
Born in Oakland, California, Robert Colescott (born 1925) was raised with a love for art and music, spending much of his early years drawing and playing drums with local bands. Greatly inspired by the sculpture of the African American artists Sargent Johnson, he enrolled in the art department at the University of California, Berkeley.

Colescott traveled to Paris to study with the acclaimed French artists Fernand Léger. He was impressed by the city’s racial tolerance and its thriving community of African American artists. Following a sojourn in Cairo, Egypt, he returned to the West Coast, where he established himself as a leading figural painter. Colescott received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985; represented the United States at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997 (the first African American to do so); and was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1999. He taught for forty-three years as professor of art at the University of Arizona until his retirement in 1997. In 2005 he served as the Class of 1943 Wells Professor at Indiana University.

Robert Colescott is not afraid to face prejudice head-on. As an African American who witnessed America before and after Civil Rights, he feels that self-censoring his work for the sake of political correctness would be shirking his responsibilities to the issues of race. It is better, in his estimation, to expose bigotry in all its ugliness and ludicrous proportions than to politely sidestep difficult topics. Many of Colescott’s works from the 1970s feature a recasting of art historical masterpieces, such as Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters* or Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, in blackface. His use of pop icons, like Aunt Jemima and minstrels, has not always been appreciated within the black community. Some people have felt these images only serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes of African American culture.

In *Lightening Lipstick*, Colescott addresses a sensitive racial issue within both the black and white communities: a preference for lighter-skinned African Americans over darker complexions and consequently, the privileges that having lighter skin entails. *Lightening Lipstick* examines how the perceptions of skin color inform identity and the incongruity of these different perceptions. A light-skinned woman looking at her darker reflection exclaims in Spanish, “Soy latina!” (“I’m a Latina”), while the face in the mirror
responds, “Negrita” (“Black Woman”). The woman appears to be challenging her African heritage and suggesting the racial transmutation that has occurred in America since the Spanish Conquest. A barometer of this “lightening” is charted from one to six, beginning with a very dark-skinned man on the left and ending with a very white-skinned Howdy Doody-like caricature. By using humor and satire, Colescott creates a complex narrative that addresses the serious social ramifications of imperialism and slavery on future generations.

Colescott’s use of pop culture references, “appropriation” of art historical prototypes, irony, and his painterly, cartoon-like style, set the stage for the postmodern art that followed. His confrontational approach and honesty spoke to a hip-hop generation weaned on MTV and desensitized to media exploitation. Younger African American artists, such as Michael Ray Charles, Kara Walker, and Adrian Piper, are deeply indebted to him. By taking a stance on complex issues, such as racial blending, Colescott challenged these artists to go beyond outrage over stereotypes and examine contemporary issues of identity.
Questions to Consider

1. How would you describe the woman to the far left?
2. How does the figure to the far left compare and contrast to the woman standing next to her?
3. Why do you think this particular part of the world map is shown so prominently in the center of the painting?
4. How has the artist presented his subject?
5. What do you think Colescott is trying to express by including the spectrum of colors and numbered faces in the top-left?
6. How does Colescott emphasize that the person on the far right side of the painting might be grappling with mixed racial identities?

Connections

Historical: Racial assimilation, slavery
Art: Satire, stereotype, beauty, material culture

Further Reading

Driskell, David C. African American Visual Aesthetics: a postmodernist view
Work: Lightening Lipstick (1994)
Artist: Robert Colescott
Location of work: Indiana University Art Museum (IUAM)

Vocabulary/Key Concept(s):

Diversity (Cultural Diversity) is the variety of human societies or cultures in a specific region, or in the world as a whole. The term is also used in reference to or as multiculturalism.

Racism A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.

Bigotry (Bigot) A person obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his or her own opinions and prejudices.

Prejudice A preconceived judgment or opinion. An irrational attitude of hostility directed at an individual, a group, or a race for their supposed human characteristics.

Stereotype A stereotype is a preconceived idea that attributes certain characteristics (in general) to all members of a class or set of people(s).

Racial Transformation is the process by which someone changes their appearance with respect to race, either from their current race to another race and/or new category.

Satire In satire, human or individual vices, follies, abuses or shortcomings are held up to certain means of ridicule or other methods with the intent to bring about improvement.

