



THE NATIONAL
WWII MUSEUM
NEW ORLEANS

The Stories a Painting Can Tell You

Willie Birch's *Old Soldiers Never Die*

A Lesson from
the Education Department

The National WWII Museum
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www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education

The Stories a Painting Can Tell You Willie Birch's *Old Soldiers Never Die*

Willie Birch (1942-) is an internationally known artist and educator who was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. Much of his artwork explores political and social themes like race and economic inequality, and challenges the viewer to question who or what has value in our society. *Old Soldiers Never Die* (1999) is a painting taken from Birch's portrait series of people living in his largely African American neighborhood, the Seventh Ward, in New Orleans. This lesson plan will introduce students to the use and analysis of a work of art as a primary historical source to learn about the role of veterans in American society.

OBJECTIVES: Students will:

- Define primary and secondary sources and identify examples of each.
- Use observation skills and their knowledge of the artist and U.S. history to explore and analyze the painting, *Old Soldiers Never Die* by Willie Birch.
- Discuss what the painting can tell us about the status of veterans in the United States today.

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

STANDARDS:

ARTSEDGE Visual Arts Standards (9-12), The Kennedy Center

Visual Arts Standards 4: understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Common Core ELA Standards for Literacy & History/Social Studies (11-12)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9: Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

National Center for History in the Schools

Historical Thinking Standard 2: the student comprehends a variety of historical sources and can identify the central historical questions and perspectives of a narrative, and draws upon visual sources, including paintings.

Historical Thinking Standard 3: the student engages in historical analysis and interpretation.

TIME REQUIREMENT: 60-70 minutes

MATERIALS:

Copies of photograph of Willie Birch painting, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (1999)
Photograph of African American WWII Naval recruits, August 1943
Handout of brief artist biography & context of the painting
Art analysis/primary source worksheet
Factsheet: *African Americans in WWII: Fighting for a Double Victory*

KEY TERMS:

- **Double-Victory:** the term given to the wartime civil rights campaign by African American leaders and organizations during WWII which called for the defeat of fascism and the enemy abroad and the defeat of segregation at home in the United States.
- **Point of view:** a position from which someone or something is observed; the mental position or attitude from which a story is observed or narrated.
- **Portrait:** a likeness of a person, especially of the face, as a painting, drawing, sculpture, or a photograph.
- **Primary source:** an original or first-hand document, story or object that was created by someone during the time period under study
- **Secondary source:** an account, object, or interpretation of an event which was created by someone without first-hand experience of the time period under study.
- **Segregation:** the practice or policy of creating separate facilities and laws for minorities; often refers to the system of discrimination against African Americans that was established in the South after the Civil War.
- **Symbolism:** the use of an object or image that represents a larger idea or concept.
Ex: a bald eagle represents the United States of America.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE:

This lesson can correspond with the study of African American participation and roles during WWII or be used as a review of primary and secondary historical sources.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Present a brief introduction about the African American experience during WWII. You may want to show the provided National Archives image of African American men in the Navy during WWII. Ask students to study the photograph and to think about the challenges that African Americans faced during the war. Introduce the concept of **“Double Victory.”**

Visual Source Analysis:

2. Review the terms/concept of **primary and secondary historical sources** with students. Introduce the idea that, like the WWII photograph that they just saw, art (visual, audio, performance) can also be a primary source. As a result, art can be analyzed to reveal meaning about the artist and the historical and cultural context in which the artwork was produced. **Hand out activity worksheet.**
3. Show students a projected image of *Old Soldiers Never Die* by artist Willie Birch but do not give them information about the title, artist or when the painting was created. Have them study the painting silently for **one minute** and to list **only what they see**, not what they think it means. Reconvene and share as a class.
4. Then, ask the students to revisit the painting and study it again silently for **30 seconds**, and to **interpret what they see** as they fill in their worksheets. Are there any **symbols** in the piece? Reconvene and share as a class and ask them to speculate on the title of the piece, who created it and when.
5. Reveal the title and the artist and date of the piece to the students. Does this information, particularly the fact that the artist is African American, change their interpretation of the piece? Why or why not?
6. Introduce the key terms **point of view and portrait**. What do they think the artist is trying to say about the veteran in the portrait? What is Birch’s point of view? Ask students to support their answers with evidence from the painting. What is the artist trying to say about America? Again,

ask the students to support their answers using evidence from the painting. How do you think the artist feel about the veteran(s) in the painting?

