



Many Mansions Project

Kerry James Marshall

Volunteer:

Date:

Grade Level:

Artist: Kerry James Marshall

Print/Sculpture: Many Mansions

Art Vocabulary:

foreground: part of the view nearest to viewer

graffiti-markings: initials, slogans, drawings, written, spray-painted or sketched on a sidewalk, wall of building, public restroom, train cars, etc.

stereotypes: a standardized conception or image held in common and members of a group

Kerry James
Marshall



I The Artist: Kerry James Marshall

Marshall grew up in housing projects (Birmingham, Los Angeles, Chicago). He was present for important moments of the Civil Rights Movement. He dreamed of being an artist in kindergarten while looking at his teacher's scrapbook – he wanted to paint magical pictures. He did a series of “Garden Projects” paintings to juxtapose the some time harsh stereotypes of life in the projects with his own good experience.

II The Painting: Many Mansions

III Composition of Artwork

Projects often named after gardens but never resemble them. Combines the real and the imaginary. Stark, angular shapes of the projects, menacing cloud, graffiti, banner slogan – express complications of living in public housing versus bright splashes of color, sun, trimmed trees, green grass, playground, well-dressed men and East baskets – represent hope and joy of residents.

IV Artist's Materials or Techniques

Acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas. Foreground is the focus of figures working to improve their community. Figures are pure black because “we identify ourselves as black.” Is anyone really “black” or “white?”

V Students' Self-Expression: Guided Activity

A Discuss the aspects of life in your community, then go to a multi-purpose room and

make three large banners:

Background elements: water tower, scout cabin, river, swinging bridge, railroad tracks, trees.

Foreground elements: Kids planting the reading garden at Central School, picking up trash, a swan pond.

Materials: Large rolls of paper, tempera paint, old birthday cards to cut up for collage, birthday paper, ribbons.

B. 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?

C. 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, often 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).

3/24/00

Many Mansions.

We created "bio poetry", see attached.

Discussion of visual arts vs.
performing arts.

Great discussion of a complex
piece of art.

S. Deems - Dhuly

Our people of Many Mansions...

African Americans, well dressed, wearing fancy clothing,

Who wander in the garden, smelling all different kinds of flowers,

Wishing to work in the garden,

Dreaming of happiness and peace,

Wanting to make a good home for themselves,

Wanting to create a beautiful garden for our people,

Who fear dying,

Who fear the destruction of their home,

Who are afraid of having the mansions fall on them,

Who are afraid of vandals,

Who believe in creative gardening,

Who believe they are working hard,

Who like to plant gardens,

Who plan to water and care for our flowers,

Who love nature and doing garden work with flowers,

Who love being there,

Who wonder what the future will be for our children.

Created by Miss Storts' 4th grade class, 3/24/00

Bio Poetry

Bio Poetry gives basic information about a person in a poetic form. Notice the pattern.

Becky

Loving,
Trustworthy,
Loyal,

Wishes to fly like a bird,

Dreams of making peace in the world,

Wants to heal the sick and poor.

Who wonders what lies beyond the stars.

Who fears war.

Who is afraid of famine.

Who likes boys with blond, wavy hair.

Who believes in God.

Who loves rice and fortune cookies.

Who loves to play volleyball.

Who loves school, especially math.

Who loves soft tacos with only meat and cheese.

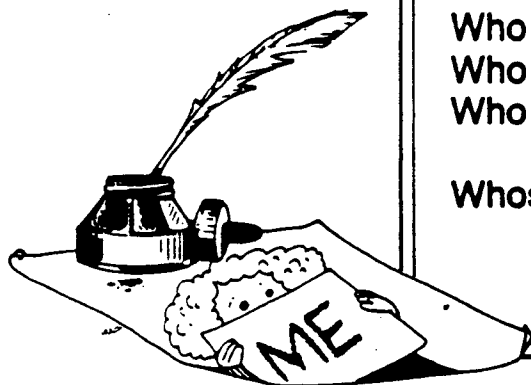
Who plans to be a missionary

Who plans to be a faithful wife.

Who plans to live the good life.

Whose final destination is heaven.

Becky Jasper



Suggestions:

This poetry can be greatly altered to fit your style. You may wish to begin phrases with such words as: who hates to, who feels good, who feels scared, who needs, who would like to see, much loved by, sibling of, etc. Notice that the lines have an artistic style in the way they are placed on the page. This is an important part of poetry writing, too. Try to have at least twenty lines so that your poem is interesting and complete.

The Pattern

Becky

Loving,
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Who loves soft tacos with only meat and cheese.

