Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties

Events, Places, and People

There are many events, historic moments, and sung and unsung heroes of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s. Below are brief descriptions of some of the events, places, and people referenced in the works of art that are in the exhibition Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties. Topics are listed alphabetically, and specific works of art in the exhibition that address or relate to that topic appear under each header.

AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists)

- Barbara Jones-Hogu, *Unite*, 1971

AfriCOBRA, or the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, was an artist collective based out of Chicago. Jeff Donaldson, Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams founded the group in 1968. According to their mission statement, AfriCOBRA came together in order to develop and assert “an approach to image making which would reflect and project the moods, attitudes, and sensibilities of African Americans independent of the technical and aesthetic strictures of Euro-centric modalities.” Members of AfriCOBRA sought to assert the power and relevance of works made by African American artists, as well as to elevate art that depicted the lived experiences of black people. Members of AfriCOBRA were artist-activists; they used their art to fight for social, political, and economic equality for members of the black race.

Birmingham, Alabama

- Charles Moore, *[Firefighters aiming high pressure water hoses at civil rights demonstrators, Birmingham, Alabama]*, May 3, 1963
- Charles W. White, *Birmingham Totem*, 1964
- Andy Warhol, *Birmingham Race Riot*, 1964

The city of Birmingham, Alabama, was founded in 1871 and rapidly became the state’s most important industrial and commercial center. As late as the 1960s, however, it was also one of America’s most racially discriminatory and segregated cities. Alabama Governor George Wallace was a leading foe of desegregation, and Birmingham had one of the strongest and most violent chapters of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The city’s police commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor, was also notorious for his willingness to use brutality in combating demonstrators, union members, and blacks.
Precisely because of its reputation as a stronghold for white supremacy, Birmingham became a major focus of civil rights activists’ efforts to desegregate the Deep South. In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. had been arrested there while leading supporters of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in a nonviolent campaign of demonstrations against segregation. While in jail, King wrote a letter to local white ministers justifying his decision not to call off the demonstrations in the face of continued bloodshed at the hands of local law enforcement officials. His famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” was published in the national press, along with shocking images of police brutality against protesters in Birmingham that helped build widespread support for the civil rights cause.

Many of the civil rights protest marches that took place in Birmingham during the 1960s began at the steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which had long been a significant religious center for the city’s black population and a routine meeting place for civil rights organizers like King. KKK members had routinely called in bomb threats intended to disrupt civil rights meetings as well as services at the church.

At 10:22 a.m. on the morning of September 15, 1963, some 200 church members were in the building—many attending Sunday school classes before the start of the 11:00 am service—when a bomb detonated on the church’s east side, spraying mortar and bricks from the front of the church and caving in its interior walls. Most parishioners were able to evacuate the building as it filled with smoke, but the bodies of four young girls (14-year-old Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson and 11-year-old Denise McNair) were found beneath the rubble in a basement restroom. Ten-year-old Sarah Collins, who was also in the restroom at the time of the explosion, lost her right eye, and more than 20 other people were injured in the blast.

The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church on September 15 was the third bombing in 11 days, after a federal court order had come down mandating the integration of Alabama’s school system. In the aftermath of the bombing, thousands of angry black protesters gathered at the scene. When Governor Wallace sent police and state troopers to break up the protests, violence broke out across the city; a number of protesters were arrested, and two young African American men were killed (one by police) before the National Guard was called in to restore order. King later spoke before 8,000 people at the funeral for three of the girls (the family of the fourth girl held a smaller private service), fueling the public outrage mounting across the country.