Historical Context of the Artist and Painting:

7. Provide students with an image of the painting, the brief artist biography and context of the painting handout, National Archives image of African American sailors, and the ***African Americans in WWII: Fighting for a “Double Victory” factsheet***. Give them class time to read the handouts and address the questions on the worksheet.
8. Reconvene the class and ask them if their interpretations of the painting have changed now that they know some background about the artist’s life and inspirations surrounding the painting. Why or why not?
9. Is this painting a good primary source to learn about the role of veterans in today’s society? How can it connect us with the past experiences of African Americans in the military, especially related to the “Double Victory” campaign during WWII?

Take Home Reflection Activity:

Based on the classroom discussion and activity, have students develop a creative writing piece written from the perspective of the American Legion veteran in Willie Birch’s painting, *Old Soldiers Never Die*.

ASSESSMENT: Components for assessment include the student activity worksheet, classroom discussion, and take home written reflection activity.

ENRICHMENT: Have students listen to one or more of the following WWII oral histories about the experiences of African Americans in the military at <http://ww2online.org>.

- [Vernon Baker](#): Army, Medal of Honor recipient
 - [Wallace Baptiste](#): Navy, USS Hopkins
 - [Joseph Hairston](#): Army, 92nd Infantry Division
 - [William Holloman III](#): U.S. Army Air Corps Reserve
 - [John Leahr](#): 332nd Fighter Group, Tuskegee Airman
 - [Charles McGee](#): 332nd Fighter Group, Tuskegee Airman
 - [Eugene Tarrant](#): Navy, USS San Francisco
- a) Ask: How do their oral histories deepen our understanding of the fight for “Double Victory” during WWII?
 - b) Ask students to create a portrait of one of the WWII veterans using words or an image. What experiences and characteristics would they emphasize and why? Display their work in the classroom.
- As a longer-term research project, have students research, conduct, and transcribe an oral history interview with a living U.S. veteran.
 - a) Contact a local library or historical society to see if they are interested in adding the students’ oral histories and transcriptions to their collection.
 - b) Ask the students to create a portrait of the veteran that they interviewed, using words or an image. What experiences and characteristics would they emphasize and why? Display their work in a classroom exhibit and invite their interviewees to attend.

RESOURCES:

The National WWII Museum

- [The Digital Collections of The National WWII Museum](#)
- [Education: For Teachers](#) webpage
- [Focus On: African Americans in WWII](#) feature
- [Home Front lesson plans: People of Color](#)

Arthur Roger Gallery, "Willie Birch" artist entry.

<http://arthurorogergallery.com/artists/willie-birch/>

Billy Sothern, "New Orleans' African Retentions: Willie Birch with Billy Sothern,"

The Brooklyn Rail, Nov. 4, 2007.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2007/11/express/new-orleans-african-retentions-willie>

KnowLA: Encyclopedia of Louisiana, "[Willie Birch](#)" entry

www.knowla.org/

Library of Congress

www.loc.gov

- [Using Primary Sources](#)
- [Veterans History Project](#)

