Soul of a Nation

Art in the Age of Black Power 1963–1983

Black and White

In 1963, a group of artists met in New York to discuss how their art should respond to the Civil Rights movement. Their opinions were as diverse as their artistic styles, and they asked many questions about their responsibility as Black artists to their communities and nation. They decided to name their group Spiral.

For their one and only group exhibition, these artists decided to show artworks that used only black and white. The color choice unified the different styles of artwork and symbolized larger ideas about race.

The questions that the Spiral group posed continue to be asked and answered in this exhibition:

How does art impact a community?
How do artists help change a nation?

Use these questions and this guide to look at and discuss the artworks, then get creative as you explore the galleries with your family.
Black Light

Many photographers in this gallery were members of the Kamoinge Workshop, a New York–based group of Black photographers. The first Kamoinge director, Roy DeCarava, wrote that their goal was to “reflect a concern for truth about the world, about society, and about themselves.” The group continues to support Black photographers today.

Look and Discuss
What emotions are captured in the faces and bodies of the people in the photographs?

What details in the frame tell you about the place?

What in these images is familiar to you? What is unfamiliar to you? Think about time period, place, emotion, relationships, actions, gender, and race.

Look and Discuss
Roy DeCarava is celebrated for the variation and richness of tones in his black-and-white photographs. Find a DeCarava photograph in the gallery, or choose one of the images on this page. How many grays can you find? Put an X under each gray you see on this grayscale.
Black Impressions

A symbol is an image that represents an idea. For example, a nation's flag is a symbol of that nation.

The Civil Rights era was a time when more Americans began to see that the nation's ideals, symbolized by the American flag, were denied to Black Americans. Many artists used the flag in their work as a way of exploring this issue.

Look and Discuss

Look for works of art that have the American flag in them and discuss with your family what ideas or feelings the artists may have been trying to express by using this symbol. What are your experiences with the flag? For example, do you pledge allegiance to the flag at school or sports games?

Get Creative

Find David Hammons's body prints with the flag. With your body, copy the positions of the figures in the prints and describe what it feels like.

“Outrageously magical things happen when you mess around with a symbol.”
—David Hammons
Destruction and Creation
Black Power and Art on the Streets

A symbol can mean different things to different people at different times in history.

Get Creative
Choose up to three of the words below and write about what the word means to you.

Family  Community  Nation  Unity  Power

Explore the galleries with your family and look for symbols that connect to these words. Sketch a detail of the symbol from an artwork.
Cut out center to create a frame.
In the photo series, *Art Is . . .*, artist Lorraine O'Grady had dancers use gold picture frames to highlight people watching Harlem's 1983 African American Day Parade. “But the people on the parade route got it. Everywhere there were shouts of: ‘That’s right. That’s what art is. WE’re the art!’ And, ‘Frame ME, make ME art!’ It was amazing.” —Lorraine O’Grady

### Look and Discuss

Look at the photographs from O’Grady's performance. What is included in the frame? How does the frame change what you see?

### Get Creative

What is art to you? Take the frame and make your own piece of art by framing something that is interesting to you. Then take a photo of what you frame and post it on Instagram using @deyoungmuseum #SoulofaNation to tag us!
Black Heroes and AfriCOBRA

In 1967 the Organization of Black American Culture defined a “Black Hero” as a person who:

1. “Honestly reflects the beauty of Black life and genius in his or her style.
2. Does not forget his Black brothers and sisters who are less fortunate.
3. Does what he does in such an outstanding manner that he or she cannot be imitated or replaced.”

Look and Discuss
Who do artists in this exhibition choose to show as heroes? Who are the everyday heroes in your life? Are they like the crossing guard, family members, friends, artists, and babysitter featured in this gallery? How do colors, size, and placement celebrate these heroes?

Get Creative
Draw someone you think of as a hero in your community. Think about their pose (sitting, standing, gesturing, dancing). Add words to the drawing to describe the person, or something you imagine they might say.
Talk about Race

These tips from Teaching Tolerance (tolerance.org) can support a family discussion about race and prejudice.

**Acknowledge differences.** Rather than teach children that people are all the same, acknowledge the many ways people are different and emphasize some of the positive aspects of our differences—language diversity and various music and cooking styles, for example.

**Be honest** about instances, historical and current, when people have been mistreated because of their differences.

**Encourage your family members to talk** about what makes them different, and discuss ways that being different may have helped or hurt them at times. After that, finding similarities becomes even more powerful, creating a sense of common ground.


---

**Gallery Guidelines:** Help care for the art! Please walk in the galleries, and don’t touch or get too close to the art; 18 inches is a safe distance. Use a pencil, as pens can accidentally damage the artwork. Sit safely without leaning on walls or lying on the gallery floor. Thank you.