

# Benny Andrews

## The Visible Man

Time: 15 minutes

## Study Guide

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### INTRODUCTION

**Benny Andrews: The Visible Man** is a film about a man who is a writer, activist and painter of people. He uses memories, storytelling and imagination as much as he does oils, ink and collages. His subject matter is people, mostly African American people lifted from his southern heritage, but more universally, people of all kinds - black, white, rich, poor, pious, heathen, northern or southern. As actor Geoffrey Holder says in the film, "In Benny's eyes, they are all his people."

He began scratching pictures in the dirt with nails or sticks and went on to develop an expressionist figurative style. His drawings, done in ink and crow quill, are of evocative, elongated figures. His lines seem to glide to reveal the figures, often from unexpected perspectives. Andrews is an excellent draftsman, whose simple but powerful works are also minimalist.

When he went to Art Institute of Chicago in 1957, he began to work in collage and was on the path to producing his strongest and subtlest pieces. This was a time when it was daring to add extraneous material to canvas. The artist liked this because he didn't want to lose the tough reality of his subjects. He describes making collages as "constructing."

Critics have said that Benny Andrews' people have a nobility. He brings to a heroic level ordinary people doing ordinary things. He is not an artist who left home, went north, got an education, got famous and forgot what he was all about. Physically and emotionally, he is never far from home. He balances his life between New York and a studio in Georgia, painting people wherever they live.

### TO THE TEACHER:

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds.

- provide questions for reflection.
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

## **SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST**

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and his accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Benny Andrews (1930 - ) was born in Madison, GA, the son of tenant farmers and one of 10 children. His father, George, was a sharecropper and a prolific folk artist; his mother, Viola, was a strong and respected person who is credited with purchasing pencils, paper and crayons for the children who all liked to draw and paint, particularly Benny.

They were poor, but somehow his parents always read and subscribed to newspapers and magazines and they had a radio, which was very unusual for a family in their situation. Benny could only attend school when he was not needed on the plantation. He went to a segregated school in a log cabin with no library for African Americans. He was only able to attend high school for five months of the year between the planting and picking of cotton.

After graduating in 1948, he received a small scholarship for his excellent performance as a 4-H club member. After two years at Fort Valley, GA, State College, he enlisted in the Air Force and served in Korea until 1954. Ironically the Southern segregationist school system enabled Benny to leave Georgia and enroll in the well-known school at the Art Institute of Chicago. State monies paid partial tuition fees for black students to attend schools outside of the state in order to receive education not available to them in Georgia. Benny's natural talent was honed at the Art Institute, but he was excluded from every school club and organizations as well as student exhibits.

He earned his B.F.A., married and moved to New York. During the next seven years, three children were born, but being an artist didn't become easier. His representational work was out of style in the era of Abstract

Expressionism, but he continued to refine his powerful figurative work and the expert manipulation of materials in his collages.

In the 1960s and 70s, Benny Andrews led protests against museums and galleries which included no African Americans and few women. His leadership in the arts has directly affected the lives of many fellow artists during his 1982-84 tenure as Visual Arts Director of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Today his oil on canvas collages are in major museums and galleries from New York to Tokyo, Vietnam to Moscow, and he is a popular professor at Queens College in New York. His work has been featured in several books and periodicals. He has received many prestigious awards such as The John Hay Whitney and Rockefeller Foundation fellowships.

### **WHAT TO WATCH FOR**

*Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.*

- Watch for the vivid description of the artist by famous actor Geoffrey Holder.
- Watch for how the artist examines fabric and stirs paints with brushes.
- Watch for a painting of an old man that shows the artist's powers of observation.
- Watch for how the artist says the painting starts talking to him.
- Watch for how the artist uses fabric.
- Watch for information about the artist's family, who he calls a family of dreamers.
- Watch for how movies affected his life.
- Watch for information about his childhood and school life.

- Watch for how he dressed himself in paintings and walked to the Museum of Modern Art.
- Watch for how the artist works in using collage to create people.
- Watch for how the artist focuses on people at work.

