

## Africa to Carolina: Seeing History Through Art

### Overview

This lesson invites students to explore how contemporary artists interpret the history and legacy of the Africa to Carolina journey. Students will examine artworks that memorialize the transatlantic slave trade, use visual analysis to understand how artists convey themes of history, memory, and identity, and connect these artistic expressions to primary historical sources such as slave narratives and ship manifests.

Because the history of the slave trade is often recorded in documents that reduce human lives to numbers and property, this lesson highlights the vital role of artists, including Stephen Hayes, Bisa Butler, Lubaina Himid, and Toni Scott, who restore humanity, dignity, and emotional depth to these stories. Through their work, students will consider how art helps us see what the historical record alone cannot: the lived experience of enslaved Africans and the ongoing legacy of their forced migration to North Carolina.

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Examine works of art that interpret or memorialize the transatlantic slave trade.
- Use visual analysis to interpret how artists convey themes of history, memory, and identity.
- Connect artistic expression to historical sources such as slave narratives and ship manifests.
- Reflect on how contemporary artists shape our understanding of the past and its relevance today.

### Central Question

How can art help us understand the human experience of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies in North Carolina?

### Course(s)

- Social Studies
- Art

### Grades

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- This lesson can be adapted for high school.

### Duration

1-2 class periods

## Vocabulary/Key Topics:

- Forced migration
- Middle Passage
- Cultural memory
- Resistance
- Manumission
- Diaspora

## Materials

Images (digital or printed) of:

- [Stephen Hayes' \*Cash Crop\*](#) (sculptural installation referencing slave ship diagrams)
- [Bisa Butler's \*The Storm, the Whirlwind, and the Earthquake\*](#) (textile portrait of Frederick Douglass, or another of her quilt works tied to slavery/Black history)
- [Lubaina Himid's \*Naming the Money\*](#) (installation referencing enslaved Africans in European households)
- [Toni Scott's \*Bloodlines\*](#) (sculptural/mixed media exploring ancestry, trauma, and resilience)
- Excerpts from primary sources

## Additional Resources

### Africa to Carolina: Overview & Historical Context

[Africa to Carolina](#) is an initiative of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, part of the North Carolina Department of Natural & Cultural Resources, that traces and interprets the arrival, experiences, and enduring impact of enslaved Africans in North Carolina.

The forced migration of enslaved Africans to North Carolina began in the early sixteenth century, bringing approximately 2,000 individuals through the colony's major ports at Bath, Edenton, Brunswick, Wilmington, New Bern, Roanoke, and Beaufort, with Portsmouth Island and Battery Island also serving as stops along importation routes. This number does not include the many lives lost on board these vessels before disembarking.

From 1759 to 1787, eleven documented voyages carried enslaved Africans directly from the continent and additional ships arrived from the Caribbean and other parts of the United States.

In an unfamiliar land and facing horrific conditions, these previously free people resisted, survived, and helped build the foundations of North Carolina's society. Their labor created intercoastal canals vital to trade; they cleared land and cultivated crops using agricultural expertise from West Africa; and they contributed specialized skills as coopers, shipbuilders, river pilots, carpenters, blacksmiths, and brick masons whose craftsmanship endures in the colony's oldest structures. Enslaved Africans built much of the physical infrastructure of North Carolina's earliest settlements and, despite being transported thousands of miles from their

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homes, rebuilt kinship networks that formed the basis of a distinct African American community.

Together, the documented voyages and the profound contributions of these individuals illustrate the direct connection between the African continent, the development of the institution of slavery, and the North Carolina colony.

See also:

- [Africa to Carolina](#)- This project page by the NC African American Heritage Commission includes county records and background essays.
- [Evolution of the Map of Africa](#)- This resource from Princeton University shows how maps of Africa have evolved throughout history.

## North Carolina Social Studies Standards

### Middle School History (Grade 8)

- 8.H.1.3 – Use primary and secondary sources to interpret various perspectives of the past.
- 8.H.1.4 – Use historical inquiry to evaluate the validity of sources used to construct historical narratives.
- 8.H.2.1 – Explain the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflicts (including slavery) on the development of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.C.1.2 – Understand how art, literature, music, and oral traditions shape the cultural heritage of a community.
- 8.C.1.3 – Understand the role that diverse groups have played in the development of North Carolina and the United States.

### High School (American History)

- AH.H.1.3 – Use primary and secondary sources to interpret and evaluate multiple perspectives of various historical events.
- AH.H.1.5 – Analyze how different historical perspectives shape the way people understand history.
- AH.H.2.1 – Explain how slavery, immigration, settlement patterns, and economic expansion influenced American identity.
- AH.C&G.1.4 – Explain how cultural expressions (art, literature, music) reflect social, political, and economic issues.