Though Birmingham’s white supremacists (and even certain individuals) were immediately suspected in the bombing, repeated calls for the perpetrators to be brought to justice went unanswered for more than a decade. It was later revealed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had information concerning the identity of the bombers by 1965 and did nothing. (J. Edgar Hoover, then-head of the FBI, disapproved of the civil rights movement; he died in 1972.) In 1977, Alabama Attorney General Bob Baxley reopened the investigation and Klan leader Robert E. Chambliss was brought to trial for the bombings and convicted of murder. Continuing to maintain his innocence, Chambliss died in prison in 1985. The case was again reopened in 1980, 1988, and 1997, when two other former Klan members, Thomas Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry, were finally brought to trial; Blanton was convicted in 2001 and Cherry in 2002 (a fourth suspect, Herman Frank Cash, died in 1994 before he could be brought to trial).
Even though the legal system was slow to provide justice, the effect of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church was immediate and significant. Outrage over the death of the four innocent girls helped build increased support behind the continuing struggle to end segregation—support that would help lead to the passage of both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In that important sense, the bombing’s impact was exactly the opposite of what its perpetrators had intended.

**Black is Beautiful Movement**


By 1966, the civil rights movement rose to a feverish pitch, which propelled the Black is Beautiful movement. Given the swell of Black unrest, this was the year the Black is Beautiful event reached a tipping point. People of color throughout America were proclaiming their blackness without shame or apology. The Black is Beautiful movement soon became part of the radical mainstream. African-inspired clothing and jewelry were the rage. Black people abandoned hair chemicals and conks for natural hairstyles and Afros.

**Black Panthers**


The Black Panther Party was a black revolutionary socialist organization active in the United States from 1966 until 1982. The Black Panther Party achieved national and international notoriety through its involvement in the Black Power movement and U.S. politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Gaining national prominence, the Black Panther Party became an icon of the counterculture of the 1960s. Although the Party emerged from black nationalist movements, ultimately, the Panthers condemned black nationalism as “black racism” and became more ideologically focused on socialist revolution without racial exclusivity. The Party’s ideals and activities were so radical, it was at one time assailed by FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover as “the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States.”

The Black Panther Party was led by Huey P. Newton, the seventh son of a Louisiana family transplanted to Oakland, California. In October of 1966, in the wake of the assassination of black leader Malcolm X and on the heels of the massive black, urban uprising in Watts, California, and at the height of the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Newton gathered a few of his longtime friends, including Bobby Seale and David Hilliard, and developed a skeletal outline for this organization. It was named, originally, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The black panther was used as the symbol because it was a powerful image, one that had been used effectively by the short-lived voting rights group the Lowndes County (Alabama) Freedom Organization. The term “self defense” was employed to distinguish the Party’s philosophy from the dominant nonviolent theme of the civil rights movement, and in homage to the civil rights group the Louisiana based Deacons for Defense. These two symbolic references were, however, where all similarity between the Black Panther Party and other black organizations of the time, the civil rights groups and Black Power groups, ended.
The Black Panther Party saw that even after the Brown court case decision, blacks struggled to integrate and become full participants in American society. As the images of nonviolent blacks and other civil rights workers and demonstrators being beaten and water-hosed by police, spat on, and jailed, merely for protesting social injustices, shot across America’s television screens, young urban blacks rejected nonviolence.

Black Panther Party membership reached a peak of several thousand by early 1969, then suffered a series of contractions due to legal troubles, incarcerations, internal splits, expulsions and defections. Popular support for the Party declined further after reports appeared detailing the group's involvement in illegal activities such as drug dealing and extortion schemes directed against Oakland merchants. By 1972 most Panther activity centered on the national headquarters and a school in Oakland, where the party continued to influence local politics. Party contractions continued throughout the 1970s; by 1980 the Black Panther Party comprised just 27 members.

