Richmond Barthé, the foremost black sculptor during the 1930s and 1940s, rarely used models for his work. Instead, he often posed himself in front of the mirror. “I don’t do my body,” he once explained. “But if I can get the position, feel the position with my body, I can do it with my fingers.” His particular focus was portraiture and genre figures—blacks dancing, boxing, and picking berries, with their postures filtered through Barthé’s unique vision.

Completed in 1942, *The Boxer* is one of the sculptor’s most famous works. [See slide 9] It was also done at a time when segregation barred African Americans from participating in any league sports with whites. Boxing was the only sport where blacks could truly compete. Barthé’s sculpture just preceded the era of the “Brown Bomber”—Joe Louis (1914-1981), world heavyweight champion. Between 1937 and 1949, the black son of a sharecropper defended his title a record twenty-five times to become a hero to blacks and whites alike. *The Boxer* also predated another great period in the history of the sport—the reign of champion Muhammad Ali (b. 1942), whose prowess in the ring led to his recognition as world figure and symbol for African American pride.

For this sculpture, Barthé chose the moment that just precedes action. Head down, feet striding, the boxer coils his right arm, ready perhaps to block a counter-punch. To accentuate the athlete’s grace and rhythm, Barthé distorts the figure, elongating the torso and limbs. With its wiry elegance, the sculpture conveys the willowy strength of a dancer more than a boxer’s stocky athleticism, but the figure’s furrowed face shows the rigors of the ring. Black art historian James Porter* described this work, along with two other statuettes by Barthé, in his pioneering 1943 survey of African American artists entitled *Modern Negro Art*. According to Porter, Barthé’s sculptures were “so close to perfection ... that their effect upon the spectator is transporting.”

To render this sport, pre-dating ancient Egypt, Barthé used the equally old sculptural tradition of bronze casting. The process of making an art object by running molten, or melted bronze into a mold was used in ancient Egypt, perfected in ancient Greece, and revived during the Italian Renaissance from about 1400 to 1600. The artist first makes a model in clay, plaster, or wax and then constructs a mold from it to receive the melted bronze. During the nineteenth century, the remarkably naturalistic works of Frenchman Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) brought cast bronze renewed popularity. Barthé’s *Boxer* springs from this time-honored method and was extremely well received.

Barthé actually began his artistic career as a painter. The Mississippi native trained at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago from 1924 to 1928. During his fourth year, his anatomy teacher made a pivotal suggestion. “He

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* designates entry in Biographical Glossary
asked me to do a number of heads in clay,” Barthé recalled, “saying that they would give me a feeling for the third dimension in my painting.” Barthé never turned back. He cast the heads, exhibiting them at the historic Negro in Art Week, held at the Art Institute in 1927. A Julius Rosenwald fellowship followed, as did an honorable mention in the 1929 Harmon exhibition. When his work received a critically acclaimed one-man show in a New York gallery in 1931, the artist moved permanently to Manhattan.

The African Dancer (1933), was completed during this period of success. [See figure 8] Again, Barthé captures not a dramatic gesture, but perhaps the moment before, when the dancer is in transition. She wears only leaves over her pelvis and a headwrap. Totally engrossed in her movement, she balances on the balls of her feet, with her knees bent and arms loose. On the brink of motion, she seems ready to spring into the next, perhaps grander, gesture.

Barthé was greatly interested in dance, one of the cultural traditions that Africans brought to the New World centuries ago. He even studied at the studio of Martha Graham (1895-1991), just as Graham was becoming one of America’s leading modern dancers. New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art purchased African Dancer, with two additional sculptures, making Barthé the first African American to enter the Whitney’s permanent collection.

Well-received exhibitions continued, including participation in Harmon’s last show of 1935. These ground-breaking exhibitions were discontinued when the federal arts programs, WPA/FAP, began to employ black artists. Barthé travelled to Europe and won the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in 1940 and again in 1941. Upon America’s entry into
World War II (1939-1945) in 1941, such government agencies as the Office of War Information began to publicize Barthé in order to mobilize black manpower as well as to promote an image of the democratic ideal. During this period, he made grand statues of black military heroes, such as Haiti's founder, Touissant L'Ouverture*. But he was aware of the motives behind his high profile. As he said: "This was the answer to Hitler and the Japanese, who said that 'America talks democracy, but look at the American Negro.'"

After the upheaval of World War II (1939-1945), Barthé turned to a mode he had used previously—portrait busts. From black heroes, such as the post-Reconstruction leader Booker T. Washington*, the artist began to focus primarily on his longstanding interest in the theater and its personalities. His series of actors in their favorite roles received a gallery exhibition in 1947. But Barthé's traditional style seemed particularly outdated with the advent of the revolutionary postwar movement of Abstract Expressionism, which originated in New York. Barthé moved from Manhattan to Jamaica in the late 1940s, continuing portraiture and genre statuettes. In the mid-1960s, he moved to Europe before settling in Pasadena, California, where he died in 1989.
Slide Nine: Richmond Barthé

1. Ask students to study the body of The Boxer. How did Barthé endow it with grace and strength? Consider his choice of materials and the manipulation and pose of the figure. On a visit to the Art Institute, compare The Boxer with the sculpture Hercules and Lichas, c. 1590, after Giovanni Da Bologna. Discuss each artist’s familiarity with anatomy and ability to sculpt a figure in athletic motion.

2. The Boxer is a figure in the round; a viewer can examine all angles of the sculpture by walking around it. Challenge students to imagine and draw what the figure of this athlete might look like from another viewpoint. Or, have a student assume an athletic pose in the middle of the classroom for other students to draw from various angles.

3. When this sculpture was made, African Americans were banned from playing all professional sports except boxing. Today, many of the top athletes in the United States are black. Have students discuss this change and its impact on racism. Has it been entirely positive or has it created new stereotypes which must be challenged?

4. Have students compare The Boxer with Richard Hunt’s Hero Construction (see pages 61–63). Consider materials, production, and choice of subject matter. Do both sculptures depict heroes? As a creative writing exercise, have students imagine a conversation between the two sculptures; what would the boxer and the hero say to one another about their battles and triumphs?