

# BLACK ORPHEUS JACOB LAWRENCE AND THE MBARI CLUB EDUCATOR GUIDE



# **INTRODUCTION**

This Educator Guide accompanies the exhibition *Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence* and the *Mbari Club*, on view at NOMA February 10 – May 7, 2023. In it you will find an exhibition overview with major themes, biographical information about Jacob Lawrence and his contemporary artists affiliated with the Black Orpheus publication, select works of art, classroom lessons for before and after your museum visit, and directions for scheduling a visit to NOMA. Lessons and tours can be adapted across grade levels and used with any in-person visit or with provided digital images.

# **EXHIBITION OVERVIEW**

Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club explores connections between African American artist Jacob Lawrence and his **contemporary** artists based in West Africa and throughout the world. The English language publication *Black Orpheus*, published in Nigeria from 1957 - 1967, featured fictional and non-fictional writings by African and **African diaspora** writers and art and reviews of visual artists from throughout the African continent, India, Brazil, Japan, Austria, U.S., and Germany.

Lawrence and his wife Gwendolyn Knight spent eight months in Nigeria in 1964. They visited the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Òsogbo, Nigeria, where Jacob Lawrence presented workshops with **Mbari** art clubs. While there, he created works in a variety of media inspired especially by open air marketplaces, Nigerian women, and spirituality.

The **Mbari Artists & Writers Club** was an artistic organization of Nigerian-based artists, writers, and dramatists promoting modern African and international artistic practice. In addition to publishing *Black Orpheus*, Mbari presented works in galleries by international artists including Jacob Lawrence, William H. Johnson, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Uche Okeke, Jacob Afolabi, and Twins Seven-Seven, among others.

The exhibition features Lawrence's 1964–65 Nigeria series, works by artists featured in *Black Orpheus*, archival images and letters, and videos. This global exchange of ideas took place at a time when people and countries around the world were fighting for independence from colonialism, and when the civil rights movement was achieving success in the United States.

# THEMES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Jacob Lawrence was inspired by the places he visited and made drawings and paintings of things he saw there.
  - How does visiting new places inspire creativity?
- 2. Black Orpheus journals presented writings and art from Nigeria and around the world.
  - How can reading about places and cultures increase our understanding of others?
- 3. The Mbari clubs were places for artists to learn from each other and exchange ideas.
  - What are some places where people gather and learn from each other?
- 4. Jacob Lawrence captured his experiences in paintings, drawings, and letters to his friends.
  - How does he tell the story of his travels through images?
  - What are some other ways to share stories?
- 5. Nigeria achieved independence from England in 1960, ending nearly 100 years of colonial rule. Post-colonial modern artists in Nigeria expressed the tensions and hopefulness of this period while also looking to traditional arts of the Yoruba and Igbo Peoples for inspiration.
  - How can the past inspire the future?
  - How do artists reflect the cultural and political issues of their time?

## **JACOB LAWRENCE**

Jacob Lawrence first traveled to Nigeria in 1962 at the invitation of the American Society for African Culture. During this ten day visit, he exhibited several works from his *Migration* and *War* series and met Mbari Club members in Ibadan. He was featured in the Mbari Club's *Black Orpheus* journal in 1963. In 1964, he returned to Nigeria for eight months with his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight. The two traveled to Lagos, Ibadan, and Òsogbo.

Throughout his five decade career as an artist, Jacob Lawrence (1917 - 2000) focused on the lives and struggles of African Americans. He often worked in series that portrayed the dignity and everyday realities of historical figures including Harriet Tubman and Toussaint L'Ouverture as well as everyday workers and builders. His personal artistic style was celebrated in solo gallery exhibitions, museum retrospectives, and many awards and honorary degrees.

