

# **The Life and Work of Dox Thrash: An Expression of Identity**

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## **Overview**

This curriculum unit will highlight the artwork and career of Dox Thrash. Dox Thrash was an African American printmaker who worked and lived in Philadelphia before, during and after the era of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Students will be able to connect historical events as they learn about his life, the impact his work had on the art world and the viewing public, and how his art reflected time and place in American culture.

The unit will be taught to middle school students in seventh and eighth grades, but can be adapted to high school levels. In my current teaching environment, class sizes vary from 33 to 27 students per classroom. Students will learn about Dox Thrash by studying examples of his artwork and researching the social, political and cultural climate in America during his lifetime. Students will learn about the carborundum mezzotint, a printmaking technique developed in 1937 by Dox Thrash, fellow printmaker Hugh Mesibov, and workshop supervisor Michael Gallagher at the Philadelphia Federal Arts Project Graphics Workshop. Students will also be introduced to prints made by other visual artists working in Philadelphia, Chicago and New York during the 1930's and 40's on a variety of Federal Art Projects budgeted through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and compare their work and printmaking styles to the work and methods of Dox Thrash. During the unit study, students will examine a collection of prints, learn how to differentiate between printmaking techniques, identify the steps in the printmaking process, and explain how printmakers draw, design, build, carve, cut out and register their work. A studio art project will serve to illustrate the printmaking process by requiring students learn how to apply a variety of printmaking techniques to achieve a desired effect and create their own art prints.

## **Rationale**

Through his sensitive portrayal of people, place, and moments in time, Dox Thrash tenderly depicted the effects of racism and prejudice on its victims. In his art, he revealed the dignified effort of African Americans as they met challenges posed by an often-intolerant society. Thrash's life and work are examples of how the voice of an artist can have visual impact, how that voice can inform by directing focus on people and the events that shape their lives, ultimately creating change. By studying the life and work of Dox Thrash, we can learn about a vibrant and turbulent time in the history of the United States and pursue an inquiry into the efforts of one man as he sought to reflect the African American community and achieve social justice through his art.

I am the art specialist at an urban middle school, in which approximately 98% of the student body is African American with 85% coming from low-income families. The administration actively encourages the integration of the arts with the core curriculum linking reading, mathematics, history/social studies and science to artistic endeavor and creative expression. Teachers meet regularly to coordinate the instruction of curriculum requirements across subjects and the introduction of topics of special interest. As the Art Specialist, I strongly advocate the use of a hands-on approach to engage students in their own creativity and foster a connection with culture, history and tradition. I motivate students to develop a deeper understanding of their own culture and other world cultures through a study of the arts. I strive to involve my students in art investigations that connect traditional art forms and techniques with contemporary applications. In my studio art classes, I emphasize group cooperation in tandem with the development of personal expression.

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I was offered an opportunity to work with a dynamic fabric artist, Betty Leacraft. Betty and I were introduced to each other by Edward Epstein, the instructor of this TIP seminar and director of the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Artist-in-Residence Program in West Philadelphia. Betty's artistry, her residency at 40th Street, my interest in fabric arts traditions and my work with the Teachers Institute at the University of Pennsylvania inspired our partnership. Our collaboration sought to introduce, explore and connect African myth, folklore, identity and history through the study of traditional African textiles, garments, accessories and masks. During each workshop session, Betty displayed fabric artwork from her personal collection, explained the techniques used and the history of each particular art form. She then demonstrated the techniques that the students would experiment with during each session. The students embraced the activity of making fabric art. Their sense of confidence and ease with materials grew with each session as they learned and experimented with new fabric design techniques. As a result of this collaboration of cultures and ideas, students successfully developed individual and paired artwork and experienced positive interaction with one another through a unified work effort on two large-scale projects. To

commemorate their positive effort the student artwork was exhibited at 40<sup>th</sup> Street AIRSPACE, a gallery associated with the 40<sup>th</sup> Street Artist-in-Residence Program.

In the late spring of 2007, my students and I were given an opportunity to work with Christopher Hartshorne, an innovative woodcut printmaker and artist in residence at 40<sup>th</sup> Street AIRSPACE. The purpose of the workshop was to explore potential teaching techniques for the Dox Thrash project. I introduced the subject of printmaking, and then Christopher used his work to illustrate a variety of printmaking methods, giving students step-by-step instructions on how to use those techniques. Students then applied what they learned to make their own prints. The printmaking workshop took place during school hours and involved a small group of sixteen 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

In the workshop, we explored two printmaking methods: collagraph and relief prints. To make a collagraph, or a collage print, the printing plate was built up with shapes cut from cardboard, foam plates and tag board. The materials were glued to the surface of the printing plate to create an image or a design. String or cord of varied weight was also be used to create outlined shapes and texture. Christopher and I sealed the surface of the students constructed plates with glue prior to inking so that the students would have multiple opportunities to print from the same plate. To learn about relief prints, the students first practiced by drawing directly on a foam meat tray and then transferred what they learned to drawing on a Scratch Foam Board printing plate. By pressing the drawing implement (pencil, pen, or blunted nail) into the foam plate, students formed a depression in the surface of the printing plate. When inked the depressed lines and areas revealed the color of the paper, while the remaining raised surface printed the ink color. We also experimented with woodcut and linocut techniques to produce relief prints. The students were fascinated with reverse images, cutting into the wood and linoleum. Of course, it is advisable to consider whether woodcut or linocut is a viable printmaking process to explore in your school environment. Due to the required sharpness of the tools, the potential for injury, and unpredictable teenage behavior, I determined that I would only teach this printmaking technique if I could limit the number of students to a group of 16 - 18, and if I have qualified supervisory assistance from another adult.