**Black Power Movement**

- LeRoy Clarke *Now*, 1970
- Barbara Jones-Hogu *Nation Time*, about 1970
- Elizabeth Catlett *Homage to My Young Black Sisters*, 1968
- Jeff Donaldson *Wives of Shango*, 1969

The Black Power movement gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Inspired by the political slogan “black power,” and characterized by racial pride and declarations for black autonomy, participants in the Black Power movement fought for the formation of black economic, social, and political institutions that would allow for the advancement of African Americans. According to Stokely Carmichael, Trinidadian-American leader in the civil rights movement, “‘Black Power’ means black people coming together to form a political force and either electing representatives or forcing their representatives to speak their needs.” While some members of the Black Power movement supported a non-violent approach to advocate for equal rights, others rejected what they considered “accommodationist” strategies to attain civil rights and instead endorsed armed self-defense in concert with their protests.

**Brown vs. Board of Education 1954**

- David Hammons, *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969
- Benny Andrews, *Death of the Crow*, 1965
- Edward Kienholz, *It Takes Two to Integrate (Cha Cha Cha)*, 1961
- Jim Dine, *Black Bathroom #2*, 1962

The case that came to be known as *Brown v. Board of Education* was actually the name given to five separate cases that were heard by the U.S. Supreme Court concerning the issue of segregation in public schools. While the facts of each case are different, the main issue in each was the constitutionality of state-sponsored segregation in public schools.
When the cases came before the Supreme Court in 1952, the Court consolidated all five cases under the name *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although a variety of legal issues were raised on appeal, the most common one was that separate school systems for blacks and whites were inherently unequal, and thus violated the “equal protection clause” of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Furthermore, relying on sociological tests, such as the one performed by social scientist Kenneth Clark, and other data, it was also argued that segregated school systems had a tendency to make black children feel inferior to white children, and thus such a system should not be legally permissible.

Expecting opposition to its ruling, especially in the southern states, the Supreme Court did not immediately try to implement its ruling. Instead, it asked the attorney generals of all states with laws permitting segregation in their public schools to submit plans for how to proceed with desegregation. After more hearings before the Court concerning the matter of desegregation, on May 31, 1955, the Justices handed down a plan for how it was to proceed; desegregation was to proceed with “all deliberate speed.” Although it would be many years before all segregated school systems were to be desegregated, *Brown* and *Brown II* (as the Court’s plan for how to desegregate schools came to be called) were responsible for getting the process underway.

**Children’s Crusade**

- Jacob Lawrence, *American Revolution*, 1963
- Charles Moore, *Firefighters Aiming High-Pressure Water Hoses at Civil Rights Demonstrators, Birmingham, Alabama*, May 1963

By 1963, interest in and commitment to the civil rights movement was waning as activists were increasingly being harassed, beaten, and killed for their involvement. In attempts to reinvigorate the movement, civil rights leaders attempted to find new populations for potential activism. Led by Reverends James Bevel and Martin Luther King Jr., hundreds of Alabama youth missed school in May of 1963 to protest the segregationist policies of the Jim Crow-era South in what has been deemed the Children’s Crusade. During the Crusade, African American students marched to Birmingham to protest peacefully, but they were met by white police officers who beat them, blasted them with high-pressure fire hoses, used police dogs to intimidate them, and arrested them. Photographs of these events, like that by Charles Moore in this exhibition, sparked national outrage and urged subsequent action by other activists.

**Civil Rights Act of 1964**

- Benjamin Patterson, *First Symphony*, 1964
- Betye Saar, *Is Jim Crow Really Dead?*, 1972
- Benny Andrews, *Death of the Crow*, 1965

On June 11, 1963, inspired by the National Guard being called to protect two African American students enrolling in the University of Alabama, as well as other events of the civil rights movement, President John F. Kennedy gave a speech advocating for the support of new civil rights legislation. After Kennedy’s assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson continued the advocacy for civil rights and signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2. Despite a
fifty-four day filibuster, the bill passed in the Senate on June 19, 1964, and in the house on July 2 of the same year. The Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, or religion, and was considered a watershed piece of legislation enacted during the civil rights movement. By asserting and safeguarding the right of African Americans to receive equal treatment during the voting process and in the education system, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a definitive statement that African Americans should have equal access to the benefits of citizenship.

**Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)**

- Norman W. Lewis, *Double Cross*, 1971
- Jim Dine, *Three Rainbows for CORE*, 1966
- Robert Indiana, *The Black Yield Brother 3*, 1963

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was a civil rights advocacy organization founded in 1942 in Chicago. CORE was comprised of both white and black members who, inspired by Gandhi’s protest against British imperialism in India, believed that nonviolent civil disobedience could be used as a tool to undermine racial segregation and discrimination in the United States. In 1947, CORE organized a bus ride, the Journey of Reconciliation, from Virginia to North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, to protest Jim Crow laws’ restrictions on interstate travel for African Americans. The travelers were arrested a number of times for not adhering to the discriminatory policies of the bus companies. Because of their actions and subsequent arrests, the CORE riders received substantial press coverage, and in turn inspired later activists to ride integrated buses into the segregated south on what came to be called “Freedom Rides.”

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

- Sam Gilliam, *Red April*, 1970
- Jack Whiten, *King's Wish (Martin Luther's Dream)*, 1968
- Moneta Sleet Jr., *Rosa Parks, Dr. and Mrs. Abernathy, Dr. Ralph Bunche, and Dr. and Mrs. Martin King Jr. Leading Marchers into Montgomery*, 1965, printed about 1970
- Moneta Sleet Jr., *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, in the Midst at the March on Washington*, 1963, printed about 1970
- Moneta Sleet Jr., *Selma Marchers on the Road to Montgomery*, 1965, printed about 1970

Drawing inspiration from both his Christian faith and the peaceful teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. King led a nonviolent movement in the late 1950s and '60s to achieve legal equality for African Americans in the United States. While others were advocating for freedom by “any means necessary,” including violence, Martin Luther King Jr. used the power of words and acts of nonviolent resistance, such as protests, grassroots organizing, and civil disobedience to achieve seemingly impossible goals. He went on to lead similar campaigns against poverty and international conflict, always maintaining fidelity to his principles that men and women everywhere, regardless of color or creed, are equal members of the human family.
Some of Dr. King’s most important achievements include:

- In 1955, he was recruited to serve as spokesman for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was a campaign by the African American population of Montgomery, Alabama, to force integration of the city’s bus lines. After 381 days of nearly universal participation by citizens of the black community, many of whom had to walk miles to work each day as a result, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in transportation was unconstitutional.

- In 1957, Dr. King was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization designed to provide new leadership for the now burgeoning civil rights movement. He would serve as head of the SCLC until his assassination in 1968, a period during which he would emerge as the most important social leader of the modern American civil rights movement.

- In 1963, he led a coalition of numerous civil rights groups in a nonviolent campaign aimed at Birmingham, Alabama, which at the time was described as the “most segregated city in America.” The subsequent brutality of the city’s police, illustrated most vividly by television images of young blacks being assaulted by dogs and water hoses, led to a national outrage resulting in a push for unprecedented civil rights legislation. It was during this campaign that Dr. King drafted the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” the manifesto of his philosophy and tactics, which is today required reading in universities worldwide.

- Later in 1963, Dr. King was one of the driving forces behind the March for Jobs and Freedom, more commonly known as the “March on Washington,” which drew over a quarter million people to the national Mall. It was at this march that Dr. King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, which cemented his status as a social change leader and helped inspire the nation to act on civil rights. Dr. King was later named Time magazine’s “Man of the Year.”

- In 1964, at 35 years old, Martin Luther King Jr. became the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. His acceptance speech in Oslo is thought by many to be among the most powerful remarks ever delivered at the event, climaxing at one point with the oft-quoted phrase, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.”

- Also in 1964, partly due to the March on Washington, Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act, essentially eliminating legalized racial segregation in the United States. The legislation made it illegal to discriminate against blacks or other minorities in hiring, public accommodations, education or transportation, areas which at the time were still very segregated in many places.