Lawrence grew up in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City in the 1930s. The **Harlem Renaissance** flowered from 1919 - 1929, and continued to influence the community. Lawrence drew inspiration and education from the older generation of artists, writers, and historians. His early experiences at the **Harlem Art Workshop** taught by Charles Alston and work on the

Harlem Mural Project as part of the Works
Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Art
Project honed his visual storytelling skills. He
developed his own brand of modernism which
focused on African American subject matter. The
artist's work from the 1930s and 40s focused
primarily on the people, sounds, and events
taking place around him.

Between 1937 and 1941 Lawrence created more than 170 paintings in series that depicted African American history. The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture (1938), The Life of Frederick Douglass (1939), and The Life of Harriet Tubman (1940) were painted in rapid succession. In 1940, Lawrence began work on a new series, The Migration of the Negro, which would occupy him for two years. Unlike the previous themes which were based completely on historical narrative, the Migration series involved the artist's personal experience as well as historical fact. In 1961 he began a series of paintings on the Civil Rights Movement.

Lawrence continued to work in series or thematic groupings of the African American experience over the succeeding decades. Teaching also became an important part of his career, through which he was able to influence another generation of artists.

"I've always dealt with my experiences, either directly or indirectly...

I paint my impressions of the things I know about and the things I have experienced."

—Jacob Lawrence

# **JACOB LAWRENCE'S** *NIGERIA SERIES*



Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000), *Market Scene,* 1966, Gouache on paper, Chrysler Museum of Art, Museum purchase 2018.22, © 2022 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This lively painting of a Nigerian marketplace expresses the excitement Jacob Lawrence felt during his visits to Nigeria. His focus is on an area of the market where fabric is sold. Women are wearing, carrying, touching, and selling handcrafted *adire*, a patterned Nigerian cloth dyed blue with indigo. He expressed his fascination with the market in letters to his gallerist, remarking that women operated the stalls. He created several works dedicated to this theme.

"I became so excited then by all the new visual forms I found in Nigeria unusual color combinations, textures, shapes and the dramatic effect of light..." —Jacob Lawrence



Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000), *Four Sheep*, 1964, Tempera and gouache on paper, Andrew and Ann Dintenfass Collection, © 2022 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

"Visually the most exciting experiences are the marketplaces...Everything you can imagine is sold in the marketplaces—goats, sheep, chicken, fruits, vegetables, clothes, hardware, etc."

—Jacob Lawrence

Lawrence described the huge markets he encountered in letters to fellow artist Robert Gwathmey and art dealer Terry Dintenfass in New York. He expressed fascination with the centrality of the marketplace in African life and acknowledged his participation as a privileged outsider. In *Four Sheep*, Lawrence represents a view from above the marketplace, portraying vendors of animals, vegetables, and rolls of cloth. This scene includes interactions and exchanges between humans and is filled with an assortment of animals. The diagonal roofs of the stalls suggest tight spaces that appear to continue into the distance.

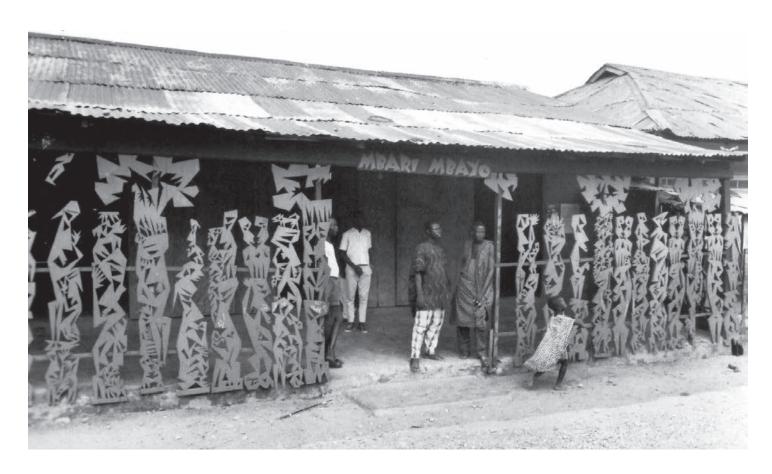


"They [the markets] are operated mostly by women... and they are very sharp traders...Gwen and I are relearning how to bargain—this is quite an experience in itself...and at times can be quite frustrating."—Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000), Street Scene, 1964, Tempera and gouache on paper, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, © 2022 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In *Street Scene* Lawrence centers a woman wearing the traditional blue, *adire* cloth. He creates a sense of movement through the figure passing close by in the lower left and the extended leg of the main figure. Lawrence was excited by the colors and shapes that filled the streets. He included references to traditional African forms in the upper left section of the painting.