The process of experimenting with several printmaking methods, described above, will lead students into an exploration of the art of Dox Thrash and his extraordinary life. This hands-on introduction to printmaking will serve as a foundation to promote student interest in a study of the artist and his work. They will return to printmaking activities after they consider how Thrash presented his thoughts, feelings, observations, and experiences in his art.

Dox Thrash: A reflection of his life and work

Dox Thrash was born on March 22, in 1892 or 1893, to Gus and Ophelia Thrash in Griffin, Georgia. Dox was the second oldest of four children. The Thrash family lived in a cabin formerly used by slaves near the outer edge of their country town. (Ittmann 1) Thrash would use his memory of his childhood home when he created a series of prints of rustic cabins, small family farms and rural churches. (Ittmann 1) The people and settings that Thrash brought to life in his art reveal a poor community fortified by family, friends, and religion.

Although Thrash dropped out of school after fourth grade, possibly to work as unskilled labor on a local farm, by age fourteen it is documented that he was beginning his art studies through correspondence courses. (Ittmann 1) In an interview with a Philadelphia reporter some years later, Thrash said, "I always wanted to be an artist, even when I was touring the plantation circuit in a dance-and-patter act with a fellow name of Whistling Rufus." (Ittmann 1)

In 1908, at age fifteen, Thrash left his rural Georgia home to travel north, continuing his art studies. He arrived in Chicago by 1911. In a conversation with Jacob Kainen on October 7, 1948, Thrash commented, "At fifteen [I] began to travel through out the country doing odd jobs. My ambition to be an artist caused me to settle in Chicago." (Ittmann 146) Thrash benefited from opportunities in Chicago for "promising artists of color." (Ittmann1) He lived in Chicago off and on for nearly twelve years where he took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. (Ittmann 1)

In September of 1917, Thrash joined the United States Army and served as a private in the 365<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 183<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 92<sup>nd</sup> Division of the American Expeditionary Forces, also known as the Buffalo Soldiers. (Ittmann 1) Thrash was wounded during the final hours of World War I while engaged in France. He returned to the United States with the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division and within months resettled in Chicago to continue his studies in art. (Ittmann 2) According to the artist:

After my art education was completed, I was lured back to the open road, hobo-ing, working part the time on odd jobs. Such as, bell boy, dining car waiter, private car porter, massager in bathhouses, black face comedian in carnivals, small town circuses, and vaudevilles. With the idea of observing, drawing and painting the people of America. Especially the "Negro".

Finally I landed in Boston and lived there for a year. Soon I faded out of the picture, and was not heard from for two years... I came out and decided I had enough study of nature to carry me along. I came to New York City, and remained there for a year. Later departed from New York, for another cross-country journey but did [not] get any further than Philadelphia, and have remained here ever since. (Ittmann5)

Thrash remembered himself as having “settled in Philadelphia in 1925.”(Ittmann 5) His name was listed in a Philadelphia directory in 1929, “as “Dock Thrash, janitor” at 2409 Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue) in North Philadelphia.” (Ittmann 5) Thrash lived at this address until the 1940’s when he married. In a conversation with David Brigham, July 17, 1987, Sam Brown said that he and Thrash shared the space at 2409 Columbia Avenue as a studio after Thrash’s marriage. In 1960, Thrash and Brown moved their studio a short distance to 2313-15 Ridge Avenue. (Ittmann 148)

To establish himself as an artist after he settled in Philadelphia, Thrash sought opportunities to exhibit his work both commercially and in art exhibitions. He enjoyed success as a commercial artist in Philadelphia before he gained recognition for his fine art work. In May of 1930, his poster design was used to advertise the Second Annual National Negro Music Festival held at the Academy of Music. Sometime after 1929, Thrash began studying printmaking with Earl Horter at the Graphic /Sketch Club, known today as the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial. The Graphic Sketch Club was organized as a free art school and exhibition space in 1899. (Ittmann 9) “Thrash probably began to attend classes at the Graphic Sketch Club sometime in 1930. Although he was drawn to the club by the printmaking classes it offered, he may also have wished to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the exhibitions, where he demonstrated that he was an accomplished fine artist fluent in a variety of mediums.” (Ittmann 8) Thrash became involved with the Tra Club of Philadelphia, established by a group of local artists, to locate venues and organize exhibits for their work. The Tra Club exhibited art at the southwest branch of the YWCA at 1605 Catherine Street in Philadelphia. This venue promoted Thrash and his fellow artists to a larger audience in several publicized art exhibitions. (Ittmann 6)

Dox Thrash lived and produced art during a turbulent time in the economic, political and social history of the United States. The Great Migration moved African Americans from the rural south to the industrial north; World War I altered the economic influence and military presence of the United States; and the Harlem Renaissance flourished in New York City and Chicago, followed by the crash of the Stock Market, the onset of the Great Depression, and the introduction of the New Deal. This period in American history led to a revitalized sense of purpose in American Art. Art created by African-Americans in particular gained influence and popularity as a result of increased support through government programs that bridged social, economic and racial barriers. (Messinger 10)

The United States government under Franklin Roosevelt’s leadership directed federal subsidies to the cultural arts through programs imbedded in the New Deal legislation. Artists were supported through two agencies: the Treasury Department sponsored painting and sculpture projects, and the Works Progress Administration funded the Federal Art Project. Both agencies sought “to make art a larger part of American life

and thereby improve the quality of that life. (McKinzie, preface, xi.) Thus, the effort to provide work relief to unemployed artists also impacted the American audience through the production of accessible art for public consumption.