- The next year, 1965, Congress went on to pass the Voting Rights Act, which was an equally important set of laws that eliminated the remaining barriers to voting for African Americans, who in some locales had been almost completely disenfranchised. This
legislation resulted directly from the Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, March for Voting Rights led by Dr. King.

- Between 1965 and 1968, Dr. King shifted his focus toward economic justice—which he highlighted by leading several campaigns in Chicago, Illinois—and international peace—which he championed by speaking out strongly against the Vietnam War. His work in these years culminated in the “Poor Peoples Campaign,” which was a broad effort to assemble a multiracial coalition of impoverished Americans who would advocate for economic change.

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s less than thirteen years of nonviolent leadership ended abruptly and tragically on April 4, 1968, when he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King’s body was returned to his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, where his funeral ceremony was attended by high-level leaders of all races and political stripes.

**Fannie Lou Hamer**

- Danny Lyon, *Fannie Lou Hamer*, 1963

Fannie Lou Hamer was born on October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi. In the summer of 1962, Hamer made a life-changing decision to attend a protest meeting. She met civil rights activists there who encouraged African Americans to register to vote. Hamer was one of a small group of African Americans in her area who decided to register themselves. On August 31, 1962, she traveled with 17 others to the county courthouse in Indianola to accomplish this goal. They encountered opposition from local and state law enforcement along the way.

Such bravery came at a high price for Hamer. She was fired from her job and driven from the plantation she had called home for nearly two decades—just for registering to vote. But these actions only solidified Hamer’s resolve to help other African Americans get the right to vote. According to *The New York Times*, she said, “They kicked me off the plantation, they set me free. It’s the best thing that could happen. Now I can work for my people.”

Hamer dedicated her life to the fight for civil rights, working for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This organization was comprised mostly of students who engaged in acts of civil disobedience to fight racial segregation and injustice in the South. These acts often were met with violent responses. During the course of her activist career, Hamer was threatened, arrested, beaten, and shot at. She was severely injured in 1963 in a Winona, Mississippi jail. She and two other activists were taken in by police after attending a training workshop. Hamer was beaten so badly that she suffered permanent kidney damage.

In 1964, Hamer helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which was established in opposition to her state’s all-white delegation to that year’s Democratic convention. She brought the civil rights struggle in Mississippi to the attention of the entire nation during a televised session at the convention. The following year, Hamer ran for Congress in Mississippi, but was unsuccessful in her bid.
Along with her political activism, Hamer worked to help the poor and families in need in her Mississippi community. She also set up organizations to increase business opportunities for minorities and to provide childcare and other family services. She helped establish the National Women’s Political Caucus in 1971.

In 1976, Hamer was diagnosed with breast cancer. She continued to fight for civil rights, despite her illness. Hamer died on March 14, 1977, in a hospital in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Hundreds crowded into a Ruleville church to say goodbye to this tireless champion for racial equality. On her tombstone is written one of her most famous quotes: “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

**Freedom Riders**

- Edward Kienholz, *It Takes Two to Integrate (Cha Cha Cha)*, 1961

In efforts to protest against discriminatory practices on buses, trains, and in other public spaces, in 1961 the Freedom Riders organized a trip on interstate buses from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans. Inspired by the Congress of Racial Equality’s 1947 bus ride and led by CORE director James Farmer, the Freedom Riders, made up of black and white activists, developed strategies—such as having a black rider in the front seat and an interracial pair seated together—to demonstrate their demand for equality in public transportation. When the Freedom Riders reached Anniston, Alabama, they met a mob of Klansmen who slashed the bus’s tires, lit the vehicle on fire, and held its doors shut so the Riders would burn to death. The Riders were able to escape, but they were subsequently denied care at a local hospital, and later beaten with bats, tire chains, and pipes when they reached Birmingham. These abuses did not discourage the Riders, and when Kennedy asked for a “cooling off period” because of the escalating tension, CORE director James Farmer stated, “We have been cooling off for 350 years, and if we cooled off any more, we’d be in a deep freeze.” The violence and brutality shown by Klansmen and police forces during the ride shocked America and motivated others to participate in the civil rights movement.