## THE MBARI CLUBS AND BLACK ORPHEUS



Emerging in the early 1960s following independence from colonial rule, Mbari clubs became a center for Nigerian modernism and attracted artists, writers, musicians and actors from across Africa and the world. The Mbari Artists' and Writers' Club was concerned with fostering and sharing art and culture across the African continent. *Mbari* is an Igbo word for creation.

The first Mbari Club was established in Ibadan in July 1961 by writers, including Wole Soyinka, artists Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, and Ulli Beier, a German writer and critic. The club sought to provide a creative hub for the exchange, appreciation, and discussion of Pan-African art, theater, dance, music, poetry and writing. The club's meeting place was in the commercial heart of the city, near Dugbe Market.

A former nightclub, it had a courtyard that was converted into an open-air performance venue, as well as space for an art gallery, a library, and an office. Mbari workshops aimed to provide atmosphere and opportunities for creative exchange among artists. The Ibadan Mbari club established a publishing house that published novels, poems, and plays of emerging writers and artists throughout Africa. They also published the English language journal *Black Orpheus* from 1957 – 1967.

A second location, the Mbari-Mbayo Club (meaning 'when we see it, we are happy') was established in Òsogbo by the playwright Duro Ladipo in 1962. While another group of Nigerian artists and art students including Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya formed the Zaria Art Society in 1958 with a philosophy of combining local aesthetics and cultural traditions with Western art techniques to create a new modern art form.

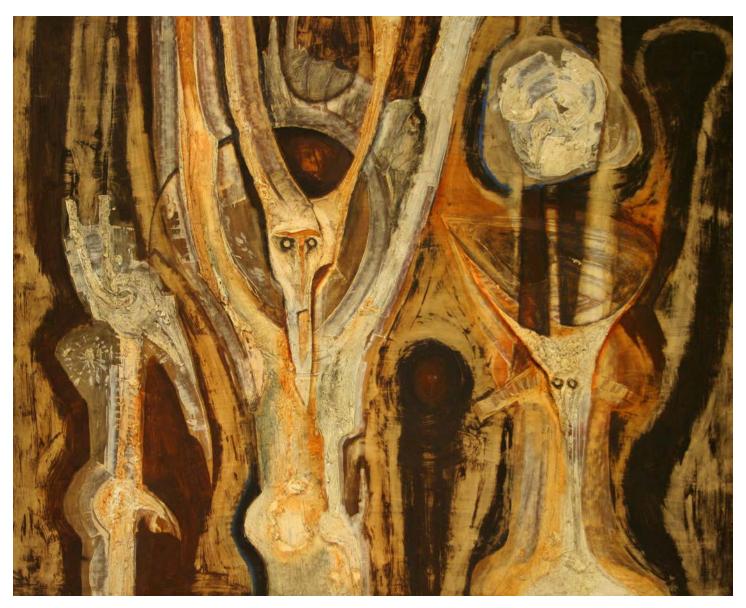
## SELECTED WORKS BY AFRICAN ARTISTS



Twins Seven-Seven (Nigerian, 1944–2011), *Sea Ghost 3*, c. 1968, Ink on plywood, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Holly and David Ross, 20003-5-1 © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Oyewale Aitoyeje) is considered one of the most important artists affiliated with the Òsogbo Mbari Mbayo Club. He painted, drew, sculpted, and designed textiles and metalwork, as well as being an accomplished musician and dancer. Twins' imagination was expansive. He created works filled with creatures drawn from Yoruba oral traditions, myths, religion, and his own personal experiences. His images were densely populated with figures emerging from the background towards the viewer.