Through the WPA, African American gained access to art resources, time and space to explore their own creative sensibilities, and the means to develop their own style and method of making art. “During the 1930’s and 1940’s, African-American artists were drawn to working on paper...” Drawings, paintings, and prints were inexpensive to produce on paper, and therefore affordable to purchase. The lower cost of buying materials, selling or purchasing works of art on paper, made the graphic art more affordable for the public, thus increasing the exposure of the artist in the public arena. “African Americans were increasingly recognized for their contribution to this field.” (Messinger 10)

In 1937, Thrash joined the Fine Print Workshop, taking a job with the graphics art division of the WPA Federal Art Project. (Ittmann 45) While working for the WPA, he discovered that the properties of carborundum, an industrial product traditionally used to clean and prepare lithographic stones, could be used as a vehicle for producing a print. He found that the substance, “a very hard synthetic abrasive made by fusing coke and sand” could create a pitted surface in a copper plate. The copper plate was then able to retain ink. (Messinger, Mustalish 87) After applying ink, a design or image could be etched, scraped or burnished into the plate. Less time and effort were required to prepare a plate using the carborundum process and the resulting plate offered a more durable textured surface that could be used to produce larger print editions. (Medley-Buckner, 34) Thrash, with fellow artists Hugh Mesibov and Michael Gallagher, developed the carborundum printmaking process between 1937 and 1938. (Messinger, Mustalish 87) This innovative printmaking process was referred to as the carborundum tint, carbograph, or the Opheliagraph, (after Thrash’s mother), and brought Thrash national recognition. (Brigham 27) *The Welder*, an example of Thrash’s use of the carborundum printing process, was produced in the Fine Print Workshop of Philadelphia. The print reflects both the tonal variations available to the artist using the carborundum process and also presents a powerful image of African American involvement in the home front war effort. (Messinger 78, 88)

For artists working in the New Deal programs, realistically rendered narratives and scenes of daily life were the expected forms of expression but, in fact, the administrative agencies placed few restrictions of any kind on an artist’s style, subject matter, or choice of medium. This freedom led many to explore new techniques, especially in the printmaking studios, where several revolutionary advances were made. Dox Thrash’s invention of the carborundum print [is a] notable example ...For African-American artists, the freedom to choose images of personal significance meant that they could record the dignity of people

from their own communities going about their daily lives, with family, at work, and in the religious community, against the backdrop of the Depression and the social inequities of racial discrimination. (Messinger 13)

During the 1920s, the African American writer Alain Locke challenged African American artists “to create an authentic art that was their own,” ... to acknowledge their own heritage and not to emulate the European model. (Messinger 11) Following that ideal, Thrash focused his art on portraying the lives of the black community and his experiences within that community. According to Ittmann, Thrash created works from a social realist point of view with a regionalist perspective. His depictions of everyday life, memories of the South, as in *Cabin Days* or *Sunday Morning*, his graceful nudes, and humanistic portraits reflect a uniquely African American sensitivity to the social climate in America. To illustrate his confrontations with racism (as in his renderings of lynching scenes), Thrash conveyed the brutality and despair that prejudice exacts. In *After the Lynching*, Thrash reveals the deep sadness of family and friends as they mourn the lynched victim. (Ittmann 75) In this piece, David R. Bingham suggests that Thrash compared lynching to Christian suffering and the crucifixion.

In his article, *Bridging Identities*, David R. Brigham concludes that the art works by Dox Thrash bridged the conflicting critical voices of his time. “By creating images that can be understood on more than one level, be they urban or rural landscapes, genre scenes, or portraits, Dox Thrash [earned himself] the status of an American artist who also embraced his identity as an African American.” (Brigham 37) Ittmann makes the point that “Thrash expressed a consciousness of the perception of blacks within the racist structures of both American society and western art history. An African American artist, he presented the American scene as he experienced it.” (Ittmann 83) He reflected the soul of an African American within the constraints of an American culture that welcomed and offered a hand to some, and withdrew from many due to fear, ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice. As Ittmann states, “His interweaving of the human, the personal, the historical, and the political resulted in a highly individual and culturally important body of work.” (Ittmann 83)

It is my expectation that by looking at the art works of Dox Thrash and other WPA artists, students will be successful in connecting historical events and discover ways to interpret and reflect upon the influences of art on personal thought and action. They will be challenged to speculate about the reasons that Thrash chose particular scenes to depict. Students will also be asked to consider how art connects to their lives and how daily events overlap one another to create a collage of experiences. By practicing how to look, reflect and respond based on personal perceptions, students will learn to trust their own powers of observation which in turn will give them confidence to engage in creative problem solving. Students will then learn printmaking processes hands-on, and use them to create images based on their own unique perspective. Having made

prints themselves, students will be able to identify the process that an artist used to create a particular image, and consider how the work might look different if another medium or process had been applied.

