

Lesson Plan:
Jazz-Inspired Collages
Inspired by the Work of Sam Gilliam



Sam Gilliam, *Manet*, 1998, color woodcut with hand-coloring and collage on handmade paper, 17.5 x 23". Gift of the Madison Print Club.

Sam Gilliam (1933-2022) was inspired by jazz musicians such as Miles Davis and John Coltrane in their use of improvisation. He used this concept to create his collages such as, *Manet*, pictured above. In creating this piece, he experimented with different types of mark-making to create layers of texture. He then cut up the pieces of paper that he painted and arranged them in a quilt-like pattern, inspired by traditional African American quilts that were abundant in his childhood.

In this lesson, students will learn about the artist, Sam Gilliam, Gilliam's collage work, the concept of improvisation in relation to jazz and art, and themes of

experimentation. Students will create abstract collages using improvised mark-making inspired by the work of Sam Gilliam and one of his sources of inspiration, jazz.

Objective

Students will investigate different mark-making techniques and create abstract collages using Sam Gilliam's work and jazz improvisation as sources of inspiration.

Vocabulary

Jazz: a type of music of African American origin that emerged in the 1920s; characterized by improvisation, syncopation, and usually a regular or forced rhythm

Improvisation: something that is created or performed spontaneously and without preparation

Mark making: marks that are made while creating art including dots, lines, textures, and patterns varying from loose and gestural to controlled and neat

Collage: a piece of art that uses pieces of paper, photographs, fabric, and/or other ephemera that are rearranged and stuck down on a surface

Experimentation: in art, this is a process that involves testing and discovering without knowing what the outcome will be

Abstract art: artwork that is not easily recognizable and can be interpreted in various ways

Composition: the way that an artist decides to organize an artwork's distinct parts in order to make a cohesive whole

Materials

- Paper (white or color construction paper)
- Paint
- Paint brushes and alternative mark-making tools (such as toothpicks, droppers, Q-tips, cotton swabs, bubble wrap for stamping, etc.)
- Water & water cups
- Scissors
- Glue
- Paper towels or rags

Preparation

1. Introduce students to Sam Gilliam's college works such as *Manet* (1998), *Ichi* (1994), and *Pantheon* (1983) using visual inquiry. Ask the students questions such as:
 - a. What do you first notice about these collages?
 - b. How do these collages make you feel? Do they seem to capture a certain emotion or mood?
 - c. How do you think these collages were made?
 - d. What do you think might have inspired these collages?
2. Teach the students about jazz music and improvisation and how Sam Gilliam used these as a source of inspiration. Show students different forms of mark-making and explain what mark-making means.
3. Explain to the students how they will be making their own collages inspired by jazz improvisation and Sam Gilliam's collages by using experimental mark-making on several sheets of paper, cutting them into geometric shapes, and gluing them into a composition.

Methods

1. Organize supplies and have students set up their work areas.
2. Provide each student with three (or more) sheets of paper, a pair of scissors, and glue. Provide each table with water cups, paper towels, paint, paint brushes, and various mark making tools. Students may make their own mark making tools if they wish.
3. Have students paint on each sheet of paper and encourage them to try unconventional mark making to create patterns and textures. Feel free to play the music of Miles Davis and John Coltrane while the students are working for inspiration.
4. Give students a five-minute warning before moving on to the next step so they can finish up their mark-making.
5. Have students cut two out of the three pieces of paper into geometric shapes. The students will arrange the shapes onto the uncut piece of paper and glue down those pieces. Remind students to think about their composition as they improvise.

Reflection

1. Have each student present their work and talk about the choices they made while improvising.
2. Ask the students about how they felt to create a piece of artwork without a plan in mind. Ask them what they thought about this artistic process.

Variations

- If paint is too messy, you can also do this project using drawing materials such as colored pencils, markers, and crayons.
- Consider using a hair dryer to speed up the drying process or split up the activity into two days – painting and then collaging. If unable to speed up the drying process or if you are short on time, consider using different materials such as crayons, ink, tempera paint sticks, or markers.
- To add a three-dimensional aspect, consider doing the same methods but with cardboard paper. Relate these three-dimensional collages to Sam Gilliam’s plywood pieces such as *Daily Red*.