Inspired by Yoruba myths and folklores, Twins Seven-Seven developed a distinctive style of thick outline and all-over pattern. His work can be read as a reflection of the excitement that occasioned the founding of the Mbari Club in Osogbo in the 1960s.



Ibrahim El Salahi (Sudanese, b. 1930), *Victory of Truth*, 1962, Oil on masonite, The Hampton University Museum Collection © Ibrahim El-Salahi, courtesy Vigo Gallery. All rights reserved, ARS, NY 2022

Mbari Club founder Ulli Beier saw **IBRAHIM EL SALAHI**'s work at an exhibition in Paris, featured it in *Black Orpheus*, and curated a solo exhibition at the Ibadan Mbari Club in 1961. The Sudanese artist studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London, England and traveled throughout Sudan, the United States and Mexico. *Victory of Truth* illustrates El Salahi's use of modernist expressionism

informed by traditional Sudanese forms. The exaggerated faces and bodies include references to animal and human forms. The design and shape are reminiscent of West and Central African animal-head masks. The painting's various tones of brown and orange evoke the reddish brown dirt and sandy environment in certain regions of Sudan, and the skin tones of the country's people.



Alexander "Skunder" Boghossian (Ethiopian, 1937–2003) *Untitled,* 1966, Oil on canvas, Chrysler Museum of Art, Museum purchase 2020.32

## **ALEXANDER "SKUNDER" BOGHOSSIAN** is

considered a pioneer in the modernist art movement in Ethiopia. His paintings reflect his numerous interests in Ethiopian history, the Coptic Church, music, surrealism, African iconography, and a shared connection between Africans and their counterparts in the United States. He traveled and studied in England and France before settling in Washington, D.C. in 1972. Similar to Ibrahim El Salahi, Boghossian was involved in developing modernist art practices in his country, by blending his Western training with African imagery and inspiration. His work was the focus of an exhibition at the Mbari Club in Ibadan in July 1963.

## noma collection connections



Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917 - 2000, *Builders #4*, 1973, Gouache on paper, image: 21½ x 30½ inches, Museum purchase, Women's Volunteer Fund and matching funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, 73.251

#### ON VIEW ON 2ND FLOOR MODERN ART

**JACOB LAWRENCE** often worked in sequential series, and the theme of builders was a subject to which he returned throughout his career. He described his dedication to the theme as a celebration of "man's continuous aspiration to develop, to build."

The dignity of creative labor and the sharing of knowledge and tradition across generations are themes of this longterm series. Here he creates a tight interior space with figures gathered in the foreground and identifiable tools of the trade on a shelf in the back.

My pictures express my life and experience. I paint the things I know about and the things I have experienced. The things I have experienced extend into my national, racial, and class group. So I paint the American scene.

—Jacob Lawrence



Ablade Glover, Market Lane II, 1998, Oil on canvas, Gift of Diane and Charles L. Frankel, 2022.33

### ON VIEW ON 2ND FLOOR FOCUS GALLERY

This work by Ghanaian artist **ABLADE GLOVER** is currently on view in the exhibition *Field and Figure: Recent Gifts from Diane and Charles L. Frankel* (on view through August 2023). Glover's interpretation of a market scene reflects the energy and vitality of life in West Africa in the decades after Ghana achieved independence in 1957. Glover began his art career at Kwame

Nkrumah University in his hometown of Accra and earned a doctorate from The Ohio State University in 1974. Like the previous generation of African artists featured in *Black Orpheus*, Glover demonstrates his ability to turn European artistic techniques towards the representation of Ghanaian life and to establish balance between realism and abstraction.