**Freedom Summer**

- Charles Moore, *Voter registration*, 1963–64
- Ernest Withers, *Voter registration. Fayette County, TN*, 1960

In the summer of 1964, the Council of Federated Organizations, an umbrella organization that included the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, organized a campaign in Mississippi to register African Americans to vote. This project, called Freedom Summer, was meant to counteract Mississippi’s systematic exclusion of African Americans from the voting process by charging poll taxes and mandating literacy tests. Over the project’s ten weeks, Freedom Summer
workers were beaten and arrested, and black churches and homes were bombed and burned. Three civil rights workers, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, while investigating the burning of a local church, were arrested and then released a few hours later. A few hours after that, they were murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan. President Lyndon Johnson compelled the FBI, led by an unsympathetic director, to investigate the disappearance of the three activists. Eventually, their bodies were found, and seven white men were convicted for their murders. Of the seven convicted, none served more than six years.

Jim Crow Laws

- Jim Dine, *Black Bathroom #2*, 1962
- Benny Andrews, *Death of the Crow*, 1965
- Betye Saar, *Is Jim Crow Really Dead?*, 1972

Jim Crow laws, enacted between 1876 and 1965, were local and state regulations that mandated racial segregation in the United States. These laws required African Americans to use facilities, such as water fountains, parks, and restrooms, separate from those available to white Americans. Additionally, interracial marriages were prohibited in most states, black people could not live in certain residential neighborhoods, and they had to sit in separate sections of restaurants and buses. In 1955, Rosa Parks, an African American woman, refused to give up her bus seat to a white man to protest the segregationist policies of the Jim Crow American South. Much of the civil rights movement was fueled by activists’ desire to see these oppressive regulations repealed so that African Americans could have full and equal access to American citizenship. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 repealed Jim Crow laws.

Ku Klux Klan

- Bruce Davidson, *Ku Klux Klan Rally, Atlanta, Georgia*, 1962
- Philip Guston, *City Limits*, 1969
- Norman W. Lewis, *Double Cross*, 1971
- Bruce Davidson, *Car of Viola Liuzzo, Selma, Alabama*, 1965

Veterans of the Confederate Army founded the Ku Klux Klan in 1865 after the American Civil War to intimidate and oppress newly freed black people. Though the Klan disbanded around 1870, the group was revamped during the 1920s to protest the influence of Catholicism in the United States and to advocate for the prohibition of the sale and consumption of alcohol. During the civil rights movement, the Ku Klux Klan’s numbers grew and members wanted to demonstrate their strong opposition to the goals of the civil rights activists. Proponents of segregation, racial purity, and white supremacy, Ku Klux Klan members were responsible for firebombing black churches, schools, and homes, as well as for the kidnapping, lynching, and murders of African Americans. The Ku Klux Klan is still in operation, and in April 2014, a former Klan leader was found responsible for the shooting deaths of three people at a Kansas City Jewish Community Center.
Malcolm X


Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925, Malcolm was the son of James Earl Little, a Baptist preacher who advocated the black nationalist ideals of Marcus Garvey. To his admirers, Malcolm X was a courageous advocate for the rights of blacks, a man who indicted white America in the harshest terms for its crimes against black Americans; his detractors accused him of preaching racism and violence.

Threats from the Ku Klux Klan forced the family to move to Lansing, Michigan, where his father continued to preach his controversial sermons despite continuing threats. In 1931, Malcolm’s father was brutally murdered by the white supremacist Black Legion, and Michigan authorities refused to prosecute those responsible. In 1937, Malcolm was taken from his family by welfare caseworkers. By the time he reached high school age, he had dropped out of school and moved to Boston, where he became increasingly involved in criminal activities.

