Lesson Plan: 1920s Variety Show
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 6-8
Estimated Time: Four class periods

Introduction
By participating in a variety show of literary readings, musical and dance performances, and an art exhibition, students will gain an appreciation of the cultural achievements of the Harlem Renaissance.

Lesson Objectives
• Become familiar with the Harlem Renaissance and its major figures
• Develop research and oral-presentation skills

Key Terms
• Harlem Renaissance
• New Negro Movement
• silhouette
• profile
• tom-toms
• variety show
• jazz

Instructional Materials
• Pencils
• Paper
• Music player
• Poster board
• Tempera paint
• Colored marker
Procedures

Discussion

• Introduce students briefly to the Harlem Renaissance by examining and comparing a painting and a poem from the era. (For research assistance, see Books and Media.) Show them Aaron Douglas’s *Study for Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*. Ask the following questions:
  o What is happening?
  o How did Douglas choose to depict the figures? (in silhouette and in profile)
  o How did he emphasize some figures more than others? (lighting, size, movement, position)
  o How does the painting suggest music? What kind of music do you hear?
  o Why do you think Douglas selected this subject?

• Then ask students to read the following poem by Langston Hughes, discussing it in relation to Douglas’s painting. Focus on how the words in the poem evoke the same image and rhythm as the painting.

  **Danse Africaine**

  The low beating of the tom-toms,
  The slow beating of the tom-toms,
  Low … slow
  Slow … low —
  Stirs your blood.

  Dance!
  A night-veiled girl
  Whirls softly into a
  Circle of light.
  Whirls softly … slowly,
  Like a wisp of smoke around the fire —
  And the tom-toms beat,
  And the tom-toms beat,
  And the low beating of the tom-toms
  Stirs your blood.


Activity

• Assign to each student an artist, writer, musician, or dancer from the Harlem Renaissance. Ask students to research these figures on the Web or in the library. Encourage each student to read, listen to, or view examples of their subject’s work.
• Help students stage a variety show in which they will give a brief, first-person talk about their subject as if they are describing themselves. Students should also present examples of their subject’s work: artists can arrange photocopied reproductions of artwork in a small gallery; musicians can play jazz recordings; dancers can demonstrate styles of movement; and writers can perform literary readings. Encourage older students to discuss the motives for their art in greater detail.

Evaluation
Base evaluation on students’ research and oral presentations.

Follow-Up
Invite parents and students to the variety show. Divide students into their cultural groups (art, literature, music, and dance) and have each group design a poster advertising the event. Encourage them to create posters that are easy to read from a distance and lively in design, including illustrations and quotations about performers’ talents.<br />

Glossary

Harlem Renaissance
during the 1920s, the creative outburst of literature, music, dance, and art centered in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood. The movement spread to other places as well, including Chicago’s Bronzeville. It is also known as the New Negro Movement, after art historian Alain Locke’s watershed book The New Negro, which urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening their own expression.

jazz (n)
an often improvisational musical form developed during the 1920s by African Americans and influenced by European harmonic structure and African rhythmic complexity. It can be identified by its characteristic blues rhythms and distinctive speech intonations.

tom-tom (n)
a drum of indefinite pitch commonly played with the hands; a dull repetitious drumbeat or similar sound.

Illinois Learning Standards
Language Arts: 4, 5
Social Science: 16, 18
Fine Arts 25-26