

Lesson Title: The Civil War in Art and Literature

Grade Level: 4 - 12

Connections: Language Arts, Visual Arts

Students examine the historic implications of a work of art related to the Civil War and engage in classroom and independent activities that encourage creative writing of poetry and drawing. Students also learn traditional bookmaking techniques and make their own journal to create and collect their work.

National Standards:

National Language Arts Standards -

- Develop and use an expanding knowledge base and essential processes for effective communication through reading, writing, listening, viewing, and speaking
- Construct meaning and apply critical and analytical thinking strategies when engaged in reading, writing, listening, speaking, or viewing
- Understand, accept, and appreciate cultural diversity through a great variety of reading and language experiences
- Imagine and value worlds other than their own

National Visual Arts Standards -

- Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes
- Uses knowledge of structures and functions
- Chooses and evaluates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
- Makes connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Performance Objectives:

- Uses the writing process to produce poetry
- Given text to read, analyzes, infers, and synthesizes meanings
- Demonstrates an understanding of a bookmaking technique
- Selects media, technique, subjects, and symbols that communicate intended meaning in their art work.

Work of Art:

Alison Saar, American, b. 1956, *Nocturne Navigator*, 1998. Cooper, wood, neon, 12 ft. x 7 ft.

Vocabulary:

Big Dipper/Drinking Gourd – located in the Northern sky this cluster of stars that resembles a vessel is visible all year in Ohio

Celestial – of or relating to the sky or visible heavens (moon, sun and stars)

Chisel – a metal tool with a cutting edge at the end of a blade used in shaping or working a solid material (as wood, stone, or metal)

Collaborate – to work together with others

Commission - a fee paid to an artist to create a work of art

Conservator – A person responsible for the care, restoration, and repair of museum objects such as paintings and sculpture.

Gold Leaf - an extremely thin sheet of gold used to decorate frames and other art objects

Grinder – a machine or device for smoothing the surface of an object

Navigator – someone who directs or steers a course or path

Nocturne - work of art or piece of music dealing with evening or night

Nocturnal- of, relating to or occurring in the night

Polaris (North Star) – the northern most star

Torso - the waist up representation of the human body

Underground Railroad - a system of cooperation among active antislavery people in the U.S. by which fugitive slaves were secretly helped to reach the North or Canada.

About the Art and Artist:

Alison Saar spent her childhood in Los Angeles, California where both of her parents encouraged her to make art. She watched and sometimes helped her mother, Betye Saar, a well-known African American artist.. Her German-American father, Richard, an artist and conservator, encouraged her to draw and frequently took her to museums. She worked as his studio assistant from high school through college, learning to mix paints, apply gold leaf, and restore art objects from around the world.

In college, Saar studied the rich history of visual art made by black artists from around the world. She developed a special interest in self-taught African American artists. Historical figures, stories and songs from the African-American culture inspired Saar's artwork.

Saar continues to make work about black culture and history as well as work based on personal stories and experiences. She says her art always tells a story and is made from the heart and soul. She usually works in wood as well as recycled materials, such as metal she finds in trash bins.

After spending a few years in New York City, she moved back to Los Angeles to the area where she grew up. Sometimes she and her mother Betye collaborate on a work of art.

When visiting Columbus several years ago, Saar was fascinated by the city's history with the Underground Railroad. When she was commissioned to create a sculpture for Columbus, she decided to make something with a message about the Underground Railroad.

The result is the 12 foot high, 7 foot wide Nocturne Navigator. The sculpture depicts a black American woman with hands outstretched. Her long, full hoop skirt shows celestial patterns of the northern sky, particularly Polaris, (the North Star), and the Big Dipper, or Drinking Gourd, by which fleeing slaves navigated their way to freedom, often along routes through Ohio.

The torso is made of carved wood covered with copper. Saar used a chain saw, chisels and grinders to carve the wood. The skirt is made of hammered copper and painted a deep blue and punctured with holes. Underneath the skirt, there's a neon light that shines through holes that have been made in the skirt.

The work celebrates the achievements and sacrifices of the many unsung heroes who made the often-nocturnal journey in search of freedom and new opportunities in the north.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Put yourself in the same pose as the *Nocturne Navigator*. Now put your arms down straight by your side and lower your head. How does each pose make you feel? How are they different? (powerful, lonely, etc.) Why do you think Saar chose to show the sculpture with hands up and head looking upward? What message do you think she wanted to communicate? Find other examples of how artists use body language to communicate a message.
2. Imagine that you were travelling the Underground Railroad and could talk to the *Nocturne Navigator* for guidance. What questions would you ask her?
3. The Underground Railroad was not a railroad at all. Why do you think the people involved called it that?

Activities:

1. Research the Underground Railroad.
2. Study a map of the constellations. Make connections between the dots to see how the different constellations got their names. Create your own constellation maps using connect the dot drawings –see if other students can guess what the animals, heroes, etc. are.
3. Learn the lyrics of the song, *Follow the Drinking Gourd* (included at the end of this lesson) and study the hidden meanings of the words that gave instructions to slaves on how to find their way northward. Create a poem or song with the class that has hidden meanings for directions on how to get to school, the classroom, etc.
4. Visit the library and find the book, *Harriet and the Promised Land* by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence.
5. Have students complete the language and visual arts worksheet activities (see attached) on their own. These activities can be completed in a journal they make themselves. (See the lesson plan “Make Your Own Journal”)

Write it Yourself!

Nocturne Navigator, 1998

Alison Saar, 1956

Alison Saar's sculpture is a powerful reminder of the bravery and courage of the many unsung heroes who made the dangerous trip from slavery to freedom with the help of the Underground Railroad. Many songs and poems have been written to commemorate this important historical period.

Listen to the feelings expressed in the following poems. Imagine the *Nocturne Navigator* speaking or singing the following poems.

My People

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

- Langston Hughes

Nocturne Varial

I came as a shadow
I stand now a light;
The depth of my darkness
Transfigures your night.

My soul is a nocturne
Each note is a star;
The light will not blind you
So look where you are.

The radiance is soothing.
There's warmth in the light.
I came as a shadow,
To dazzle your night!

- Sterling A. Brown

Followers of the North Star

Like early slaves who followed
The North Star's guiding light,
To free themselves from bondage
And gain what was their right,

Their children's children's children
Grew up to join the fray,
And battle for the freedoms
That we enjoy today

Some struggled for the right to vote,
And end to segregation,
A chance to work at any job
Or gain an education

In struggle never ending,
They strove for Liberty,
Justice, Truth, and Equal Rights,
And human dignity.

Like early slaves who followed
The North Star's guiding light,
We follow in the path they made
In search of what is right

- Susan Altman and Susan Lechner

1. Write a poem expressing what the *Nocturne Navigator* might be thinking about. Try writing a poem with the title *I Lead My People* or *Follow Me to Freedom*. Imagine what you would say to comfort the frightened people who were travelling the Underground Railroad. You may also pretend that you are a traveler asking the figure for directions. What are your fears? How do you feel? Think about the atmosphere at night – What is the weather like? What noises do you hear? What do you smell?

Draw it Yourself!

Nocturne Navigator, 1998

Alison Saar, 1956

1. Look closely at *Nocturne Navigator*. Make a sketch of the sculpture – be sure and pay attention to how she is holding her head and hands. Make a map of the celestial sky on her skirt. Where did you place the Drinking Gourd?