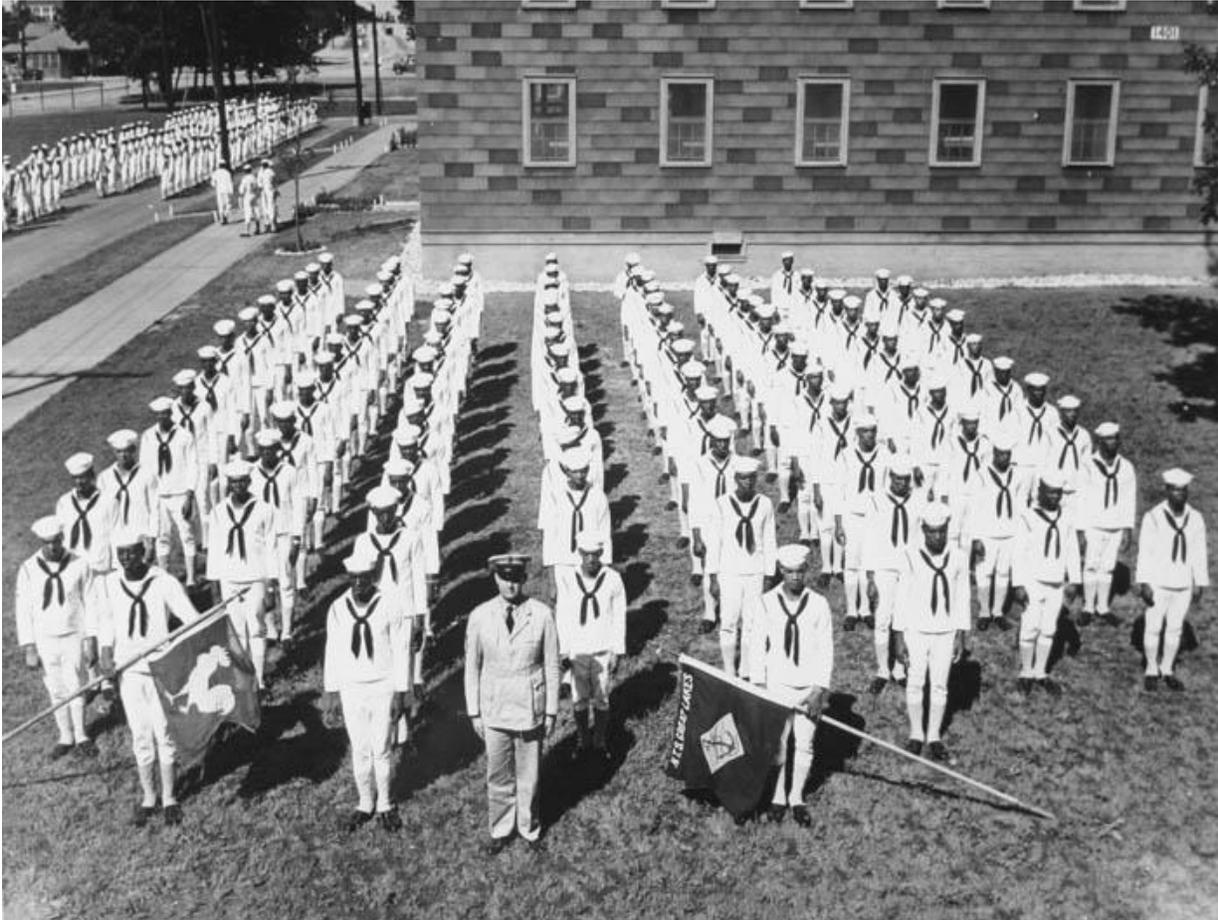
National Archives and Records Administration

www.archives.gov

Smithsonian American Art Museum

<http://americanart.si.edu/>

Image of African Americans in the Navy During WWII



Caption: “A company of new Negro recruits which has been entered in the “Hall of Fame” at the Great Lakes, Ill. Naval Training Station.” August 1943.
Image courtesy of The National Archives and Records Administration.

Willie Birch, *Old Soldiers Never Die,* (1999)
Gift of the Willie Birch, from the collection of
The National WWII Museum



Art/Primary Source Analysis
Student Worksheet

Directions: Study the projected image. Using your prior knowledge of U.S. history and powers of observation, complete the chart and following questions.

What is this object? _____

Look closely at this object. Based on what you see, take notes on only what you observe first—colors, objects, etc. Then, look again and write what you think these characteristics mean in the interpretation column.

Observation	Interpretation

- Based on what you see, what is story that this object tells you? In other words, what is happening in this picture?

- When do you think it was made?

- Who made it and why?

- What do you think that the title of this image might be? Explain your answer.

Actual Information about the Object:

Title: _____
Artist: _____
Date: _____

1. Does this information change your interpretation of the painting? Explain your answer.
2. Who is the central figure of this painting? Describe him.
3. What is the artist's point of view towards this man? Explain.
4. What symbols or other techniques does the artist use to convey meaning?
5. Is this painting a primary or secondary source? Explain your answer.
6. Describe the mood of this painting.
7. What do you think the painting says about the place of veterans in American society?

Brief Artist Biography & Context of the Painting

Willie Birch's *Old Soldiers Never Die*

Artist Willie Birch was born on Thanksgiving night, November 26, 1942 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He grew up in the Magnolia Housing Projects of New Orleans during the era of Jim Crow segregation. Birch's uncle served in the military during World War II, as did many of the men that he knew and respected in his community. One of Birch's strongest memories from his childhood was when he and his classmates visited the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) in sixth grade. He remembered entering the building through the back entrance and having the strong impression that, as an African American child, "this [art] is not for you."

Birch came of age during the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s, he joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and participated in several civil rights protests, including a sit-in demonstration at a Woolworth's Department Store on Canal Street in New Orleans. At his mother's request, Birch joined the United States Air Force and served from 1961-1965. After leaving the service, Birch took advantage of the GI Bill to return to college, and earned a Bachelor of Arts in painting in 1969.

