"So I'm getting off the expressway everyday," Kerry James Marshall begins, "and I see this sign, 'WELCOME TO WENTWORTH GARDENS.' I look around Chicago and I see that there are three other housing projects called 'gardens'—Stateway Gardens, Rockwell Gardens, Altgeld Gardens." The Chicago-based artist continued: "They looked like everything else but a garden.... Was there a trend once to name housing projects as garden spots. Isn't there an irony there?"

Thus began Marshall's Garden Project series, which includes this large, riveting work called Many Mansions, 1994. [See slide 20] In the series, Marshall examines what public housing means to him, the difference between the misguided utopian ideal and its harsh reality. The painting abounds in strong symbols. Looking almost like cardboard cutouts, stark highrise towers that represent the immense eight-building development of Stateway Gardens form the painting's backdrop. Their golden color may refer to Chicago's elite "Gold Coast," so near and yet so far. Carefully manicured trees lead our eye to the intriguing foreground scene. There, three solemn men weed, rake, and dig in a garden that is in striking contrast to the austere buildings behind them. A profusion of multicolored flowers bloom in the garden. There are also random daisies, what look like lilies, and an Easter basket or two. The men are formally dressed, more suitably for worship or prayer, in jetblack shoes, pants, and ties the color of their skin, with their bright shirts complementing the whites of their eyes.

Marshall never lets the viewer forget that this is a painted depiction—an investigation, an examination—not a recreation of reality. Fluttering in front of the weatherworn "Welcome" sign are two bluebirds of happiness that seem to have flown right out of a Walt Disney film. "Bless Our Happy Home" reads the streamer that dangles from their beaks. Above them, the signpost tells us that there are 8 buildings here, with 1644 units. "IL 2-22"—the official registration number for Stateway Gardens—is stamped in red letters across the buildings on the right. And in the bright blue sky above the entire scene is a framing red ribbon, like a banner of honor. Its message feminizes the Bible's well-known New Testament phrase from John 14:2: "In my Mother's House There Are Many Mansions," perhaps to express the idea of an all-inclusive home, or perhaps in reference to absent fathers.

In Many Mansions, Marshall blends contemporary subjects and materials with traditions of the past. The large unstretched canvas, which is simply nailed to the wall, resembles a brilliant, albeit slightly weatherworn, billboard. With its mixture of words, painted patches, decorative curlicues, and banners, the multilayered image combines acrylic paint with collage. But the stylized figures, flat space, and lively patterning reflect—in Marshall's words—the "traditional folkways" of black art. He also draws on art historical sources. In titling his series "garden," Marshall suggests idealized pastoral compositions seen in paintings beginning with the Italian
Renaissance. Indeed, despite the knowledge that this is a desolate urban site, Marshall depicts an idyllic foreground scene that unfolds with an almost otherworldly grace.

Perhaps the strongest of Marshall’s symbols are the carefully depicted, trancelike figures themselves. As Art Institute curator Daniel Schulman declares: “The figures are mesmerizing; their eyes they engage you.” Calling these jet-black figures archetypes, Marshall cites as their source black author Ralph Ellison’s* award-winning first novel, *Invisible Man*, 1952. As the book’s powerful opening reads: “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Alan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”

Marshall elaborates about his figures’ dark color: “I painted them to heighten their function as rhetorical figures. That’s how we identify ourselves, as black. It’s going to the extreme that we accumulate our power. I also wanted to heighten their visual impact as social and political figures. They do flirt with that tradition of derogatory images, but where the humor lies in my work has nothing to do with those figures.” Using biblical allusions to Easter and the resurrection, Marshall depicts fully grown men who refuse to give in to society’s degradations and misled attempts at salvation. They will give dignity to their “mansions,” digging themselves out on their own.

Marshall’s knowledge of housing projects is firsthand, for he grew up in them himself, first in a low-rise project in Birmingham, Alabama. When he was eight, his family moved to the Nickerson Gardens development in Watts in Los Angeles. Throughout the 1960s, as a little boy Marshall seemed eerily positioned to experience the upheaval of the civil rights movement. From his early childhood in Birmingham, he remembers the police dogs and water hoses during the 1963 sit-ins, and two years later, the family was in Los Angeles when Watts rioted. The Marshalls also lived in Chicago during the police shoot-out of the Black Panther Party in 1969.

