

Whose History?

Grades 6 thru 8th

Inspired by: Negro National League portraits by Morgan Monceaux

Morgan Monceaux is known for his bold, mixed media depictions of opera singers, US presidents, Black cowboys, and featured in AVAM's Good Sports exhibition: portraits of players from the Negro National League. A resident of West Baltimore for many years, Monceaux never planned on becoming a painter. But after happening upon a sign painter's discarded materials, he picked up a brush and never stopped.

This lesson invites students to take a closer look at Monceaux's portraits of Black ball players from the Negro National League, and poses the question: are all athletes celebrities? Why or why not? Students will have a chance to research a lesser-known athlete, and create a trading card.



Connie Morgan by Morgan Monceaux

Objectives

- Students will use close looking to analyze an artwork.
- Students will understand the historical context in which the Negro League was formed.
- Students will conduct research to understand and interpret a historic individual's life and significance.

Critical Questions

What events lead up to the formation of the Negro National League?

What makes an individual or event historically significant?

Are all athletes celebrities? Why or why not?

Activities

1. **Introduce & Analyze.** Share Morgan Monceaux's [artwork](#) from AVAM's Good Sports exhibition with the class. Lead them in a discussion using Visual Thinking Strategies questions below. For more on VTS, [visit Grand Valley State University art gallery's brief guide here.](#)
 - a. What's going on in this picture?
 - b. What do you see that makes you say that?
 - c. What more can we find?
2. **Read & Discuss.** Students read Morgan Monceaux provided biographies in small groups and discuss:
 - What surprised you about Morgan Monceaux's story?
 - How is Monceaux's artwork different from what you typically see in art museums?
 - Monceaux was a self-taught artist. How did this impact his art making process?
 - Why do you think the American Visionary Art Museum, and other galleries, selected his artwork to put on display?
 - What do YOU find interesting or important about his artwork?
 - How do you think Monceaux selected subjects for his artworks?
3. **Explore context.** Watch the following video about the formation of the Negro League, and optional contextual videos that briefly recap reconstruction and Jim Crow laws.

- a. [The History of Negro League Baseball](#) by Black History in Two Minutes or so (YouTube, 3:47)
 - b. Suggested watching based on prior knowledge/teaching - preview and use as necessary
 - i. [The Roll Back](#) by Black History in Two Minutes or so (YouTube, 3:11)
 - ii. [Separate But Equal: Homer Plessy and the Case That Upheld the Color Line](#) by Black History in Two Minutes or so (YouTube, 2:43)
4. **Dive deeper.** In pairs or small groups, students select one of Monceaux's Negro National League works. Using the image and text, students research the player's story and role within the league. Suggested student resources:
- a. www.MLB.com
 - b. <https://www.loc.gov/>
 - c. <https://baseballhall.org/>
5. **Inspire.** Monceaux created artworks of baseball players most of us haven't heard of. The artworks highlight the stories, talents, and significance of these players to US history.
- a. Consider: Why aren't these names (Toni Stone, Fleet Walker) household names?
 - b. Wonder: Who else's story isn't getting told?
 - c. Ask: Are all athletes celebrities? Why or why not?
6. **Create.** Students find an athlete that is *not* a celebrity. This can be historical or present day. This could be a person you know, or someone you find through research. Create a trading card that profiles that athlete's identity, story, and / achievements. Use baseball cards as a template or reference. Suggested material: collage and paint markers. Suggested size: 5x7".
- a. Suggested resources:
 - i. [Special Olympics athlete stories](#)
 - ii. [PBS feature on Lesser Known Sports - Women's Rugby, Men's Gymnastics](#)
 - iii. [The National Marbles Tournament](#)
 - iv. [Roller Derby Athletics](#)
 - v. [Three Latinas Who Made Baseball History](#) (Smithsonian)
 - vi. [Athlete Ally - LGBTQIA+ Athletes & Advocates](#)

Materials

- 5x7" cardstock
- Magazines
- Pencils
- Paint markers
- Rulers
- Scissors
- Glue

Modification/Extension

Challenge: Ask that students find an athlete / player specifically from Maryland (or your state).

Extension: Students present their trading cards in small groups. Students group athletes by commonalities. Discuss: Do any sub-groups emerge within our non-celebrity athlete selections? Why aren't these athletes' stories being more regularly told?

Modification: Provide pre-made baseball card template for students to fill with specific information to reduce decision making burden.

6-8 Maryland State Visual Art Standards

Anchor Standard 1 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

- E:6-8:1: Synthesize concepts to formulate ideas and criteria to guide the artistic process.