## **Objectives**

The School District of Philadelphia's Core Curriculum, aligned with the Pennsylvania State Standards, clearly outlines visual arts instructional models for best practices in the areas of historical and cultural context; production, performance and exhibition of visual arts; and critical and aesthetic response. By Grade 8 students are required to explain the historical, cultural and social context of a work of art; relate works in the arts to varying styles and to the periods in which they were created, analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective; and, interpret how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of work in the arts. By Grade 8, students are also expected to recognize, know, use and demonstrate the elements and principles of art to produce a work of art. In addition, students are required to know and use traditional and contemporary methods or technologies for producing art. The Dox Thrash curriculum will help students to meet these standards.

I anticipate that students will gain knowledge and understanding of Dox Thrash, the period of time in which he grew up, and how that environment affected him and the work that he produced. Further, I believe the students will develop an appreciation of the artist and his work through this exploration. It is my expectation that by applying themselves to a study of the artist and his work, students will discover how the political, social and cultural fabric of the times influenced Thrash. Students will learn how he reacted to the events that shaped his life, and observe how he successfully conveyed his responses through his art. By studying the time and place that Thrash developed as an individual and as an artist, students will perceive how his friends and fellow artists influenced his life and work, and in turn how he affected others. Students will discover details that will inform their discussion about Dox Thrash.

Students will learn about the printmaking process through a hands-on studio experience in which they will experiment with a variety of printmaking methods such as collagraph, embossed, monotype, relief, stamp and stencil. Students will also experiment with inking techniques and learn how and when it is necessary to register a print. Students will be able to answer the following questions: What is a print? What materials can be used to make a print? What are four methods used to create prints? What are the steps involved in making a print? What printmaking process is Thrash credited with inventing? How did the invention of the carborundum printing method benefit the field of printmaking? How did Thrash's work develop during his lifetime? Students will be able to name at least two contemporaries of Thrash and describe how they influenced or were influenced by his work. They will be able to compare Thrash's work to the work of his



contemporaries. Finally, students will be able to name and describe at least three works of art by Thrash and tell why the works are significant.

## **Strategies**

Students will use a journal/sketchbook to note and define new terminology, make observations, answer and ask questions, and practice drawing what they see. Through this practice, students will increase their observational skills and learn how to use those skills to translate experience into visual form. As an assessment tool, the journal/sketchbook will be used to reflect student effort and experimentation. Prior to this curriculum unit, students have been introduced to basic observational drawing techniques; therefore the drawing lessons students will engage in are directed toward skill development. A series of still life arrangements will be constructed for the students to practice contour drawing techniques. The students will be assigned to change drawing positions so that they can see and draw the still life arrangement from different points of view. By varying the viewing position students will have an opportunity to test and apply their perceptual and observational skills to alter their drawing. Through this process they will be able to note how their altered vantage point changes what they see and how it affects their artwork. Students also will be asked to depict setting in their drawings (e.g. the art room, a park, a room in the student's house), and ultimately introduce a figure into the work.

In order to promote drawing from experience and memory, and to stimulate creative thinking, students will be asked to construct a list of everyday experiences that they can represent in a drawing or a print. They will then detail a typical day in their lives, connecting thoughts, moments and events in both written and visual form linking one to another with overlapping images. To indicate changing light values and reflect their feelings as a day progresses, students will be directed to compare how they feel in the morning when they wake up or arrive at school, to how they feel by lunchtime or later in the day. Students will experiment with the resulting shapes, lines, and value changes to form compositions. For instance, each sketch of a day in their life can combine several aspects of the same scene or activity to offer multiple perspectives.

Drawing will provide the foundation for the printmaking exploration and a link to Thrash's depictions of the African American experience. The students will choose one or more of their drawings to transfer to a printing plate. They will also have an opportunity to draw with tempera or ink directly onto a flat surface, apply a dampened piece of paper to that surface to pull a monotype. Students will also experiment with transferring drawings to a foam board plate to create a relief print; cut out shapes and textures to glue onto a flat piece of cardboard or chipboard to make a collagraph or collage print; and apply string or cord to a flat cardboard surface to build a raised surface on which dampened paper will be applied to create an embossed print. Other forms of printmaking that students will have an option to explore involve stamping and stenciling.

As the students progress in the printmaking activity, discussion and attention will shift to focus on the life and artwork of Dox Thrash. Vocabulary will be introduced and reinforced through visual examples to provide students with reference points that they can use in their discussions about Thrash and his work. A large reproduction of one of Thrash's prints will be displayed for the class to discuss and evaluate. Students will be asked to answer questions referring to reference information such as the name of the artist, the title of the piece, the date of the work, the medium, the dimensions or size of the piece, and who currently owns the work of art. They will also be given a list of questions that will help focus their observations so that they can analyze the artist's subject matter for themselves, speculate about the artist's purpose and articulate their opinion of what he was trying to express.