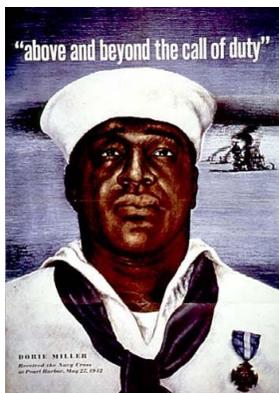
As an artist, Birch has traveled around the world and created artworks out of different materials, including sculptures made from stone, paper mache and metal, and two-dimensional paintings, public murals, and sketches. His artwork has been exhibited internationally and can be found in the permanent collections of many famous museums including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA). He currently lives and works in New Orleans.

In the late 1990s, Birch began to work on a series of large scale, two-dimensional portraits of people living in his Seventh Ward community in New Orleans. *Old Soldiers Never Die* was created during this period and was based on a Veterans' Day Parade that Birch observed in the city. When asked about his motivation for painting this series, Birch replied that "the idea behind [these portraits] was to make these people we call African American larger than life so that the viewer had to confront them as equals. This is because historically, most of the images that we see [of] ourselves are mostly very, very small." (Citation: Billy Southern, "New Orleans' African Retentions: Willie Birch with Billy Sothern," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 4, 2007. <http://brooklynrail.org/2007/11/express/new-orleans-african-retentions-willie>)

Birch donated the painting *Old Soldiers Never Die* to The National WWII Museum in conjunction with the 2001 Double Victory Conference that was co-hosted by the Museum and The University of New Orleans.

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II

Fighting for a Double Victory



African Americans served bravely and with distinction in every theater of World War II, while simultaneously struggling for their own civil rights from “the world’s greatest democracy.” Although the United States Armed Forces were officially segregated until 1948, WWII laid the foundation for post-war integration of the military. In 1941 fewer than 4,000 African Americans were serving in the military and only twelve African Americans had become officers. By 1945, more than 1.2 million African Americans would be serving in uniform on the Home Front, in Europe, and the Pacific (including thousands of African American women in the Women’s auxiliaries).

During the war years, the segregation practices of civilian life spilled over into the military. The draft was segregated and more often than not African Americans were passed over by the all-white draft boards. Pressure from the NAACP led President Roosevelt to pledge that African Americans would be enlisted according to their percentage in the population. Although this percentage, 10.6%, was never actually attained in the services during the war, African American numbers grew dramatically in the Army, Navy, Army Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard.

While most African Americans serving at the beginning of WWII were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to service duties, such as supply, maintenance, and transportation, their work behind front lines was equally vital to the war effort. Many drove for the famous “Red Ball Express,” which carried a half million tons of supplies to the advancing First and Third Armies through France. By 1945, however, troop losses virtually forced the military to begin placing more African American troops into positions as infantrymen, pilots, tankers, medics, and officers in increasing numbers. In all positions and ranks, they served with as much honor, distinction, and courage as any American soldier did. Still, African American MPs stationed in the South often could not enter restaurants where their German prisoners were being served a meal.

On D-Day, the First Army on Omaha and Utah Beaches included about 1,700 African American troops. This number included a section of the 327th Quartermaster Service Company and the 320th Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, which protected troops on the beach from aerial attack. Soon the all-black 761st Tank Battalion was fighting its way through France with Patton’s Third Army. They spent 183 days in combat and were credited with capturing 30 major towns in France, Belgium, and Germany.

The Army Air Force also established several African American fighter and bomber groups. The famous “Tuskegee Airmen” of the 332nd Fighter Group became part of the 15th Air Force, flying ground support missions over Anzio and escorting bombers on missions over Southern Italy. The Tuskegee Airmen flew more than 15,000 sorties between May 1943 and June 1945. Bomber crews often requested to be escorted by these “Redtails,” a nickname acquired from the painted tails of Tuskegee fighter planes. Sixty-six Tuskegee Airmen died in combat.

Stephen Ambrose identified the lamentable American irony of WWII, writing, “*The world’s greatest democracy fought the world’s greatest racist with a segregated army*” (Ambrose, *Citizen Soldier*). During the global conflict, African American leaders and organizations established the “Double V” campaign, calling for victory against the enemy overseas and victory against racism at home. This new black consciousness and the defiant rejection of unjustifiable racism planted important seeds for the post-War civil rights movement.

The National WWII Museum honors the contributions of African Americans in World War II.