In 1946, at the age of 21, Malcolm was sent to prison on a burglary conviction. It was there he encountered the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, whose members are popularly known as Black Muslims. The Nation of Islam advocated black nationalism and racial separatism and condemned Americans of European descent as immoral “devils.” Muhammad’s teachings had a strong effect on Malcolm, who entered into an intense program of self-education and took the last name “X” to symbolize his stolen African identity.

After six years, Malcolm was released from prison and became a loyal and effective minister of the Nation of Islam in Harlem, New York. In contrast with civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X advocated self-defense and the liberation of African Americans “by any means necessary.” A fiery orator, Malcolm was admired by the African American community in New York and around the country.

In the early 1960s, he began to develop a more outspoken philosophy than that of Elijah Muhammad. In late 1963, Malcolm’s suggestion that President John F. Kennedy’s assassination was a matter of the “chickens coming home to roost” provided Elijah Muhammad, who believed that Malcolm had become too powerful, with a convenient opportunity to suspend him from the Nation of Islam.

A few months later, Malcolm formally left the organization and made a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, where he was profoundly affected by the lack of racial discord among orthodox Muslims. He returned to America as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and in June 1964 founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which advocated black identity and held that racism, not the white race, was the greatest foe of the African American.

On February 21, 1965, one week after his home was firebombed, Malcolm X was shot to death by Nation of Islam members while speaking at a rally of his organization in New York City.
March from Selma to Montgomery, 1965

- Moneta Sleet Jr., *Selma Marcher Reading During Break*, 1965, printed about 1970
- Bruce Davidson, *Car of Viola Liuzzo, Selma, Alabama*, 1965
- Moneta Sleet Jr., *Selma Marchers on Road to Montgomery*, 1965

In 1963, members of Alabama’s Dallas County Voters League partnered with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to fight for African Americans’ right to vote. Because government resistance against the movement was strong, the group asked Martin Luther King Jr.—at this point a recognized leader of the civil rights movement—and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for assistance. The organizations planned a march from Selma to Montgomery (the state capital) on March 7, 1965, to protest African Americans’ lack of voting rights and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a black man who was shot and killed a month earlier by Alabama State Troopers after demonstrating for the right to vote. On that day, now deemed “Bloody Sunday,” police attacked the approximately six hundred marchers with tear gas and nightsticks before they had even left Selma. This violence enraged and galvanized people nationally and led to two subsequent marches from Selma to fight for equal civil rights. The final one, from March 21 to 25, 1965, proceeded all the way to Montgomery.

Middle Passage

- Frank Bowling, *Night Journey*, 1969–70

The Middle Passage refers to the trans-Atlantic slave trading route that brought enslaved Africans to various parts of the Western hemisphere. Depending on the weather, the journey took anywhere from one to six months. Conditions on the slave ships were brutal; enslaved Africans were chained and packed together, fed inconsistently, and subject to illness. According to historians, the Spanish, French, British, Portuguese, and Dutch forcibly brought over ten million Africans to the Americas in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Many died from starvation, disease, and abuse on the journey. If they did reach the Americas, Africans were sold as commodities and were subsequently enslaved by their new masters. Among the colonies and countries that depended on slave labor are the United States, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Haiti.

Nation of Islam


Wallace Fard founded the Nation of Islam in 1930 with goals to ameliorate economic, political, and social conditions for African Americans through strict adherence to the Muslim faith. While in prison for burglary, Malcolm Little—who would eventually become Malcolm X—joined the Nation of Islam and subsequently became one of the group’s most influential leaders after his release in 1952. (Later, Malcolm X rejected the group’s teachings) Members of the Nation of Islam did not support the many civil rights activities in pursuit of integration. Instead, they
advocated for an autonomous black nation. Commissioned by *Life* magazine, African American photographer Gordon Parks gained the trust of leaders of the insular Nation of Islam in order to photograph Malcolm X. Because of his level of access, Parks was able to document everyday experiences of the group’s members.

