Artists and Society: How do artists reflect their time and place

The American Visions Exhibition Overview: The era between the world wars was a time of growing art awareness in the United States—in the 1920s alone, more than 60 new museums opened across the country. In addition, the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration program provided work for hundreds of artists who in turn created thousands of artworks for public spaces. This government effort coupled with the social problems of the time, contributed to a renewed search for a unique American art style.

Although abstract painting was becoming ever more sophisticated in the United States and some artists deliberately eschewed social realist subjects, for others there was an increasing desire to depict the American land and its people as the Great Depression went on, World War Two began, and the American landscape changed from one of vast open land to one that reflected human inventiveness and development.

Get Ready: Make copies of handouts with images, *Dramatis Personae*, Jack Levine, 1942 and *Harvest*, Joseph Jones, 1942. Or prepare a slideshow with each image for whole class to see.

Look:
- What do you notice? Describe what you see.
- What is going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What is the year or time period depicted in this image? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Where is the setting? How do you know?
- What is the mood in the image? What colors, lines, shapes, or textures communicate this mood?
- Describe the figures in the image? What activities are they performing? Do they look happy, tired, sad, rich, poor, hungry, old, young, etc. What do you see that makes you say that?

Discuss:
- What is the artist’s message and how do we know?
- What is their point of view (perspective)? Purpose? Agenda?
- What events, experiences and beliefs influenced the vision of each artist?
- What does the artwork say about the time in which it was created?
- How does the image personify America? Are any of these personifications ‘true’ today?
Do:

ACTIVITY 1
Compare and contrast the two images using a Venn diagram or other visual mapping tool (http://www.artmuseum.arizona.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Text-to-Text-connections1.pdf). Students should summarize key findings and conclusions about the works of art.

ACTIVITY 2
Research an event or time period from American history. What opinions do you have of this event/period? What shapes your personal opinion or perspective? Create a visual image (drawing, painting, or collage) that expresses the significance of this event/period in history as well as your personal point of view.

ACTIVITY 3
Create the front page of a newspaper from this time period. What is the headline? What main events were happening at this time, on that date? How would these events be shown visually to the public? Research the major events, stories and figures of the era to write articles and create the images to go on your front page.

IMAGES:

Originally from the South End of Boston, Jack Levine was born in 1915, the youngest of eight children of Lithuanian immigrant parents. During the Great Depression, Jack Levine worked as a WPA artist and became drawn to social realist subjects. In 1942 he was drafted into the Army and sent to Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. Upon returning from the war, he married fellow artist Ruth Gikow and settled in New York. It was here that he discovered Abstract Expressionism as the new art style coming to the fore. Denouncing abstract artists as "space cadets", he continued to draw inspiration from old master artists of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. He imbued his works with wit and satire, aimed at politicians and corporate heads.

Although he explored different subjects from time to time, in a speech given in 1976 he underscores the importance of social realist subjects saying, "I am primarily concerned with the condition of man. The satirical direction I have chosen is an indication of my disappointment in man, which is the opposite way of saying that I have high expectations for the human race."
At the center of this painting stands a monumental figure of a farm worker and an enormous spray of golden wheat—a heroic depiction of an ordinary laborer and a rural landscape. Originally a house painter from St. Louis, Joe Jones dubbed himself, “the professor of wheat”, and achieved national recognition for his vibrant paintings that dignified the struggles of the lower classes in the American heartland. Disenchanted by racially-provoked violence, the Great Depression, and the ever-widening gap between social classes, Jones joined the Communist Party in 1933, inspired by their vow to defend the rights of working class citizens. He truly believed that art could empower the people and be used as a catalyst for change. As he described his work, “I’m not interested in painting pretty pictures to match pink and blue walls, I want to paint things that knock holes in the walls.”

Jones revisited this same composition numerous times. Similar versions of this painting exist at the Columbus Museum of Art and the University of St. Louis. There is also a mural at the Post Office in Charleston, Missouri that he painted as part of the New Deal recovery program.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING RESOURCES

http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=2904
Works by Jack Levine at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/home/#collection=home
Works by Jack Levine at the Hirshorn.

http://www.youtube.com/user/SaintLouisArtMuseum/search?q=joseph+jones
Biographical video on Joseph Jones from the Saint Louis Art Museum.