and mastered blowing bubble gum
Who wanted to ride the roller coaster and swim past the buoys
Who lived at the end of a small cul-de-sac

My Present

Alex
Ambitious, thoughtful, fun-spirited
The best sibling between Shayla and Charles
Who loves pizza and Final Fantasy XIV
Who feels confused, dreamy, and hopeful
Who fears being lost, alone, running out of time
Who is studying, socializing, and changing
Who wants to try sky-diving and go to college
Who lives on a tree-lined street

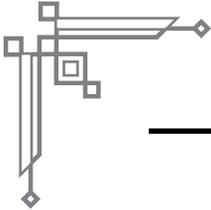
My Future

Alex
Settled, wealthy, smart, happy
Who will be a grandparent
Who will always love family, pizza, and game night
Who will feel accomplished, loved, and a little tired
Who will fear time, wrinkles, and sickness
Who will help others to succeed
Who will want to see my kids be happy and
watch the first spaceship land on Mars
Who will live in peace.

CONTINUE

Students can pass their poems to peers to read and make comments or ask questions. The margins should be filled with peers' feedback when they get their poem back. Be sure to address what are appropriate comments to make beforehand.

Have students create an artwork based on their poem.



ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

Writing—Text Types and Purposes

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Writing—Production and Distribution of Writing

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Writing—Language in Writing

Demonstrate command of and use knowledge of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing.

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

BIO-POEM EXAMPLE

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