Chicago resident Kerry James Marshall dreamed of being an artist from the time he was five years old. During nap time in kindergarten, the well-behaved children were allowed to look at their teacher’s scrapbook of postcards and magazine pictures. Remembering her collection, Marshall said, “I wanted to make magical pictures like that. I wanted to paint.”

Marshall grew up in a low-rise housing project in Birmingham, Alabama, and the Nickerson Gardens project in Los Angeles. He recalls both places fondly, mentioning grass, flowers, and a big field where children could fly kites. While living in these places, he noticed the residents’ strong sense of community and personal responsibility for their property. This would later become a dominant theme in his art. Marshall believes life in housing projects is much more complex than the overwhelmingly negative image offered by the media. He says, “All we hear of is the incredible poverty, abuse, violence, and misery that exists there, but there is also a great deal of hopefulness, joy, pleasure, and fun.” The piece Many Mansions, from his series on housing projects, challenges these stereotypes.

In the painting he combines the real and the imaginary to emphasize the residents’ attempts to preserve their community. The eight towers of Chicago’s Stateway Gardens projects loom in the distance, but the real focus is on the beautiful garden in the foreground. Marshall was interested in the fact that projects are often named after gardens but never resemble them. In his paintings, they do. Bright colors splash a canvas filled
with trimmed trees and green grass. Cheery bluebirds hold banners above blooming flowers. The sun shines over the heads of well-dressed men as they weed the garden and tend to their land. Easter baskets surround them, possibly representing a new beginning for the residents.

However uplifting, the scene is not entirely idealized. The curves and circles of the garden compete with the stark, angular shapes of the projects in the background. A menacing cloud hovers in front of a banner reading “In My Mother’s House There Are Many Mansions.” This rewording of the biblical passage “In my father’s house...” from the Book of John may comment on the number of single African American women caring for their children alone. The faded lettering of an old sign is partially obscured by tall flowers that also resemble the splotchy scrawls of graffiti. Marshall’s combination of negative and positive images expresses the complications of living in public housing.

Marshall, who is African American, says he paints his figures pure black because, “That’s how we identify ourselves, as black. It’s going to the extreme that we heighten our power.” He places figures in his paintings in social and political surroundings that he feels reflect the situation of many African Americans. This painting offers the idea of a community that is, as one critic said, “no longer contaminated or constrained by the relentless oppression, exploitation, and despair that have irrevocably shaped black American experience.” In Many Mansions, pride and hope bloom alongside beautiful flowers.
CLASSROOM SUGGESTIONS

[1] *Many Mansions* is a painting rich in detail. Have students describe what they see by responding to the following questions: What is going on in this picture? What are the men doing? Where are they? What relationship might the men have to one another? What can their clothing and the baskets tell us about what day it is? Is the painting telling a story or teaching a lesson? If so, what do you think it is and why?

[2] These men are part of a community that lives in a housing project called Stateway Gardens. Ask students for the name of their community. How is their community similar to and different from the one in Kerry James Marshall’s painting? How are the three men in the picture contributing to their community? How can (or how have) your students contribute to their own community? Students can make a list of possible ways to get involved and perhaps select one or two upon which to act as a class. As an alternative or addition to this exercise, have students paint a mural-size picture (perhaps on an old bedsheet) of people cooperating in their community.

[3] Ask students what they know about housing projects or life in the inner city. Where or from whom have they learned this information? How does Kerry James Marshall’s painting support or challenge what they think to be true about places like Stateway Gardens? What symbols has the artist included in the picture that suggest happiness or hope (bluebird, as a symbol of happiness in songs and stories, the garden, the men’s attire suggesting churchgoing and faith, the Easter baskets suggesting hope and a new beginning)?

[4] There are many different communities in the Chicago area that have their own rich identities. Establish a pen-pal relationship with a school from a different community, marking on a map its location and distance from your own community. What can the students learn about one another? How are their lives—their homes, school, and neighborhood—similar and different? What are their hopes and dreams?