Odili Donald Odita (Nigerian, b. 1966, lives and works in Philadelphia), Forever, 2011, acrylic on wall, 12 feet 9 inches x 113 feet

Born in Nigeria and now based in Philadelphia, **ODILI DONALD ODITA** is well known for his hard-edged abstract paintings and murals in bright colors. His works reflect his African heritage, for they are reminiscent of African textiles, but Odita also draws inspiration from contemporary media-centered culture as well as the duality of growing up in both Nigeria and America. His father Emmanuel Odita was an founding member of the **Zaria Arts Society**, a modernist Nigerian art movement.

ON VIEW 1ST FLOOR ELEVATOR LOBBY

The wall painting consists of three main zones separated by gallery doors. paintings and murals in bright hues, reminiscent of African textiles. Shards of color streak across the wall in carefully selected colors designed to enliven and enhance the space in which they exist. "I like to get a feeling for a space," Odita explains, "and then try to capture the dynamics of the space." *Forever*, celebrates the vitality and diversity of New Orleans and is inspired by the notion of "Crossroads of class, race, culture, and crossroads of space."



**OLOWE OF ISE** was perhaps the greatest Yoruba carver of the 20th century. Although traditional African artists are not often identified by name, Olowe of Ise was praised by his contemporaries in **Oriki poems** celebrating his carving skills. He was hired by the **Oba** of Ikere to create doors, chairs, ritual objects, and architectural posts at the palace of the Ogoga of Ikere. The *Mounted Warrior Veranda Post* is one of a series of five posts in the exterior courtyard.

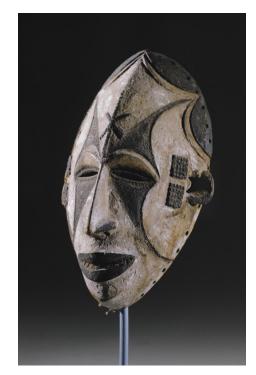
The mounted warrior appears ready for battle holding weapons and wearing armor. The Yoruba deity Esu is depicted toward the back of the post. Esu is considered a spirit of trickery who may lead mortals to temptation. He is called upon to protect travelers. The figure's sharp beard, sweeping hairstyle, and exaggerated eyes are typical of Olowe's work and are informed by tradition.

Mounted Warrior Veranda Post, 1910-1914, Olowe of Ise (circa 1875-1938), Yoruba Peoples, Ekiti Region, Nigeria, wood, polychrome, Ella West Freeman Foundation matching fund, 70.20

ON VIEW IN 3RD FLOOR AFRICAN ART GALLERIES

This traditional wooden mask of the **Igbo Peoples** represents women, but is commonly danced by men. Masks of this type were attached to an embellished headdress made of wooden sticks covered in multicolored cloth. The dancers also wore patterned bodysuits covered in appliqued fabric of blue, yellow, white and red. Such masks may have been worn during festivals to honor the seasons, such as "the fame of the maidens" ceremony during the dry season, or during rites to honor plentiful harvests. The fine features and ghostly white face intricate that this mask is in honor of ancestors, a spirit mask, not a lifelike representation.

ON VIEW IN 3RD FLOOR AFRICAN ART GALLERIES



Maiden Spirit Face Mask (Agbogho Mmanwu), n.d. Igbo Peoples, Nigeria, wood, pigment  $8 \% \times 5 1/8 \times 3 \%$  in., The Robert P. Gordy Collection, 88.34.

# **BEFORE YOUR VISIT**

## **SHOW**

Look at Lawrence's painting *Market Scene*, 1966 (page 5).

Use the **VISUAL THINKING ROUTINE See, Think, Wonder**:

What do you **SEE**?

What do you **THINK** is happening?

What do you WONDER about this image?

## **DISCUSS**

Tell students about Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight's visit to Nigeria in 1964 (see previous sections). Ask students to think about a time when they visited a new place. How did it make them feel? What did they see, smell, hear while there?