Art Connection(s):

Pop Icons A “Pop Icon” is a celebrity whose fame in popular culture constitutes a defining characteristic of a given society or era. In Lightening Lipstick, the pop icon image is that of the character (caricature of) Howdy Doody.

Symbol Using something to represent something or someone else

Expressionism Any art that emphasizes the artist’s state of mind more than his objective observations. This work often shows exaggeration such as distorted shapes and unnatural colors.

Abstract Expressionism A movement that stresses the physical art of a painting as a means of expression and is sometimes called action painting. The style encompasses the cubist emphasis on the picture plane (the imaginary plane represented by the physical surface of a painting or drawing, comparable to the glass through which one sees a view beyond a window.
Geography Connection(s):
Caribbean
New Orleans, Louisiana

Time Line Connection:
20th Century

Resources:
National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Picturing America website:
http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/

National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITEment, What Portraits Reveal, for Grades 9-12. A lesson on portraits that engages students in looking at a portrait to discover not only the physical description of a person, but how to interpret what is viewed. Also discusses manipulation of the image, including caricature.

http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/building_lessons/
Getty Museum Education department Web site, Teachers’ Programs and Resources, is designed for K-12 teachers who wish to introduce art and art history into their classrooms. The site uses works from the museum’s collection along with pages A Grade-by-Grade Guide, The Elements of Art (teaching the formal components of art such as line and color) and a PDF file, Lesson Template.

Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) Bloomington, Indiana University
(812) 349-3050 – To Reserve Resource Materials

Sweet Land of Liberty by Deborah Hopkinson
Call Number: J973.0496 Hop (Children’s Collection)
Includes: Race relations in the United States, 20th Century History, African Americans, Civil Rights, Marian Anderson and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Web sites:
Robert Colescott

Indiana University Art Museum
http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/iuam_home.php
• click on On-line Collections
• click on African American Art
• click on Robert Colescott (Lightening Lipstick image)
Includes: Biographical information

Harlem Renaissance

http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/harlem_renaissance/
Includes: information and movie (animation)
Slavery

http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/slavery/preview.weml
Includes information and movie (animation)

Indiana Academic Standards – Visual Arts Grade/Level 5
RESPONDING TO ART: History
Standard 1
Students understand the significance of visual art in relation to historical, social, political, spiritual, environmental, technological, and economic issues.
5.1.1 Identify the relationship between a work of art and the geography and characteristics of the culture, and identify where, when, why, and by whom the work was made (Focus: North America).
5.1.2 Identify and compare works of art and artifacts with similar functions.
5.1.3 Identify themes and symbols used in works of art and artifacts throughout history that portray universal ideas and beliefs.
RESPONDING TO ART: Criticism
Standard 3
Students describe, analyze, and interpret works of art and artifacts.
5.3.1 Analyze the artist’s use of sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties in a work of art.
5.3.2 Construct meaning in the work based on personal response, properties found in the work, and background information on the context of the work.
5.3.3 Use appropriate art vocabulary.
RESPONDING TO ART: Aesthetics
Standard 5
Students reflect on and discuss art theories and aesthetic issues concerning the meaning and significance of art.
5.5.1 Identify problems or puzzles in a work of art or aesthetic issue, construct a hypothesis, and evaluate alternate hypotheses.
5.5.2 Identify and analyze a variety of well reasoned points of view on aesthetic issues (censorship, plagiarism) and develop a personal point of view.
Standard 6
Students theorize about art and make informed judgments.
5.6.1 Identify artwork made from the artist’s philosophy that art is at its best when it moves people to act for the betterment of society (instrumentalism).
5.6.2 Understand that personal preference is one of many criteria used in making judgments about art.
INTEGRATED STUDIES

Standard 13

*Students identify and make connections between knowledge and skill in art and all other subject areas such as humanities, sciences, and technology.*

5.13.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

**National Academic Standards – Visual Arts – Level 5**

**Content Standard #3:** Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

*Achievement Standard:*

Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks. Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks.

**Content Standard #4:** Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

*Achievement Standard:*

Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures. Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts. Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

**Content Standard #5:** Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

*Achievement Standard:*

Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art. Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry. Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures.

**Content Standard #6:** Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

*Achievement Standard:*

Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context. Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts.