

# *Spirit Sister*

Lesson plans for viewing the work by artist Nelson Stevens



50/45

SPIRIT SISTER

2013

Nelson Stevens

*“I create from the rhythmic color-rappin-life-style of Black folk. I believe that art can breathe life, and life is what we are about.”*

*“At my best, I am the hope and the dream of the enslaved, dedicated to following my calling to create visions of a liberated self.”*

— Nelson Stevens

**Conversations with African American Art**

On exhibition January 5 - February 28, 2024

Artists' Cooperative Gallery of Westerly,  
44 Railroad Avenue, Westerly, RI

Wednesday – Saturday, 11 a.m. – 7 p.m.  
Sunday, 1-5 p.m.

Opening Receptions, 5-8 p.m.  
Friday, January 5, 2024  
Friday, February 2, 2024

On exhibition: A selection of pieces of the Bill and Paula Alice Mitchell Collection of African-American Art, selected and interpreted by Westerly ARC members April Dinwoodie, Leslie Dunn, and Kevin Lowther.

Free and open to the public.

Visit our website for more information and lesson plans:

<https://westerlyarc.weebly.com/arc-art-exhibit>

This lesson plan was created by Tim Flanagan for the Westerly ARC exhibit “Conversations with African American Art.” The plan follows Lincoln Center Education’s Learning Framework: *The Capacities for Imaginative Thinking*.

**WESTERLY ARC**

**ANTI-RACISM COALITION**

Embracing multiculturalism to educate,  
engage, and empower our community

WESTERLYARC.WEEBLY.COM

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The Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition, is a community coalition unaffiliated with any state, national, or international organization. ARC embraces multiculturalism to address racism. Join our weekly gatherings on the steps of the Westerly Post Office each Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Learn more and subscribe to ARC’s newsletter at [westerlyarc.weebly.com](https://westerlyarc.weebly.com). Contact us at [westerlyarc@gmail.com](mailto:westerlyarc@gmail.com).

# Spirit Sister

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## Line of Inquiry

In *Spirit Sister*, how does Nelson Stevens combine color and lines to create depth and evoke a sense of pride?

## Student Learning Goals

### [National Core Art Standards](#)

- Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.
- Additional subject-specific goals for English language arts, social studies, or other areas will depend on which post-viewing lessons are developed.

## Grade Level

“Spirit Sister” can be adapted for elementary, middle, or high school.

## Capacities for Imaginative Thinking

Notice deeply  
Pose questions  
Make connections  
Empathize

## Teacher Preparation

Teachers using the lessons in this series should familiarize themselves with topics that may come up during these student-centered lessons.

It is important to be prepared to have conversations about race and racism while considering the various identities of students and their needs. The resources below have specific suggestions for preparing teachers and their students for these conversations.

Fostering Civil Discourse (Facing History & Ourselves)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m7lrg90w0fug6lcLCJq60-0cKcBv2VTT/view?usp=sharing>

How Should I Talk about Race in My Mostly White Classroom? (ADL)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MZ7FWvzHrbAnTLsX5Y2Vu91vpqGloCi/view?usp=sharing>

Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students (Learning for Justice)

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>

Preparing for a Conversation about Policing and Racial Injustice (Facing History & Ourselves)

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/preparing-conversation-about-policing-racial-injustice>

Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism (ADL)

<https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/race-talk-engaging-young-people-conversations-about-race-and-racism>

Talking about Race (National Museum of African American History and Culture)

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/audiences/educator>

Toolkit for Talking About Racism and Police Violence with Students (Learning for Justice)

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2015/toolkit-for-talking-about-racism-and-police-violence-with-students>

## Attention to Safe Spaces

It is important to consider how students of color might be impacted by conversations about race as well as by the works of art. Some of the works of art in these lessons and in the exhibit contain racist language and images and can trigger strong emotions. Teachers should intentionally curate spaces that will create the conditions for all students to feel as safe as possible with particular attention paid to students who might not be comfortable with the works of art or the conversations during the lessons. Teachers should also prepare for possible feelings of discomfort and defensiveness on the part of white students while learning about racial inequality and injustice. With this in mind it is important that as educators you are also listening to what may be activating in you as you prepare for these lessons.

## Pre-Viewing Lesson: Proud Poses

Note: Suggested times are given for each portion of the lesson, but these can vary widely depending on how deep you go into the concepts. This could be completed over one class period or extended to more class periods as time allows.

