"One day in 1938, I was driving my car down on 37th Street near Indiana Avenue, and there I saw a huge red stone, next to a newsstand," recalled Peter Pollack, then director of Chicago's South Side Community Art Center. "A few days later, I was driving down there again, and noticed that the head of [Abraham] Lincoln was beginning to emerge," continued Pollack, who later became Publicity Director at The Art Institute of Chicago. "I stopped and did a double take, and asked a little Negro boy who the stone belonged to; he said it was his father's." The father was Marion Perkins, who found his stones at demolition sites and worked various jobs—day laborer, newsstand owner, post office clerk—to support his three children. Art was a goal he had to pursue on the side, as in the case of Man of Sorrows, done more than a decade later in 1950. [See slide 12]

Pollack offered studio space to Perkins at the South Side Community Art Center, where the artist's work soon rivalled that of his teacher. Perkins began to exhibit and teach at the Center, becoming one of its first generation of successful Chicago artists. In the late 1930s, he worked for the WPA/FAP. By 1940, Perkins's sculpted heads were included in the noted American Negro Exposition, held at Chicago's Tanner Gallery. That same year, he exhibited at Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., as well as at Hull House in Chicago.

Throughout the 1940s, Perkins's figurative sculptures with African American themes were shown at the Art Institute's Artists of Chicago and Vicinity exhibitions. By 1948, Perkins received the Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship, enabling him to tour museums and studios in New York City. There he found the piece of marble that he transformed into Man of Sorrows. This powerful work won the Pauline Palmer Purchase Prize upon its exhibition in the Art Institute's 1951 Artists of Chicago and Vicinity show, thus entering the museum's permanent collection.

Here, Perkins uses one of Christianity's oldest subjects, Christ wearing a crown of thorns, and depicts him as African American. Perkins selectively polishes the gray stone, juxtaposing the rough texture of the beard, eyebrows, and hair with the smooth surface of the skin. Contemplative and unshaven, the head seems to be inwardly praying. The symbol of Christ's endless love and suffering for mankind—the crown of thorns—seems embedded in the figure's skull. Fully aware of the double meaning behind his hybrid Christ, the socially committed Perkins declared: "My work says what I want it to say. This head reflects the suffering of our people. This head of Christ is the acid test of American democracy."

* designates entry in Biographical Glossary
As was his custom, Perkins found the piece of marble at a demolition site. “I usually work in marble. It has greater aesthetic value, and it’s easy to find although it’s too expensive to buy.” Perkins explained. “Lots of old buildings in Chicago were made in marble, and lots of them are being torn down for freeways and housing projects—plenty of marble!” He let the hardness of the marble and its portable size dictate the finished product. Here, within the head’s compact unity, Perkins has managed to convey both a quiet constraint and an expressive intensity. “Art must enable the viewer to see that the spiritual emanates from out of the materials,” he explained. To accomplish this, he chiselled and carved the marble directly, using the method of direct carving. Both African sculptors and modernist artists of his era utilized this traditional technique. In addition, the head’s composed, downturned gaze recalls features found in African masks, while the abstracted, simplified forms reflect the modern sculptor’s interest in paring down detail to achieve the most immediate effect.

When Man of Sorrows won the Art Institute award, Ebony magazine ran this headline: “Marion Perkins: Talented Chicago Sculptor Wins Prize But Still Works as Freight Handler.” Life had never been easy for the Arkansas native. His parents died when he was eight. He arrived in Chicago shortly afterwards, with a note pinned to his clothing alerting the train conductor that an aunt would pick him up. He always wanted to be a sculptor, but he had to drop out of high school after three years to go to work.

Throughout the 1950s, awards and exhibitions continued—additional Art Institute shows and in 1956, both Art in America magazine’s New Talent Award and first prize at Atlanta University’s annual exhibition, started by Hale Woodruff. [See pages 22-25] Perkins helped found the National Conference of Artists in 1959, which is now the oldest organization of African American artists. But he was never able to support himself as an artist. As he declared in the conference’s keynote address in Atlanta: “To be an artist and a Negro presupposes problems whether one likes it or not. In fact, just to be a Negro in America creates a problem....”

An additional problem was that Perkins’s career as a traditional figurative sculptor coincided with the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. As the outspoken artist despaired: “The vogue of abstract expressionism ... has small attraction for the Negro artist confronted with harsh human realities and impelled with the desire to uplift his people, to portray them in dignity in the manner of old masters, and to seek to demolish the stereotype which persists in being cherished in the minds of white America.”
Nonetheless, Perkins remained unwavering in his commitment to his art and his cultural heritage, continuing to sculpt African American figures who served black ideals. [See figure 12] He died in Chicago in 1961, his dedication to his artistic goals expressed in lines written years before by Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen*:

"Yet do I marvel at this curious thing;  
To make a poet Black and bid him sing!"

Figure 12.  
Marion Perkins.  
Ralph Crane, Life Magazine,  
© Time Inc.
1. Perkins found many of his stones for sculptures at demolition sites. What other artist in this manual used materials that he found (in junkyards) to create his art? Have students make works of art from objects—natural or manufactured—that they find in their neighborhoods.

2. Ask students to imagine a conversation between Man of Sorrows and the woman in Elizabeth Catlett’s Sharecropper (see pages 64–66), referring to their facial expressions, information in the manual, and knowledge about the subjects. What would they have in common? What stories would they tell? What comfort or advice would they offer one another?

3. As an artist, Perkins had the “desire to uplift his people” and “demolish the stereotype which persists in being cherished in the minds of white America.” Do other artists in the manual share this mission? Who? How have they expressed it in their art?

4. Have students relate the Langston Hughes poem below to Man of Sorrows. What does the crown symbolize in both the poem and sculpture?

   Prayer

   I ask you this:

   Which way to go?

   I ask you this:

   Which sin to bear?

   Which crown to put

   Upon my hair?

   I do not know,

   Lord God,

   I do not know.