Anchor Standard 7 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

- E:6-8:1: Explain how a person's artistic choices are influenced by culture, values, and the environment.
- E:6-8:1: Collaboratively interpret and construct meaning by describing the feelings experienced, subject matter, formal characteristics, and art-making approaches, key concepts, and contextual information.

Anchor Standard 11 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

- E:6-8:1: Analyze how responses to art are influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources and cultural uses.

6-8th Grade Social Studies Standards

- 2.0 Students will understand the diversity and commonality, human interdependence, and global cooperation of the people of Maryland, the United States and the World through both a multicultural and historic perspective.
- 5.0 Students will examine significant ideas, beliefs, and themes; organize patterns and events; and analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time in Maryland, the United States and around the world.

Specific 8th Grade Standards addresses

- 5.C.4.b Analyze the experiences of enslaved and free African Americans

Morgan Monceaux Biography

Provided by AVAM

1947–2017

Morgan Monceaux was raised in Alexandria, Louisiana, by his Creole-speaking great-grandmother and great-grandfather. His mother, Jonetta Monceaux, was a jazz singer, often on the road, who passed along her love of books to her son. Monceaux attended Bishop College in Dallas, Texas, studying music as well as theology. His studies were interrupted when he volunteered for the Navy and went to serve in the Vietnam war.

On return to the U.S., Monceaux traveled the country, indulging his passion for history and for the seldom-told story of the contributions made by African Americans and Native Americans. "History defines who we are, where we came from, and where we are going—we need to tell the children the truth." Monceaux researched the backgrounds of many historical and larger-than-life figures, including all the Presidents, their wives, civil rights leaders, and folk heroes such as Black cowboys and legendary jazz and opera performers.

He used what he learned about their racial and social history to create series of works, some of which include *George to George*, a series on the American Presidents, *Black and Red*, a study on the experience of African Americans and Native Americans in the West, and *Shadowball*, a series featuring Negro League baseball heroes as well as the legacy of the league. Delving into the struggles and truths of those with African ancestry, Monceaux's work is also concerned with class and social status. Of his own heritage, which includes Native American, French, Creole, and African ancestry, Monceaux has said, "I don't look at myself as Black . . . I see myself as an American."

More biographical information on Monceaux

Excerpt from "From Undiscovered to Rediscovered, an Artist Battles On", New York Times, Patricia Cohen, 2009.

Born in Alexandria, La., he [Morgan Monceaux] studied music at Bishop College in Dallas with the idea of becoming an opera singer. He volunteered for the Army, and by the time he returned from Vietnam in 1968 he was suffering from severe bouts of depression. He spent the next two decades homeless or itinerant, working as a janitor, short-order cook, gas station attendant and more.

In 1990 he was living off Dumpsters and squatting in an abandoned South Bronx building when he found some supplies a sign painter had left on the roof and, for the first time in his life, picked up a brush. He has been obsessed with painting ever since.

After his Hamptons debut he had a few other exhibitions. Two series of paintings of jazz artists and African-American cowboys were collected and published as books for children. Yet reality did not quite match the movie-of-the-week story arc. He was H.I.V. positive and developed lung cancer (now in remission).

In 2002 he moved to Baltimore and worked part time...to earn enough for food and art supplies. Camay Murphy, the daughter of the legendary jazz singer and bandleader Cab Calloway, offered to let him move into the abandoned house in West Baltimore that her father had grown up in, which Mr. Monceaux ultimately bought for \$3,000 and a couple of paintings. Once a thriving artistic center that had been home to Thurgood Marshall, Billie Holiday and James Brown, the neighborhood is now filled with public housing, boarded-up buildings and vacant lots.

Friends from New York, the painter Gail Bruce and her husband, Murray, came to visit. "Morgan was very sick and living in a house that was shameful," Mr. Bruce said. "It had no windows, it had no water, it had no heat."

Mr. Bruce, the owner of Ramscale, a Manhattan gallery, said, "Climbing through this mess of a house, I found all the presidents." (Although Mr. Monceaux had offers to buy individual paintings, he wanted to keep the series together.) "There were lots of things I found on the floor, one of his jazz pieces with a boot print."

Mr. Bruce brought dozens of paintings back to his gallery and took Mr. Monceaux's work to the National Portrait Gallery, which ended up acquiring portraits of Ray Charles, Dinah Washington and B. B. King. In March 2007 Michelle Talibah, the owner of New Door Creative, hosted a one-man show of his work. Enough sold for Mr. Monceaux to finally buy a furnace (though his windows are still covered by plastic sheeting to keep out the draft) and start renovations.

Last week Ms. Talibah and Mr. Monceaux slowly walked through his "Divas" show, looking at the 15 oil paintings of African-American opera singers. In front of a painting of Ruby Hinds performing in Leroy Jenkins's opera ballet "The Mother of Three Sons," Mr. Monceaux noted that he was able to fit in only two of the three brothers.