To provide an in-depth exploration of Thrash's work, students will view a website produced by the Philadelphia Museum of Art entitled, *Dox Thrash Revealed*. They will be instructed on how to find and navigate the website to locate information. The students will be arranged in eight groups of three to four students. Each student group will be responsible for a particular segment of Thrash's life and learn about him by looking at the art that he produced, and by reading about his life. Some of this group work will be accomplished in the art room, where books and photocopied materials will be available for students to use. Much of it, however, will be completed off campus through library and on-line research. In addition to the public library, students will be encouraged to use the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Community After School Program offered at Shaw Middle School, or access the recommended websites using the Internet at home.

Each student will choose one of Thrash's art works and an artwork by one of his contemporaries to analyze and interpret using questions and strategies that they applied in an earlier large group discussion about a Thrash reproduction. In their analysis, students will cite reference information and discuss how the artist used line, shape, volume, texture and value or tone in his print art. Students will then compare the artist's works one to another, focusing on subject matter and style. They will also investigate how the invention of the carborundum technique changed the field of printmaking. Each student group will present their discoveries to the rest of their classmates in an oral presentation.

Throughout this unit of study, students will take notes and record comments or observations in their journal/sketchbooks. This information will prove helpful as they compose a written and visual response to Thrash's artwork. Students will create a story or a poem about the work of art that they have analyzed. The stories or poems can be based on a fictional account of events, but students will be encouraged to reference some of the true facts about the artist's life or the time in which he produced art. Students will then illustrate their story or poem as a visual response to Thrash's work. Each of the written pieces will be bound in a group book and displayed in the Sonja Sanchez Writing Center at our school. The student's artwork will be displayed along a large time line depicting the life of Dox Thrash in the third floor gallery space adjacent to the Writing Center. As a

form of assessment and a means of informing the students and their parents of activities in the art room, the student's collaborations will be digitally documented and presented during Report Card Conferences in December 2007.

### **Classroom Activities**

Lesson: Printmaking Methods

Grade level: 7 – 8<sup>th</sup> grade; middle school

Time frame: Six one-hour class sessions

Lesson objectives: students will--

- Draw from observation.
- Create a monotype print.
- Create a collagraph or a collage print based on one of their drawings.
- Create an embossed print based on one of their drawings.
- Create a relief print based on one of their drawings.

Materials: Journal/sketchbook, pencil, eraser  
White drawing paper, 9" x 12"  
Pencils, erasers  
Still life (teacher constructed)  
Viewfinders (teacher made)  
Colored pencils, bold and fine tip markers, charcoal, cray-pas  
Heavier, 80 - 90 lb. white paper  
Brayers  
Barens, large spoons  
Inking plates  
Foam printing plates  
Ballpoint pens  
Ink  
Masking tape  
Newsprint  
Newspaper  
Tempera Paint

Vocabulary: Balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, repetition, unity, variety, color, form, line, shape, texture, tone, value, brayer, edition, ink, inking, printing plate, printing press, baren, collage, collagraph, collage prints, embossed, embossed prints, etching, intaglio, monoprint, monotype, printing plates, registration, relief, relief print, rubbings, stamping, stenciling, woodcut.

Procedures:

1. Students will draw from observation using contour line and progressing to drawings in which they experiment with line to achieve variations in texture, value and tone.
2. Teacher will introduce methods of printmaking highlighting monotype, collage/collagraph, embossed and relief print forms. Teacher will then demonstrate inking and printing techniques.
3. Students will draw directly on a flat non-porous printing plate with tempera paint or ink, dampen a piece of paper, place the dampened paper on top of the painted or inked design, gently rub the back of the paper to transfer the image, and pull a monotype print.
4. Teacher will lead a class discussion about why and how to sign and register a print.
5. Students will use choose one of their drawings that emphasizes shape to compose an image or design by cutting out shapes and gluing those shapes onto the surface of a printing plate. Students will then ink their plate, place a piece of paper on top of the inked plate, rub the back of the paper with the back of a spoon or a baren and pull a collagraph or a collage print.
6. Students will transfer one of their contour line drawings to a printing plate by gluing string to the plate to denote line. Students will then dampen heavyweight paper, press the dampened paper into the plate, and pull an embossed print. This print can be hand colored when dry with colored pencils or watercolor.
7. Student will choose one of their drawings that utilize contour line and transfer the image to a foam printing plate. Students will place their original drawing onto of the foam plate and trace their original lines with a firm pencil line or a ballpoint pen. They will then ink their plate, place a piece of paper on top of the inked plate, rub the back of the paper with the back of a spoon or a baren, and pull a relief print.
8. Students will mount and label their prints to exhibit in the Marble Hall Gallery at Shaw Middle School.

Lesson: Dox Thrash, printmaker: A study of his life and work

Grade level: 7- 8<sup>th</sup> grade; middle school

Time frame: Four one-hour class sessions

Lesson objectives: Students will--

- Research the life and artwork of Dox Thrash.
- Form an opinion about how and why Thrash developed his ideas and used his unique perspective to create works of art.
- Create a timeline based on his life and career.
- Compare the artwork of Dox Thrash to the artwork of one of his contemporaries.