## WRITE

Students will write a *Five Senses Poem* about their experience.

l see			
I hear			
l smell			
I taste			
l feel			

## **AFTER YOUR VISIT**

## **DISCUSS**

Jacob Lawrence made drawings and paintings and wrote letters to relay stories about his visit to Nigeria. How do you like to share stories from your life?

## **DESCRIBE**

Consider a work of art that you saw on your visit to NOMA or another interesting sight from your neighborhood. How would you describe it to a friend?

## **CREATE**

Give each student a blank piece of paper and ask them to write down their description and illustrate it on the page. Use crayons, colored pencils, markers or other available materials. Collect all student work to make a class book.

**ALTERNATIVE:** Students can describe their chosen work of art in an oral presentation or video.

## CURRICULUM STANDARDS

## K-12 Student Standards English Language Arts

- Anchor Standard W 2: Write informative/ explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- Anchor Standard W 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, wellchosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

K-12 Louisiana Student Standards for **Social Studies** (World Geography)

- WG.1 Describe economic, social, cultural, political, and physical characteristics of countries, nations, and world regions.
- WG.3 Connect past events, people, and ideas to the present to draw conclusions and explain current implications.

### **NATIONAL CORE ART STANDARDS**

- Visual Arts: CREATING
   Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work
- Visual Arts: PRESENTING
   Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work
- Visual Arts: RESPONDING
   Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work
- Visual Arts: CONNECTING

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

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

## **TIMELINE**

1917 Jacob Lawrence born in Atlantic City, NY

**1930** Lawrence moves to Harlem, takes art classes, and participates in the Harlem Art Workshop

**1937 – 1941** Lawrence creates painting series on the lives of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman

**1957** American Society for African Culture (AMSAC) forms in New York.

Black Orpheus journal launches in Ibadan, Nigeria

**1958** Zaria Art Society established by students from the Nigerian College of Art and Design

**1960** Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule

**1961** Mbari Artist and Writers Club formed in Ibadan, Nigeria

**1962** Jacob Lawrence visits Lagos, Nigeria where works from his *War* and *Migration* series were shown at AMSAC's West African Cultural Center.

**1964** Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight visit Nigeria for an eight month stay that includes workshops at the Ibadan and Osugbo Mbari Clubs.

**1965** Lawrence presents 13 paintings and 9 crayon and ink drawings of Nigerian marketplace scenes at the Terry Dintenfass gallery in New York.

**1967 – 70** Nigerian Civil War results in civilian deaths. *Black Orpheus* ceases operations (printed sporadically until 1975).

**1970** Lawrence becomes an art professor at the University of Washington in Seattle

**1990** Lawrence awarded the National Medal of Honor

**2000** Lawrence died at his home in Seattle at the age of 82 after a long illness.

# **GLOSSARY**

#### **ADIRE**

A patterned Nigerian cloth dyed blue with indigo.

#### **AFRICAN DIASPORA**

The voluntary or involuntary movement of people and communities descending from the continent of Africa who dispersed to various parts of the world, predominantly in the Americas.

#### **CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

A nonviolent social and political movement of the mid-1950s to late 1960s in the United States formed to abolish institutionalized racism, segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement of oppressed peoples.

#### **CONTEMPORARY**

Of the current time.

#### HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Black intellectual, literary, and artistic movement that flowered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York city from 1919 – 1929.

### HARLEM ART WORKSHOP

A community art center that operated from 1937 – 1942 as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. Led by Augusta Savage, the center offered art classes for children and adults.

#### HARLEM MURAL PROJECT

Part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project led by Charles Alston.

#### **OBA**

A Yoruba word for ruler or king, often used as a formal title or acknowledgment.

#### ORIKI

A literary genre specific to the Yoruba People that is expressed as a poem or song of praise.

#### **MBARI**

An Igbo word for creation.

MBARI ARTIST AND WRITER'S CLUB Meeting place and cultural center founded in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1961.

#### VISUAL THINKING ROUTINE

A framework developed by Harvard University's Project Zero that offers questions or routines for classroom use to be used in a variety of contexts.

# WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION'S FEDERAL ART PROJECT (WPA)

A cultural program established by the United States government in 1935 under the New Deal to help unemployed artists. Artists were hired to produce works of art for tax-supported institutions.

#### **ZARIA ART SOCIETY**

A modernist Nigerian art movement.

## REFERENCES

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www.nga.gov/learn/teachers/lessons-activities/pre-k/jacob-lawrence.html National Gallery of Art Teacher Materials.

www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/remember/janjune00/lawrence\_6-13.html Interview with Jacob Lawrence by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, 1995

www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/fosteringcreativity-mbari-artists-and-writers-club. Blog post on the Mbari Clubs of Nigeria.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrVQ\_cu9HEI.
NOMA Video of Odili Donald Odita mural installation, 2011.

#### **VIMEO VIDEOS**

https://vimeo.com/31650644 Lecture at NOMA by Odili Donald Odita

https://vimeo.com/30249514

How to make a graphic travelogue video

## **SCHEDULE A VISIT**

Look for **STUDENT VISIT REQUEST FORM** on <u>noma.org</u>

**EMAIL** grouptours@noma.org

## **GUIDED SCHOOL TOURS**

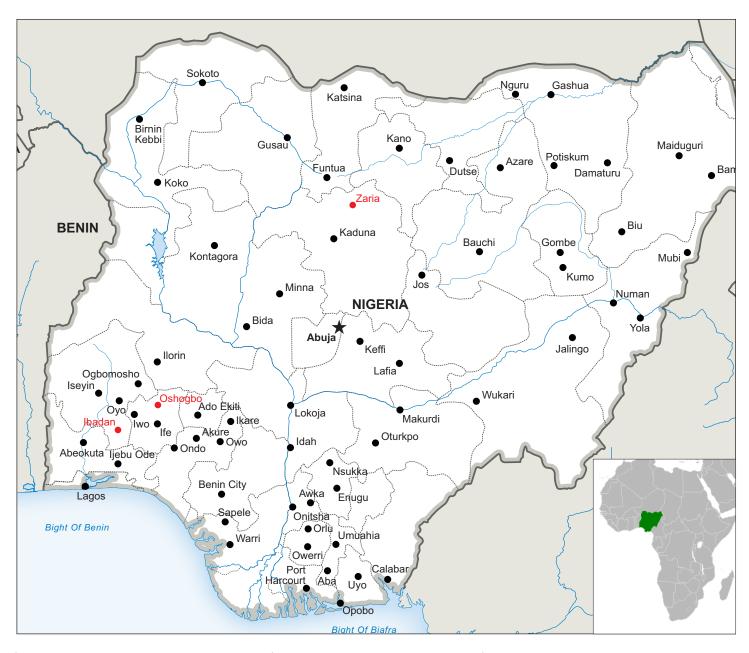
Kindergarten through 12th grade

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- Interactive, conversational, and standards-aligned
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   Explorers, What's the Story? and STEAM
   Ahead. Adaptable to all age groups.
- Special Request tours available with one month notice.

#### **SELF-GUIDED AND EDUCATOR LED TOURS**

- Offered during NOMA's public hours
- Make connections to your curriculum
- Request educator resources or use the NOMA Mobile Guide

# **ABOUT NIGERIA**



Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups. The most populous and politically influential are Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo), and Ijaw. Over 500 languages are spoken in Nigeria. English is the official language.

**IBADAN, NIGERIA**— capital of Oyo State, University of Ibadan, Mbari Artists and Writers Club

**ÒSOGBO, NIGERIA**—capital of Osun State, home of Mbari-Mbayo club

#### **COVER IMAGES**

Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000), Market Scene, 1966, Gouache on paper, Chrysler Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 2018.22, © 2022 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Cover of Black Orpheus Journal #2, January 1958. Jean Outland Chrysler Library, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Va., T2022.9.