### **QUESTION FOR STUDENTS**

*Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Benny Andrews and his work.*

- ? What is Benny Andrews favorite subject matter ?
- ? What does the artist say is the most important to him? (being able to express myself.)
- ? The artist is described as having a special humanity. What does that mean? Does this make Benny Andrews a humanitarian?
- ? What did the artist and his brother learn from watching movies?
- ? What was the artist s childhood like? Describe his family, schooling, work, and what he did for fun.
- ? How did the artist manage to go to the Art Institute of Chicago?
- ? What does the artist observe in creating his works? (human figure, movement of body, what people wear and how they wear it.)
- ? How does the artist make his works?
- ? What does he mean when he describes himself as having a quick-change or being in wonderland?

? What advice does Benny Andrews have for people about their work? (do something you like for the pleasure of doing it; not for being famous or for money.)

? What can you learn from Benny Andrews?

## **EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS**

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Benny Andrews' message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. Challenge yourself to be an excellent observer like Benny Andrews. Choose a partner and stand facing each other. Look carefully at the way the person is standing and what they are wearing. At a certain signal, turn around and change three things. Face each other again and see if you can guess what three things are changed.

2. Make a portrait of the person you observed using pencil, markers or oil pastels. Sketch the person first and try to put in as many details as possible. Enhance your work by using surprising colors, like Benny Andrews did by giving the old man a green beard and white lips. How did these colors affect the artwork?

3. Research movie stars from the 30s and 40s that Benny Andrews and his brother would have watched. Rent a video featuring one of the stars, like Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant, Hedy Lamar, Veronica Lake or Spencer Tracy. Write a story or draw a storyboard to imagine yourself in one of these adventures. Share them with the class.

4. Watch people as they go about doing various everyday tasks. Look at the video for examples of how Benny Andrews drew these working people. Do a line drawing of one of the people you have observed, first in pencil and then with marker or India ink.

5. Benny Andrews came from a family of drawers. Foremost among them was his father, George Andrews, who was also drawing, painting and designing on walls, furniture, objects, paper, cardboard, styrofoam and wood. Find out more about George Andrews, who is a folk artist, on the Internet, in books or exhibition catalogs. Compare Benny Andrews

work to his father's. How is it alike? How is it different? Discuss the term folk art.

6. Think of a theme for a collage. Gather a collection of magazine pictures, fabric, sketches, dried flowers, labels and objects that portray the theme. Arrange and rearrange them into an interesting pattern or design. Decide what things will go underneath or on top of a sturdy sheet of cardboard. Glue them down; add paint, markers or other media as desired.

7. Borrow from Benny Andrews by drawing an active full-length figure of yourself or someone you want to remember. You may want to use a photograph of the face. Clothe the figure using scraps of fabric, paper, stitchery or other materials to create interesting textures and add to the mood of your figure.

8. Look at the video once more to select one of the artworks that you would like to make move. Pause the video at that spot and study it closely. Some good choices are the drawing of the family in the kitchen, the pool shooters or the blacksmith. What is happening in the artwork? Think about how the people in the image would move: for example, The pool players would take a shot, chalk a cue, watch the play, rack the balls. Would the movement be fast/slow; high/low; rounded/curved angles? Experiment and create a sequence of movements that bring the artwork alive!

9. Benny Andrews learned a lot by reading newspapers and magazines. Read the newspaper every day for two weeks and make a list of the major stories. Read at least one news magazine during that time to see if it is featuring the same stories. Report to the class about your findings. Choose one story and write three things you learned from your newspaper study.

10. Divide into small groups of five or six students. Have three people present arguments for one of the following opinions about what is most important in life --- to make a lot of money, to be famous or to do what you like to do. Each speaker should be able to back up his/her statement with reasons. The rest of the group can question the speakers and then vote in favor of one opinion. Each group will then present their viewpoint to the class, which will come to consensus on what they believe.

## **VIDEO SERIES**

**Benny Andrews: The Visible Man**, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about **Benny Andrews: The Visible Man** and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Video, Inc. Tel: 914-238-9366; Fax: 914-238-6324.

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