Materials: Computer, LCD projector, Projection screen  
Print information about Thrash, and examples of his artwork  
Examples of artwork by Samuel Brown, Claude Clark, Raymond Steth, and other contemporaries of Thrash  
Journal/sketchbook, pencil, eraser  
White drawing paper, 9" x 12"  
Banner Paper  
Digital film camera and/or movie camera

Vocabulary: Elements of Design, line, shape, form, space, color, value, texture, Principles of Design, contrast, emphasis, balance, unity, pattern, movement, rhythm, realism, realistic, regionalism, regionalist, narrative, genre, historical, literary, romantic, contemporary, medium, media, printmaking, method, process, style, technique, carborundum, collagraph, etching, intaglio, linocut, monoprint, monotype, relief, stamp, stencil, woodcut, edition, brayer, ink, printing press, baren, printing plates, registration.

Procedures:

1. Introduce the artist Dox Thrash and the medium of printmaking using museum reproductions of his work, the Philadelphia Museum of Art website: [www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/2002/48.html](http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/2002/48.html), and a teacher constructed power point generating questions to focus and direct a student inquiry. Reflect on the time frame in which Dox Thrash lived and worked. Discuss his contribution to the field of printmaking and the method of printmaking that he developed.

2. Assign groups of three to four students specific time periods in Dox Thrash's life to research and present. Direct students to publications and websites via a "recommended resource list" for the purpose of gathering information and looking at examples of Thrash's life and work:

- Bearden, Romare, and Harry Henderson. *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.
- Ittmann, John. *Dox Thrash: An African-American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2001.

- Messinger, Lisa Mintz, Lisa Gail Collins and Rachel Mustalish. *African-American Artists, 1929-1945: Prints, Drawings, and Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003.
- The African American Registry: Dox Thrash, an inventive artist...  
[http://www.aaregistry.com/african\\_american\\_history/769/Dox\\_Thrash\\_inventive\\_artist](http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/769/Dox_Thrash_inventive_artist)
- Black History Month WPA Prints – Dox Thrash  
<http://www.slam.org/images/spex/BLKHIST/thrash.html>
- Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered  
<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa103.htm>
- Dox Thrash Revealed  
[http://www.philamuseum.org/micro\\_sites/exhibitions/thrash/flash.html](http://www.philamuseum.org/micro_sites/exhibitions/thrash/flash.html)

3. Each student group will present an oral report on the segments of Thrash's life that they were assigned to research. The presentations can be a combination of oral and visual reporting.

4. Each student will compare one of Dox Thrash's artworks to an artwork of one of his contemporaries. The students will study the artworks using subject matter, style, genre, and technique as criteria for comparison.

5. Student groups will recreate in visual images and written word the community and events in Thrash's life. They will then show how these interactions related to domestic and international events of the same time period. Using the images and words that they generate, students will build a large-scale timeline of his life. Students may also apply the phrases and visual examples from their oral reports to illustrate events along the Thrash timeline.

Lesson: Analysis and Interpretation of Works of Art by Dox Thrash

Grade level: 7-8<sup>th</sup> grade; middle school

Time frame: Four one-hour class sessions

Lesson objectives: students will--

- Analyze Thrash's artwork using specific criteria
- Respond to his work in a creative writing format: story, poem, prose
- Illustrate their stories in a visual response to both Thrash's work and their own stories.
- Translate their drawings into prints.

Materials: Journal/sketchbook, pencil, eraser

Questionnaire

Poster size reproduction of a Thrash print

Examples of Thrash's artwork (Art Museum postcard reproductions)

Colored pencils, bold and fine tip markers, charcoal, cray-pas

White drawing paper, 9" x 12"

Brayers

Barens, large spoons

inking plates

foam printing plates

ballpoint pens

ink

masking tape

newsprint

newspaper

Procedures:

1. Introduce the method of examination by demonstrating the questioning process to focus observation and response. Using a large poster size museum reproduction of a print by Dox Thrash, the teacher will introduce vocabulary and concepts that students will use to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate the print work. The questions listed below can be used to help the students look at, think about and respond to Thrash's artwork.

Students will answer the following questions:

- Name of the artist, (Who created the artwork?)
- Title of the work
- Year work was created
- Medium (What materials were used to make the artwork?)
- Dimensions (What is the length and width of the artwork?)
- Who currently owns the artwork? (Museum or private collection?)
- What is the first thing that you see when you look at the artwork?
- Why did you notice that particular part of the artwork?
- What is the second thing that drew your attention?
- What is the dominant color in the print?
- Is color an important element in Thrash's artwork?
- What types of lines did the artist use to create the print image? Draw an example.
- What shapes did he use? Describe and draw examples.
- How did Thrash express volume in his work?
- Is line an important element in Thrash's artwork?
- What is the subject of the artwork?
- Where did the event in the picture take place? Explain.
- What is in the background? Describe.
- When did the event in the picture happen? (Time of year; past, present, or future)
- What do you think the artist was trying to say? Explain.

- What feeling do you think Thrash expressed in this artwork?
- How do you feel when you look at the artwork? Explain.
- Why do you think it was important for Thrash to create this artwork?
- What do you think the artist was trying to say?
- What happened in Thrash's life that may have influenced his work?
- Did Thrash belong to any particular Art Movement? Name it.
- Did his work reflect a particular style of art? What was it called?
- How does Thrash's work make you feel? What did you think about when you look at his work? Does it remind you of someone, or someplace?

