

## THE INFLUENCE OF OUR ANCESTORS: STORIES AND MEMORIES



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, American (b. 1940). *A Street Called Home*, 1997 (original art for the book of the same name) ©Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson

When I considered planning an art lesson with my students about Aminah Robinson's art, I thought about creating a lesson that dealt with the importance of work and the jobs our ancestors did and relating it to Aminah's *A Street Called Home*. When the lesson started to unfold, it became a lesson on ancestors with a different emphasis. Instead of just the occupations of our elders, it was broader. It became a lesson on what our elders and ancestors do (did), why we cherish them, special memories of times spent with them, or the stories we were told about them, and how they influence us (our lives and our art).

The students looked at Aminah's work and discussed how her art was influenced by her father, mother, and the stories told to her by her Uncle Alvin. After looking at Aminah's work, I showed them a multicultural children's picture book, ***Honoring Our Ancestors: Stories and Pictures by Fourteen Artists*** edited by Harriet Rohmer ISBN D-89239-158-8. This is a rich anthology that includes personal accounts by each of the fourteen artists about an ancestor that influenced their lives and a painting they did to honor each of them. Norman Rockwell's many prints that depict children with elders are other resources that I used for this lesson.

The students then discussed what elders and ancestors influenced their lives, family stories, the occupations, likes, dislikes, and hobbies of their parents and grandparents, and cherished memories of times they spent with them. One added aspect to the lesson was discussing "ancestors in spirit" which may be important elders who are not related to us but are cherished and honored by us. I wanted the students to put themselves in the shoes of their ancestors to feel what they felt, see what they saw, to close their eyes and imagine what it would be like if they were living in their ancestor's shoes. I wanted my students to be empowered by the memories and stories of their ancestors so they could tell those stories through their art.

The student art that resulted from this lesson was varied and rich. One student drew a beautiful picture of a quilt that was given to her mother by her grandmother. Even though her grandmother is deceased, when they want to remember the past, the student and her mother take out the quilt and her mother tells her stories about her grandmother's farm. Another student's grandfather was a preacher, farmer, and served in the army. The student divided his paper in four sections and depicted his grandfather in each of these ways with the fourth section showing he and his grandfather fishing and building a dock

together. Another student honors both grandfathers by dividing his paper in two sections. The first section of the drawing shows a railroad scene complete with box cars, tunnels, and a little town where the first grandfather worked and the other section of the drawing depicts an office with computers, bookshelves, and file cabinets where the other grandfather worked as an engineer. One boy drew his father (who was a professional baseball player) on the pitching mound in a stadium complete with lights and hometown fans. Another girl has a special memory of her elderly neighbor (an ancestor is spirit) who taught her how to ride horses and let her help take care of the chickens. There were many more drawings equally sensational. In this lesson, students were easily engaged to tell wonderful stories through their art.

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