

**African-American Murals
Handout #1**

First → Go to the "[Faces on the Wall](http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/wallofrespect/main.htm)" (<http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/wallofrespect/main.htm>) section of the Wall of Respect website and explore it by completing this chart. **Choose one figure from each section of the mural and study his/her biographical information. Use the chart below to record data about each person you studied.**

Name	DOB/DOD	Occupation	Important Facts to Know

African-American Murals Handout #3

Aspects of Negro Life: Slavery Through Reconstruction (p.49) by Aaron Douglas, 1934.

This mural is composed of three sections covering the periods from slavery through Reconstruction. From left to right, the first section depicts the slaves' doubts and uncertainty transformed into exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. The third section shows the departure of the Union soldiers from the South and the onslaught of the Klan that followed.

Building More Stately Mansions (p. 55) by Aaron Douglas, 1944

I take the title from the "The Chambered Nautilus" by Oliver Wendell Holmes. The central idea in this design is the progression of cultures and civilizations from the dawn of recorded history to the present. Each new generation can and must look back on, face up to, and learn from the greatness, the weaknesses and failures of our past with the firm assurance that the strength and courage certain to arise from such an honest and dutiful approach to our problems will continue to carry us on to new and higher levels of achievement.

Black Women Emerging (p. 75) by Justine DeVan and Mitchell Caton, 1977.

Three dimensions of an African American woman's life: on the left, her historical ties to Africa; in the center, her professional aspirations; and on the right, the home and her role as a mother.

Wall of Meditation (p. 67) by Eugene Wade, 1970.

Thoughts of the past and present: Egyptian figures on the left, involved in cultural pursuits, are balanced on the right by a militant Black Panther and others breaking out of their chains.

The Contribution of Negro Women to American Life and Education (p. 60 & 61) by John Biggers, 1953.

Masculine society had been inclined to place woman in a minority role; yet in the history of our country, no more heroic work has been done than that performed by woman. She has not only organized the family, but has had to lead in struggles to build a society in which the family could grow. She has been the leader in public, rural, and informal education. In depicting the contributions of Negro women, it was but natural that those should first be known who were interested in the struggle for freedom. Notable were Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

African-American Murals Handout #3

No attempt has been made to include every character in the mural, but to symbolize through two main characters the sociological, historical, and educational contributions of Negro women to American life and education. The right side represents slavery, out of which Harriet Tubman leads people...the Tree of Life embraces the balance of the mural, depicting progress in education, science, music, and healthful living, with Sojourner Truth as the pioneer teacher. The search for knowledge in a free society becomes available to the old and young, men and women, as symbolized by the old man reading by [lamplight]. The contributions of a third woman, Phyllis Wheatley, appears in the [depiction of] the book being read by the mother [to her child]. All of that embraced by the Tree of Life is in contrast to the hopelessness expressed in the figures at the far right.

The church on each side symbolizes the spiritual background of those women who have maintained leadership roles in our society.

**African-American Murals
Handout #4**

- 1) How does the size of an image relate to its power?

- 2) What symbols seem to represent power and why?

- 3) Do any of the images represent more than individual identity?

- 4) Do attire, adornment or facial expressions show power?

- 5) How do multiple figures enhance the portrayal of power?

- 6) What, if any, conflicts are portrayed within the murals?

The Edo Peoples Handout #5

From the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art website:

According to local court histories and the accounts of early-17th century Dutch travelers, the oba or king of Benin covered the piers of his palace courtyard with hundreds of plaques such as this. As a sheer display of wealth and power, this act would rival covering the White House with gold from Fort Knox. But more than excess, it reveals aspects of artistic technique, local history and a society in which art was essential. Today, some 900 plaques survive in public and private collections, but there is no documentation to indicate how they once were arranged on the palace walls. After 1700, travelers' accounts do not mention the plaques, and an 1897 British military force found them in a palace storehouse.

In the early 1600s, a Dutch report described the royal palace of the Benin court as having "beautiful and long square galleries . . . one larger than another resting on wooden pillars . . . covered with cast copper . . . pictures of their war exploits and battles." Allowing for damage, they are relatively uniform in size and shape. While some plaques show scenes, such as battles and hunts, and others hierarchical multiple figures, many have one or two male figures in court regalia. They depict members of the royal court in the proper trappings for different ceremonies. The leopard is a symbol of the oba. Warriors wear bells into battle to invoke the spiritual protection of the reigning oba of Benin and his predecessors and to strike fear into the enemy. Figures with weapons often are called "warriors," figures with regalia are termed "courtiers," but both depict members of the royal court in the proper trappings for different ceremonies.

Benin art served as both a sign of status and a record of court life. The oba, nobles, officials and attendants were depicted on various objects, including plaques. Costumes and regalia indicated their relative position in the court hierarchy. According to early accounts, horsetail headdresses symbolized military authority and were worn by war chiefs. Fanning out in low relief behind the heads, the horsetail is sculpted in a manner similar to Benin depictions of European hair or the fins and tails of the mudfish, a symbolically significant animal. Both Europeans and the mudfish are associated with Olokun, the god of the waters and bringer of wealth. Benin art emphasizes patterns and texture; empty space is avoided. A background pattern of quatrefoil "river leaves" is typical of most Benin plaques. Symbolically the background design is another reference to Olokun, who is linked with the oba and wealth, and to the oba's monopoly on foreign trade. This recurring emphasis on wealth and foreign trade leads back to the most basic and blatant of symbols, the metal itself. The most obvious effect of Benin's overseas trade with Europe was a dramatic increase in the availability of copper and brass. European ingots and imported metal trade goods provided the raw material that was transformed into royal Benin art by metal casters who worked solely for the oba.