### High School (African American Studies Elective)

- AAS.H.1.3 – Analyze primary and secondary sources to compare multiple perspectives of African American history.
- AAS.H.2.2 – Analyze the effects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on Africa and the Americas.

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- AAS.C.1.2 – Evaluate how African American cultural expressions (art, literature, music, performance) have influenced American culture.
- AAS.C.1.3 – Analyze how African American artists, writers, and musicians have used creative expression to resist oppression and reclaim identity.

## Preparation

Set a thoughtful tone, emphasizing the themes of resilience, humanity and truth, and refrain from only addressing the trauma experienced by those enslaved. Teachers should anticipate a range of emotional responses and build in brief moments for reflection, discussion, or grounding as needed. For younger learners, the lesson can be scaled down by focusing on one artist (such as Stephen Hayes or Toni Scott) and pairing the artwork with age-appropriate texts like Kwame Alexander’s *An American Story* or Ashley Bryan’s *Freedom Over Me*.

Tips for framing:

- Center *humanity and agency*, not just trauma.
- Use terms like *enslaved person* rather than *slave*.
- Remind students that enslaved Africans contributed essential skills (farming, building, craftsmanship) that built NC’s economy.
- Build in time for reflection (journals, circle shares, art responses) to help students process emotional weight.

For additional support, consult:

- [“How Can Teachers Explain Slavery to Students?”](#) – Harvard Graduate School of Education
- [“Teaching About Slavery in the United States? Start With Honesty”](#) - EdWeek
- [Teaching Hard History – American Slavery](#)– *Learning For Justice*. Offers a grade-band framework, key concepts, and sample strategies for teaching slavery with accuracy and care.

## Procedure:

### 1. Hook (10 min)

Display Toni Scott’s [Bloodlines](#) sculpture. Ask:

- Is this about the past, the present, or both?
- What emotions or memories might the artist be connecting to?
- Why might the title “Bloodlines” be significant?

Briefly introduce Scott as a contemporary artist who uses art to explore ancestry and the legacy of enslavement. Visit her website and explore her full exhibition, [Bloodlines](#).

### 2. Gallery Walk – Four Artists (30 min)

Divide students into groups. Set up four “stations” (Hayes, Butler, Himid, Scott). At each station, students spend 7–8 minutes observing the artwork, viewing the video clips, and [North Carolina African American Heritage Commission | NC Department of Natural & Cultural Resources | aahc.nc.gov](#)

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responding to guiding prompts:

- What materials, colors, and shapes do you notice?
- How does the artwork represent history or memory?
- Whose perspective is centered?
- What emotions does the piece evoke?
- What questions does it raise about the transatlantic slave trade?

**\*\*Each group rotates until they have seen all four works\*\***

### **3. Historical Connection (20 min)**

Give each group a short excerpt of a primary source (ship diagram, slave voyage, Equiano's words, Omar Said excerpt, NC oral history, genealogical record).

Task: *Compare the historical source with one of the artworks.*

- What does the document emphasize? How do you know?
- What does the artwork emphasize? How do you know?
- How do the two together give a fuller picture of history?

#### **Example Pairings:**

- Hayes ↔ Slave Ship Diagram/Slave Voyages
- Butler ↔ Equiano's Narrative/Frederick Douglass
- Himid ↔ Omar Ibn Said Excerpt/Runaway Slave Advertisements
- Scott ↔ NC oral history/genealogical record

### **4. Whole-Class Discussion (15 min)**

- Hayes and Scott both use the human body to tell history. How are their approaches similar or different?
- Butler and Himid use textiles, names, and presence. How does that shift how we see history?
- What role does art play in remembering stories that were silenced or erased?
- How do these artists reclaim narratives of Africa to Carolina that were once told only from the perspective of enslavers and traders?

### **5. Reflection/Exit Ticket (5 min)**

Prompt: Choose one piece of art from today. If you could ask the artist one question about their work, what would it be and why?

## **Culminating Activity Options**

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- **Creative Response:** Students create their own “Bloodlines” or “Cash Crop”—inspired piece: a symbolic family tree, collage, poem, or digital art that reflects either their own ancestry or an imagined voice of someone from Africa to Carolina.
- **Analytical Writing:** Students write a short essay comparing Toni Scott and Stephen Hayes’ use of the body in art.
  - How do they represent trauma?
  - How do they represent resilience?
  - What does this tell us about the power of art as historical narrative?

## Works Cited

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[Stephen Hayes’ Cash Crop](#) (sculptural installation referencing slave ship diagrams)

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