### **Warm-Up:** (5 minutes)

Display for students the close-up image from the work of art

(<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1kIWWwx6qNLuIU4aqUtCNNxDk5LHcQtPLOtm47Muukl/edit?usp=sharing>; also below)

Ask students to quickly list what they notice. Discuss their responses. Continue the discussion by asking why the artist might use so many colors, how the image makes them feel, and what effect the lines might have.

### **Activity 1: Proud Poses** (15 minutes)

Ask students to brainstorm how to make a pose in a way that makes them look proud. Gather some quick ideas from students.

Have students work with a partner to practice poses that show that they are proud. Ask each pair to choose to be Partner A or Partner B. Students should spread out around the room to practice their poses.

After about five minutes of practicing, ask all students to be silent for the next part of the activity. Once everyone is silent, tell students who are Partner A to make their Proud Pose and stay frozen in that position. Students who are Partner B will have one minute to scan the room (without leaving their spot) to observe the poses. Then reverse roles and have Partner B pose while Partner A observes for one minute.

Have a discussion about what students observed. Which poses evoked the most pride? What made them look proud?

### **Activity 2: Complete the Image** (30 minutes)

Print and make copies of the coloring sheet

([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Xk-ySkhuYtEIAG8ZanYDXv0\\_U2nFPQAU/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Xk-ySkhuYtEIAG8ZanYDXv0_U2nFPQAU/view?usp=sharing); also attached below), one for each student. Tell students that this came from an actual work of art, but it has been modified. Have students describe what they see, focusing on the various lines, shapes, and lack of color.

Tell students they will add color and lines to complete the image. They can add another half (whether they see a face or not), but should also focus on adding more lines and coloring in the image.

Remind students that they are not trying to recreate an image that they haven't seen, but to use color and lines to make their own image.

Set a specific amount of time for the activity; tell students that they might not finish. Encourage them to work quickly and not worry about making something beautiful or complete - it will be a work in progress.

Once the allotted time is up, have each student display their work of art. Have students go on a silent gallery walk by visiting each piece and jotting down what they notice and any questions they have.

Lead a whole-class discussion on what students noticed about the works of art. Discuss how the different ways students use lines and color impact each piece.

### **Closing**

Exit slip (or turn and talk to a partner): What questions do you have about the work of art you are going to view?

## Contextual Information

### **Nelson Stevens** (1938-2022)

Share all or some of this information either before or after viewing the work of art.

Excerpts from: <https://springfieldmuseums.org/exhibitions/nelson-stevens-color-rapping/>

Nelson Stevens (American, 1938-2022), an artist and educator, is renowned for creating powerful, rhythmic compositions that celebrate Black life and reveal his technical mastery of the figure. His works can be found in private collections and public museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago and Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

An early member of AfriCOBRA (the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), and a professor at Northern Illinois University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Stevens spent decades alongside leading intellectuals of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. His experiences contributed to a legacy of vivid works that amplify African American culture and achievements.

~

*"Unafraid. Unapologetic. Black-centric. It is not an easy task to paint Black people without using the color brown. These people were unmistakably Black folks, and there is nary brown inside, which is pretty incredible."*

— Nadya Stevens, daughter of Nelson Stevens



## Viewing the Work of Art: Analyzing *Spirit Sister*

Preferably, students will view the actual work of art. If this is possible, consider dividing the class in half to have the discussion about the art. If viewing the work in person is not possible, the teacher can project an image of it for the students in class or share a link to the work of art:

<https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/spirit-sister>

As you view the work of art with students, lead them in a discussion. Choose questions from below to help your students describe, analyze and interpret the work of art. Encourage multiple interpretations and ask students to provide evidence for their interpretation.

**Describe:** Open questions that elicit pure noticing.

**A few examples:**

- What do you notice?
- What do you see?
- How would you describe . . . “

**Analyze:** Open questions that ask the students to analyze various aspects of the work.

**A few examples:**

- What relationships do you notice among the elements?
- What do you see
  - that is similar;
  - that is different;
  - that is a pattern?
- How is the work of art put together?
- What patterns or relationships do you identify in the work of art?
- What questions do you have?

**Interpret:** Open questions that help us find our own meaning in the work of art after considering our responses to the prior descriptions and analyses.

**A few examples:**

- What connections do you make
  - to your life?
  - to your world?
  - to things you have read?
  - to things you are studying in school?
- What do you think is going on in the work of art? What is it about?
- What ideas was the artist trying to convey in this work of art?
- What does it mean? What does it mean to you?
- Does it represent something? If yes, what?
- Does the work of art evoke any emotions? What does it express?
- If this work of art is a metaphor for something - what might it be?