"This was the only canvas I had that day, and this painting was saying it just had to be done," he said. The "Divas" series would never have been created without donations for supplies from friends and supporters, he added.

His favorite in the series, he said, is of Lillian Evanti performing “The Bell Song” in 1927 from Léo Delibe’s “Lakmé.” Evanti’s dress is made of lace affixed to the canvas. Small bells are attached, and Mr. Monceaux tinkled them with a flick of his finger. Thick swirls of blue, red and yellow paint surround the figures.

“That’s called impasto,” Ms. Talibah informed Mr. Monceaux, who never had any formal art training. “He plays with perspective in a way that gives them motion,” she said. “The skewed textures and rhythms translate what would otherwise be illustration into theater.”

Mr. Monceaux offered a tentative “O.K.,” as if he were trying a designer jacket on for size at a Madison Avenue store and assessing whether the unaccustomed figure staring back in the mirror was really him. “Intellectually it makes sense,” he said. “Am I thinking about that while I’m doing it? No. The paintings are coming out. Boom.”

Wall text from Good Sports exhibition:

Introduction to the Negro Leagues

Prepared by Hieronimus & Co., Inc.: Dr. Bob Hieronimus, Sika Wheeler and Laura Cortner

Black Americans have been involved in baseball since the sport began. In the late 1800s, there were unofficial multiracial teams playing across the country. However, as Jim Crow laws took hold, segregation created a formal color line in professional baseball that would last for decades. The official Negro Leagues grew out of the early barnstorming days, when teams would travel around the country challenging local players to a match. These teams drew crowds as big as any other league, but often faced limitations created by prejudiced booking agents who dictated when they could play and what venues the teams could use. Dissatisfied with this lack of autonomy, Andrew “Rube” Foster — a former pitcher and then manager — led the establishment of the first organized Negro League team in February 1920 in Kansas City, Missouri called the Negro National League. Soon after, the Eastern Colored League emerged in 1923. The first Negro Leagues World Series took place in 1924 between these two pioneer leagues. It would be the first of eleven throughout Negro Leagues history.

As the country weathered the ups and downs of WWI, the Depression, and WWII, five more major negro leagues formed, dissolved, and re-formed. Star players like Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, and many others emerged and were later inducted into the MLB Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. They also began a tradition called the East-West game each summer at Chicago’s Comiskey Park in which all-star teams would compete, attracting up to 50,000 fans of all backgrounds.

Jackie Robinson’s recruitment into Major League Baseball in 1947 was momentous for the Negro Leagues. On one hand, it was a point of honor and due acknowledgment in the eyes of the public. Robinson had played for the Kansas City Monarchs, a team so well-loved that Sunday church service would be moved back an hour so that congregation members could watch the game. At the same time, it generally spelled the end of the Negro Leagues. White Major League owners began recruiting the top talent from the Negro Leagues teams, and around a decade later, the teams fizzled out completely. Hall of Famer Monte Irvin described playing for the white majors as actually being an easier experience. Often, the Negro Leagues fields were larger and rougher compared to white Major League venues, and the ferocity of play in the Negro Leagues was more extreme. Traveling also proved more complicated, especially in the barnstorming days, when teams had to plan around limited accommodations for Black people across the country. Hall of Famer Monte Irvin described the transition into the Major Leagues: “Once we got to the Majors, it became easy because we had already been through the hard knocks.”



NOTES

MORGAN MONCEAUX'S BIO

**READ ONE OR BOTH OF MORGAN MONCEAUX'S BIOGRAPHIES.
CONSIDER AND MAKE NOTES ON THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

WHAT SURPRISED YOU ABOUT MONCEAUX'S STORY?

**HOW IS HIS WORK DIFFERENT FROM WHAT YOU
USUALLY SEE IN MUSEUMS?**

WHAT DO YOU FIND INTERESTING ABOUT HIS WORK?

HOW DO YOU THINK MONCEAUX PICKS SUBJECTS FOR HIS WORK?

PLAN

ARE ALL ATHLETES CELEBRITIES?

FIND AN ATHLETE THAT IS **NOT** A CELEBRITY. THIS CAN BE HISTORICAL OR PRESENT DAY. THIS COULD BE A PERSON YOU KNOW, OR SOMEONE YOU FIND THROUGH RESEARCH. ONCE YOU FIND THEM, TAKE NOTES BELOW.



Athlete's name & Sport	
Important achievements	
Details about identity	
Important statistics/achievements	

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF BASEBALL CARDS TO INSPIRE YOUR MAKING.