2. Students will choose one of Thrash's works to analyze, compare, evaluate, interpret, and respond to using the questions listed above. This will be an individual activity, although students will be encouraged to help one another as long as they stay on task.

3. Students will respond to the Thrash print that they are analyzing with a creative writing piece: story, poem or prose. While their compositions can portray a fictional event or character, students will be encouraged to reference at least one fact about Thrash or his life in their writing.

4. Students will illustrate their stories in a visual response to both Thrash's work and their own stories or poems.

5. Students will translate their drawings into prints using methods that they applied in earlier printmaking activities.

6. Final drafts of their written work and selected prints will be published, hand bound, and exhibited in the Sonja Sanchez Writing Center at Shaw Middle School.

### **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

Books and Articles:

Bearden, Romare, and Harry Henderson. *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.

Considered a major contribution in research on African American history and art, Bearden and Henderson presented a thorough study of the lives and achievements of 36 African American artists born prior to 1925. In their book, Bearden and Henderson reveal to what extent racism limited opportunities for black artists. The book is beautifully illustrated.

Brigham, David R. " *Bridging Identities: Dox Thrash as African American and Artist.* " *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 27-39.



A clearly worded, thorough and richly imaged article about Dox Thrash, focusing on his portrayal of the daily life and circumstances of African American culture. This was a well-used reference.

Fine, Ruth. "*Master Printmaker Rediscovered.*" International review of African American Art, vol. 18, no. 2 (2001), pp. 52-3.  
A thoughtful and informative review of the exhibition, *Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*, organized by John Ittman at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Ittmann, John. *Dox Thrash: An African-American Master Printmaker Rediscovered*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2001.  
A meticulously detailed catalogue written by the curator of a major retrospective of Dox Thrash held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2001. Ittmann presents his research and analysis of the events in Thrash's life. In the catalogue, he also includes the writing of three other authors, who have researched the artist's life and the social environment of his time. This was the source that I referred to most often as I contemplated the benefits of a study concerning Dox Thrash, his life and work and constructed an approach to the topic for my students.

Kennedy, Winston, "*Dox Thrash: Out of the Shadows.*" International Review of African American Art, vol. 15, no. 4 (1998), pp.42-45.  
An article about the choices Thrash made when he selected his subject matter and the quality, depth and dignity expressed his prints.

Lewis, Samella. Floyd, Coleman and Mary Jane Hewitt. *African American Art and Artists*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2003.  
This is a readable reference tool that offers brief and informative biographical sketches, illustrations, and information about art styles of many notable African American Artists.

Locke, Alain. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. New York: Arno Press, 1968.  
Reprinted from the 1925 edition. Essays by Locke provide insight into the thoughts and atmosphere in the United States and the world that provided a catalyst for the artistic energy leading up to and including the Harlem Renaissance.

McKinzie, Richard D. *The New Deal for Artists*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.  
A credible and readable account of the state of the collective mind culturally, socially and politically during the WPA and New Deal.

Medley-Buckner, Cindy, *Carborundum Mezzotint and Carborundum Etching*. Print Quarterly, vol. 16, no. 1 (March 1999). pp. 34-49.

A well-written and engaging analysis of the discovery of the effects of carborundum on a metal printing plate, and the invention of the carborundum mezzotint and the carborundum etching and the benefits of this innovative process. This article is an excellent source of information on the carborundum process.

Messinger, Lisa Mintz, Lisa Gail Collins and Rachel Mustalish. *African-American Artists, 1929-1945: Prints, Drawings, and Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003.

This book is a catalogue about African American artists during the Depression and the war years (1929-1945), when government-sponsored programs such as the WPA led to a build-up of artistic production throughout the United States. Many of the works featured in the catalogue are recent acquisitions of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This was also a well-used reference. I returned to sections of this book a number of times, and gleaned more information and insight with each read.

Websites:

The African American Registry: Dox Thrash, an inventive artist...

[http://www.aaregistry.com/african\\_american\\_history/769/Dox\\_Thrash\\_inventive\\_artist](http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/769/Dox_Thrash_inventive_artist)

This site contains a very brief biographical sketch of Dox Thrash based on the book a History of African-American Artists from 1792 to present by Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson.

Black History Month WPA Prints – Dox Thrash.

<http://www.slam.org/images/spex/BLKHIST/thrash.html>. This site contains illustrations and two brief paragraphs about Thrash.

Dox Thrash: An African American Master Printmaker Rediscovered.

<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa103.htm>

This site offers a thorough explanation of the Thrash exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Dox Thrash Revealed.

[http://www.philamuseum.org/micro\\_sites/exhibitions/thrash/flash.html](http://www.philamuseum.org/micro_sites/exhibitions/thrash/flash.html)

An interactive site that provides insightful information about the art and life of Dox Thrash. This site will be used during the course of teaching the unit, to encourage students to search for biographical information, to examine visual

examples of the artist's work, to view a demonstration of printmaking techniques, and to listen to the curator talk about the exhibit and how he became interested in the project.

Philadelphia Museum of Art – Exhibitions: Past Exhibitions: 2002.