But, Marshall insists, life in the projects “wasn’t any different than being in a house, except we paid less rent.” He has fond memories, such as using the communal garden tools in Birmingham to tend his family’s garden. The Los Angeles project, he reminisced, “had a huge gymnasium and a large field where we flew kites.” He used to check out toys from the project’s toy library, returning them the next day. “These [Garden Project] pictures are meant to represent what is complicated about the projects,” explains Marshall. “We think of projects as places of utter despair. 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.”
One early episode of joy determined Marshall's life course. It happened when he was five and in kindergarten. As he recalled: "If you behaved yourself in school and were good, the teacher rewarded you by letting you sit down and look at a scrapbook she'd made up of painted postcards and pictures from magazines. One day I was good so I got to sit down and look at this art and it was so magical. I knew right then what I wanted to do. I wanted to make magical pictures like that. I wanted to paint." This desire motivated him through high school, city college, and the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he studied with Charles White. [See pages 55-57] Marshall also worked briefly in film as a production designer. His film work may have influenced the stagelike setting of his paintings, as well as their sudden shifts in style, from a cartoonlike realism to decorative curlicues to abstract drips.

A 1991 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts enabled Marshall to pursue painting full-time. His works are now included in The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. His paintings were exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1993; the Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany, in 1994; and in 1995, in the American Exhibition, the venerable survey of modern art at The Art Institute of Chicago. He was also included in the exhibition Art in Chicago 1945-1995 held at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago during 1996-1997. In 1997, Marshall represented the United States in Documenta X, the international contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. He also received the prestigious John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant the same year.

Throughout his career, Marshall has made African American life his predominant subject. In his recent Scout series, 1995, Marshall again addresses racial stereotypes, with their underlying incongruities and ambiguities. [See figure 23] The series was triggered by the artist's glimpse of a black Scout Master and two black Boy Scouts emerging from a housing project, fully dressed in scout uniforms. To see African Americans in a stereotypical white American role had a profound impact. "The effect was startling," recalls Marshall. "They certainly looked alien at that moment."

His response caused him to examine his own bias. "One of the things a lot of Black people have to overcome is this self-limiting kind of construction of who we are and what we are supposed to be like. This notion that if you are smart and getting straight A's you are trying to be white, those are self-defeating kind of things."

Nevertheless, in Campfire Girls, 1995, Marshall leaves the viewer wondering. "In itself, being a Campfire Girl, camping out, is not such a strange phenomenon," he insists. But the girls in Marshall's image do not look like
they’re having such a good time. Wrapped in blankets, they sit in a big yard with a tent, and on the other side of the fence is a house. “Are they in their own back yard in this suburban neighborhood,” Marshall asks, “or are they homeless?” Do they camp out because of pleasure, or necessity? Marshall concludes: “They are certainly not placed specifically in the community... The community seems on the other side of the fence.”

With images like *Campfire Girls*, as well as with all of Marshall’s compelling narrative paintings, the artist examines the same issue of “two-ness” that W.E. B. DuBois* articulated almost a century before. As DuBois declared: “One ever feels [the African American’s] two-ness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder... He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed in his face.” And as Marshall reiterates about his underlying theme: “the ambivalence and duality that Black Americans experience with that hyphenated designation of Black-American or African-American—the ambivalence that Black people experience about really joining and participating in American culture fully. There’s still—in the back of people’s minds—this notion that they’re never really ever going to be fully American.” It is just this “ambivalence and duality” that has informed African American art with richness and complexity of vision.

1. Ask students what they know about housing projects or life in the inner city. Is it from their own experience? Where or from whom have they learned this information? How does this painting support or challenge what they think or know to be true about places like Stateway Gardens?

2. Kerry James Marshall decided to be an artist after an episode as a child in which his kindergarten teacher showed him painted postcards and pictures from magazines. How many other artists highlighted in this manual were inspired early in their lives to pursue the visual arts? Discuss with students their professional ambitions; can they attribute their interests to any early experience or contact with specific individuals?

3. “IL 2-22”, the official registration number for Stateway Gardens, has been painted prominently by the artist. Why? Have students discuss the link between addresses and identity. Do different streets, neighborhoods, or cities conjure up different pictures in their minds? By what other means (cars, clothing, belongings, etc.) is status perceived?

4. Relate the following excerpt from a poem by Maya Angelou to Many Mansions:

   From On the Pulse of Morning

   Women, children, men
   Take it into the palms of your hands,
   Mold it into the shape of your most
   Private need. Sculpt it into
   The image of your most public self.
   Lift up your hearts
   Each new hour holds ne chances
   For a new beginning.
   Do not be wedded forever
   To fear, yoked eternally
   To brutishness.

   The horizon leans forward,
   Offering you space
   To place new steps of change
   Here, on the pulse of this fine day
   You may have the courage
   To look up and out and upon me,
   The Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.
   No less to Midas than the mendicant.
   No less to you now than the mastodon then.

   Here on the pulse of this new day
   Your may have the grace to look up and out
   And into your sister’s eyes,
   And into your brother’s face,
   Your country,
   And say simply
   Very simply
   With hope –
   Good morning.