Questions come from Lincoln Center Education materials which were adapted from:  
Weitze, Morris, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1956): 27-35.



## Post-Viewing: Reflecting, Art-Making, Celebrating

### Activity 1: Comparing Works of Art (Think, Pair, Share)

Ask students to silently compare the drawing they made in the pre-viewing lesson to the actual work of art. What are the differences they notice in lines, color, feeling, meaning, and more? Next, have students pair up and discuss what they noticed. Finally, have a brief class discussion where students can share their comments.

### Activity 2: Art-Making Explorations

Use as many classes as time allows to develop post-viewing activities for your subject area. Incorporate concepts and vocabulary students have learned from exploring the work of art. Below are some ideas for developing lessons and activities in specific areas.

#### Social Studies/English Language Arts

- Nelson Stevens was part of the AfriCOBRA movement, artists who focused on uniting the African diaspora and who used their art to create change in their communities. Research the AfriCOBRA movement. Find out more about the characteristics of the art that was created. Create a slideshow of AfriCOBRA works of art with some details about what you have learned.
- Spend more time examining *Spirit Sister*, noticing as much as you can. Write a poem inspired by the work of art. Some ideas for topics for your poem: How the art makes you feel; What you would say to the woman in the image; Connections between the work of art and your life.

#### Arts

- View more of Nelson Stevens' work online and notice how he used lines and colors to add depth and emotion to each piece. Much of his work focuses on a single person. Think of a subject for your own work of art to create in the style of Nelson Stevens. What emotion do you want to convey about the subject? Sketch out some ideas and create a piece inspired by the style of Nelson Stevens.
- Serigraph printing, also known as silk screening, uses stencils and multiple colors of ink that are pressed through a screen one at a time to create the image. Find out more about serigraph printing and use materials available in your classroom to imitate the process as much as possible.

### Final Lesson: Celebrating Student Work

Be sure to save time to celebrate student work while reflecting on what was learned in this unit.

## About the Work of Art

Nelson Stevens (1938-2022); American

### ***Spirit Sister***

2013

Hand pulled serigraph on paper

Collection of Bill and Paula Alice Mitchell

*Black is not a monolith. It is many things, many colors. How do you see us? Black is not the absence of anything. It is a multitude.*

— Kevin Lowther II

This serigraph print was created by Nelson Stevens in collaboration with master printmaker Dr. Curlee Raven Holton. From the outset, both the print and the original acrylic painting, titled *Sister Spirit*, portray fellow artist Valerie Maynard (1937-2022). Maynard and Stevens were friends and colleagues, working and studying together at the Studio Museum of Harlem in the 1970s.

*Spirit Sister* grabs and holds the viewer's attention through the use of primary colors and perspective. Stevens' perception of Maynard's face is not from the point of view of another adult, but rather that of a child gazing upwards. She is to be held in high regard, deserving of the viewer's respect.

Note:

Meet printmaker Curlee Raven Holton and hear his talk, "Below the Surface: An African American Story in Printmaking" at the Westerly Library.

Saturday, February 17, 2024, 1:30-3:30 pm

## Additional Resources

Nelson Stevens, "Spirit Sister" (2013): <https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/spirit-sister>

Nelson Stevens - Artworks: <https://www.artsy.net/artist/nelson-stevens>

'The 60s were devastating' - AfriCOBRA's Nelson Stevens on art and activism: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/aug/29/the-60s-were-devastating-africobras-nelson-stevens-on-art-and-activism>

Artist Nelson Stevens: <https://youtu.be/2GKRhYGvPRc?si=cTQTSxf0f0B8pZj8>

The Making of a Serigraph Print: [https://youtu.be/TSkTjb\\_Wmxo](https://youtu.be/TSkTjb_Wmxo)

Mural Map – Nelson Stevens – Color Rapping: <https://nelsonstevens.com/murals/>

A Brief History of AfriCOBRA - Swann Galleries News: <https://www.swannalleries.com/news/african-american-art/2020/04/africobra/>

'Unafraid. Unapologetic. Black-centric': Nelson Stevens finally getting his due: <https://www.nepm.org/regional-news/2023-06-13/unafraid-unapologetic-black-centric-nelson-stevens-finally-getting-his-due>

## Acknowledgments

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Teaching Materials