Who plans to be a missionary

Who plans to be a faithful wife.

Who plans to live the good life.

Whose final destination is heaven.

the name

three adjectives

wishes to

dreams of

wants to

who wonders

who fears

who is afraid of

who likes

who believes

who loves

who plans

closing line

Bio Poetry

_____, _____, _____

Wishes to _____

Dreams of _____

Wants to _____

Who wonders _____

Who fears _____

Who is afraid of _____

Who likes _____

Who believes _____

Who loves _____

Who loves _____

Who loves _____

Who loves _____

Who plans _____

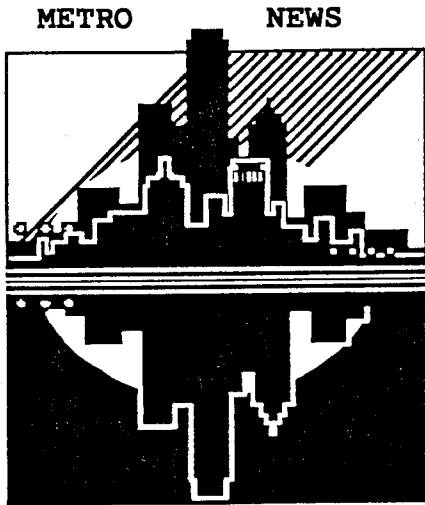
Who plans _____

Who plans _____

WRITING EXERCISE

Kerry James Marshall's Many Mansions

Pretend you are a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. You heard there were a group of young men who were planting a beautiful garden in the middle of the city. What questions would you ask them? How do you think they would respond? Write a short article below.



Slide 9

Kerry James Marshall (American, b. 1955)
Many Mansions, 1994
Acrylic and collage on canvas
Max V. Kohnstamm Fund, 1995.147

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 says, "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 painting, 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 which 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 the beautiful flowers.

SLIDE TWENTY



KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

American, b. 1955

Many Mansions, 1994

Acrylic and collage on canvas
(114 x 135 in.)

Max V. Kohnstamm Fund,
1995.147



“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.

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 gold 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 Easterbasket 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

* designates entry in
Biographical Glossary

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

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.

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.

Figure 23.
Kerry James Marshall.
Scout Series,
Campfire Girls,
1995. Acrylic on canvas.
Jack Shainman Gallery.

MANY MANSIONS

Kerry James Marshall (American - 1994)

Acrylic and collage on canvas

The information contained in this folder was obtained from a workshop for volunteers at the Art Institute pertaining to social studies curricula and the arts. This particular painting was highlighted in a discussion about “community”. It is probably the most recently painted work in our collection.

Kerry James Marshall had first-hand experience with housing projects in various sections of the U.S. His portrayal here of a Chicago housing project provides a wonderful launching point for a discussion of the concept of “community”. Marshall is able to capture both the joy and despair of life in the projects and challenges to think about common elements and the differences between this kind of environment and our own.

Please review the enclosed material and also see the file “Self, Family, and Community” for further information and a slide of the work, if you care to use it.

III. Community

Key issues to address with students:

- different roles within a community
- differences in communities: around the corner and around the world
- sharing and cooperating
- accountability: rules and responsibilities

Additional works in the Art Institute that relate to the concept of community (gallery numbers subject to change):

different roles within a community

- Anonymous (American), *Country Preacher*, 1861-1890, gallery 182
- Joan Miró (Spanish), *The Policeman*, 1925, gallery 244
- *Gun Capturer's Shirt*, Crow, Lent by the Foundation for the Preservation of American Indian Art and Culture, 1890-1900, gallery 127.

differences in communities

- Archibald J. Motley, Jr. (American), *Nightlife*, 1943, gallery 247
- Edward Hopper (American), *Nighthawks*, 1942, gallery 247
- *Royal Altar Tusk* (African, Nigerian), mid-19th century, gallery 14

sharing and cooperating

- *Bedcover* (American), 1942, rotated with other textiles in gallery 57.
- *Rhyton (Drinking Vessel) in the Shape of a Donkey Head*, Greek, c. 460 B.C.E., gallery 155
- Peter Blume (American), *The Rock*, 1944-48, gallery 238B

accountability

- Eastman Johnson (American), *Husking Bee, Island of Nantucket*, 1876, gallery 171
- Armor (European), gallery 140
- Auguste Rodin (French), *A Burgher of Calais*, 1889, gallery 200

Taken from the teaching packet *Self, Family and Community*. Available through the Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center at The Art Institute of Chicago.