

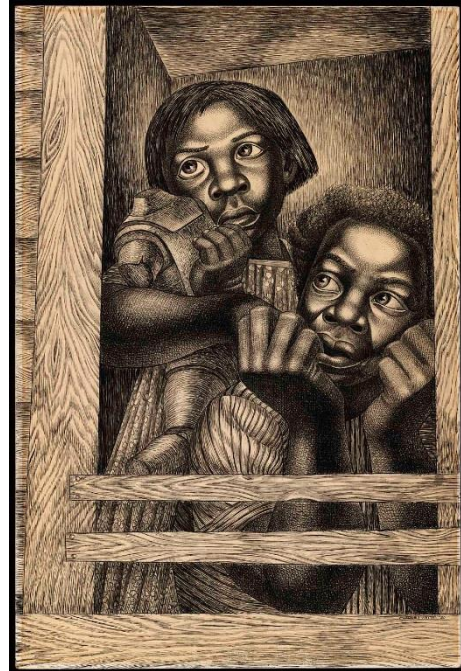
Activity: Observe and Interpret

Artists make choices in communicating ideas. Charles White is a leading African American artist of the twentieth century. He is best known for the masterful drawings he created throughout his career. What message is Charles White trying to convey in this drawing? What can we learn about African American life following the conclusion of World War II through this artwork? Observing details and analyzing components of the artwork, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the artwork.

Observation: What do you see?

What are the figures looking at? What could they be thinking about?

In this intense composition, two figures stare out of a narrow window, both gazing upward. Charles White's drawing exudes an anxious, uneasy mood. He carefully renders the figures so that viewers identify with their apprehension. The African



[Untitled](#), 1950, Charles White, ink and graphite on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum



American girl in the background clutches a doll hoping it can provide her with solace. The doll's headless and armless body serves as a symbol of the girl's thwarted ambition and lack of opportunity. She looks outside the window, perhaps wondering what is to become of her. The figure in front of her—perhaps an older brother—holds up large, powerful hands to his face, another sign of worry. He looks out the window, speculating about her future in a world filled with adversity for people of their race. Although they inhabit the same space and glance in a similar direction, they seem detached from one another, as if their worries isolate them. Compressing the figures behind the window's flat surface, White makes the pair's agitation and forlornness palpable. The artwork captures the post-World War II anxieties and adversity faced by black Americans, expanded on by black veterans returning home to a world lacking in opportunity.

How does the artist create tension?

The figures are locked tightly in a cramped space, their movement cramped by the edges of the window. The lack of depth behind them, along with the restrictive horizontal bars in front of them, further hem them in physically. It is conceivable that the lives of these two figures are also barred by restrictions

imposed on African Americans during the 1950s; restrictions such as segregated public facilities and a lack of opportunity in education and employment. The drawing is made with thousands of fine lines and crosshatching, that infuse the composition with movement and tension. For White, the late 1940s and early 1950s were a deeply anxious time. As a left-wing artist who associated with progressives and members of the Communist Party, he felt the constant threat of political persecution, especially after the McCarran Act of 1950 criminalized activities perceived to be subversive.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

While White's art may convey some of his personal anxieties, he relates his work to social issues of particular importance to African Americans, seeing himself as a "spokesman for my people." Around 1950, when White created this drawing, school desegregation had become the prevailing civil rights issue for many African American families. Returning black WWII veterans who had and risked their lives serving their country, now found that they had to send their children to segregated and terribly inadequate schools. This issue may also have been especially significant to White, who married and began his own family that year. Since the 1930s, thousands of African Americans had joined protests against school segregation. Yet in 1950, civil rights leaders used new tactics to show that segregation was not simply unfair but also psychologically damaging to black children. To provoke legal battles, these leaders encouraged black children in certain communities to try to attend all-white schools, knowing they would be turned away. Five key cases began to make headlines in 1950 and culminated in the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled school segregation illegal. White's drawing may not be a direct commentary on the issue of school desegregation, yet by portraying two African American children within a confined, tense space, White seems to register the psychological torment African American families endured during the era of segregation.