<http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/2002/48.html>

An informative site through which a viewer can navigate from the opening page to major exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

## **Appendices-Standards**

### Arts and Humanities

#### 9.1 Production, Performance and Exhibition of the Arts

##### A. Elements and Principles

- Elements in the Visual Arts: color, form, line, shape, space, texture, and value
- Principles in the Visual Arts: balance, contrast, emphasis/focal point, repetition, unity and variety

B. Recognize, know, use and demonstrate art elements and principles to produce a work of art.

C. Vocabulary: recognize and use fundamental terminology within an art form.

E. Demonstrate the ability to define objects, illustrate an action or relate an experience through creation of original art work.

F. Historical & Cultural Production, Performance (Demonstration) and Exhibition.

H. Handle materials, equipment and tools safely.

- Identify materials used.

J. Know and use traditional and contemporary technologies for producing, performing and exhibiting works in the arts.

#### 9.2 Historical and Cultural Contexts

##### A. Context of Works in the Arts

- Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

##### B. Chronology of Works in the Arts

- Relate works in the arts chronologically to historical events.

##### C. Styles and Genre in the Arts

- Relate works in the arts to varying styles and to the periods in which they were created.

##### D. Historical & Cultural Perspectives

- Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.

##### E. Historical & Cultural Impact on Works of Art.

- Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts.

F. Vocabulary for Historical & Cultural context

G. Geographic Regions in the Arts

I. Philosophical Context of Works in the Arts

- Identify, explain and analyze philosophical beliefs as they relate to works in the arts.

K. Traditions Within Works in the Arts.

- Identify, explain and analyze traditions as they relate to works in the arts.

L. Common Themes in Works in the Arts

- Identify, explain and analyze common themes, forms and techniques from works in the arts.

### 9.3 Critical Response

F. Comparisons

- Know how to recognize and identify similar and different characteristics among works in the arts.

## Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

### 1.1.3 Learning to Read Independently

F. Understand the meaning of and use of new vocabulary.

G. Demonstrate after reading an understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text.

- Retell or summarize the major ideas, themes of the text.
- Connect the new information or ideas in the text to known information.
- Clarify ideas and understandings through rereading and discussion.
- Make responsible assertions about the text by citing evidence from the text.

### 1.4.3 Types of Writing

A. Write narrative pieces (stories)

- Include detailed description of people, places and things.
- Use relevant illustrations.

B. Write informational pieces (descriptions)

- Use illustrations when relevant.

### 1.6.3 Speaking and Listening

A. Listen to others.

- Ask questions as an aid to understanding.

- Distinguish fact from opinion.
- B. Listen to a selection of literature (fiction and informational).
  - Relate readings to similar experiences.
  - Retell a story in chronological order.
  - Identify and define new words and concepts.
- D. Contribute to discussions.
  - Ask relevant questions.
  - Respond with appropriate information or opinions to questions ask.
  - Listen to and acknowledge the contribution of others.
  - Display appropriate turn-taking behaviors.
- E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.

## Geography

### 7.1 Basic Geography Literacy

- B. Identify and locate place and regions by physical features, and geographic characteristics

## History

### 8.1 Historical Analysis and Skills Development

- A. Understand chronological thinking and distinguish between past, present and future time in terms of continuity and change and time and place of events.
- C. Understand fundamentals of historical interpretation in terms of causes and results

### 8.3 United States History

- A. Identify contributions of individuals and groups to United States history.

## **Appendices--Assessments and Rubrics**

### Assessments:

- Journal/ Sketchbook vocabulary, definitions, observations, notes, writing samples
- Portfolio of drawings and prints
- Classroom discussion and participation
- Analysis and Interpretation of Works of Art by Dox Thrash
- Timeline group investigation
- Group presentation
- Creative writing final project
- Digital documentation

Rubrics: Reflect how students follow posted guidelines for classroom procedures, adhere to project directions, use imaginative expression to creatively solve lesson problem(s), and meet lesson objectives.

- 5 - Outstanding
- 4 - Very Good
- 3 - Good
- 2 - Making Progress
- 1 - Needs Improvement

Assessment Criteria: Guidelines for students to follow to successfully meet expectations of unit study.

Preparation/warm-up/clean-up procedures:

- 5 – I followed the guidelines for class procedures.
- 4 – I followed procedures, however I had to be reminded to stay focused.
- 3 – I had to be reread the classroom procedures, and redirected more than twice.
- 2 – I was off task more than half the class period, but tried to meet expectations.
- 1 – I didn't follow classroom procedures.

Following Directions:

- 5 – I followed the directions, stayed on task and helped other students.
- 4 – I followed the directions, however I had to be reminded to stay on task.
- 3 – I was off task, and had to be redirected two or three times.
- 2 - I was off task more than half the class, but tried to meet expectations.
- 1 – I did not listen to the directions.

Classroom behavior is reflected in a student's ability to manage his or her use of class time, their ability to exhibit a cooperative attitude with other students and the teacher and the use and care of materials. (5 – 1)

Class Participation can be observed in a student's interest and contribution during class discussion. Did the student ask question and record thoughts? (5 - 1)

Skill and craftsmanship are demonstrated by the attention to detail, choice of material and overall quality of design in a student's work. (5 – 1)

Creativity is expressed in the imaginative use of resources and originality of expression. Did the student interpret the assignment with his or her own ideas and feelings? (5 – 1)

Project completion is indicated by the student's effort to meet the lesson objectives. Did the student problem solve to reach a creative solution? (5 –1)