**Nina Simone**

- Bob Thomson, *Homage to Nina Simone*, 1965
- Nina Simone performing “Mississippi Goddam” on the Dutch TV special *Nina Simone*. Original broadcast date December 25, 1965. Licensed courtesy of Reelin’ In The Years Productions

Simone was an American singer, songwriter, pianist, arranger, and civil rights activist widely associated with jazz music. She worked in a broad range of styles including classical, jazz, blues, folk, R&B, gospel, and pop.

The sixth child of a preacher’s family in North Carolina, Simone aspired to be a concert pianist. Her musical path changed direction after she was denied a scholarship to the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, despite a well-received audition. Simone was later told by someone working at Curtis that she was rejected because she was black. In order to fund her continuing musical education and become a classical pianist, she began playing in a small club in Philadelphia where she was also required to sing. She was approached for a recording by Bethlehem Records, and her rendering of “I Loves You, Porgy” was a hit in the United States in 1958. Over the length of her career Simone recorded more than 40 albums, mostly between 1958, when she made her debut with *Little Girl Blue*, and 1974.

In the early 1960s, she became involved in the civil rights movement and the direction of her life shifted once again. Simone’s music was highly influential in the fight for equal rights in the United States. In later years, she lived abroad, finally settling in France in 1992. She received a Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 2000 and was a fifteen-time Grammy Award nominee over the course of her career.

**Pan-Africanism**

- LeRoy Clarke, *Now*, 1970
- Ademola Olugebefola, *Sculpture and Ochre*, 1967

Pan-Africanism encourages unity among Africans and people in the African diaspora around the world. According to the movement’s ideology, unity among and racial uplift for all black people is contingent upon economic, social, and political agency. Pan-Africanism gained a large following in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as black Americans protested for their own social mobility during the civil rights and Black Power movements.
**Plessy vs. Ferguson 1896**


*Plessy v. Ferguson* is a landmark United States Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of “separate but equal”.

On June 7, 1892, 30-year-old Homer Plessy was jailed for sitting in the “White” car of the East Louisiana Railroad. Plessy could easily pass for white but under Louisiana law he was considered black despite his light complexion and therefore required to sit in the “Colored” car. When Louisiana passed the Separate Car Act, legally segregating common carriers in 1892, a black civil rights organization decided to challenge the law in the courts. Plessy deliberately sat in the white section and identified himself as black. He was arrested and the case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Plessy’s lawyer argued that the Separate Car Act violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

The Plessy decision set the precedent that “separate” facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional as long as they were “equal.” The “separate but equal” doctrine was quickly extended to cover many areas of public life, such as restaurants, theaters, restrooms, and public schools. The doctrine was a fiction, as facilities for blacks were always inferior to those for whites. Not until 1954, in the equally important *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, would the “separate but equal” doctrine be struck down.

**Sixteenth Street Baptist Church**

- Charles W. White, *Birmingham Totem*, 1964

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was a headquarters of the civil rights movement located in Birmingham, Alabama. Leaders and activists would convene at the church to strategize and organize their protests. On Sunday, September 15, 1963, several members of the Ku Klux Klan left sticks of dynamite outside the church’s basement. The dynamite exploded at 10:22 a.m. on the church’s “Youth Day,” killing four young girls and wounding twenty-two others. At the time, Birmingham had been nicknamed “Bombingham” because over fifty bombings of black churches, schools, and homes had occurred since the beginning of the 1960s civil rights movement. Many activists condemned Alabama’s governor, George Wallace, for the white supremacist terrorism and because of his refusal to safeguard the rights of African Americans. The Klan’s violence against children and the girls’ deaths shocked the country, and the bombing served as a catalyst for subsequent civil rights legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)


After the boycott of the Montgomery bus system (which began when Rosa Parks, a black woman, was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. invited a number of civil rights leaders and activists to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. The SCLC, led by King, advocated nonviolent action, such as boycotts and protests, to desegregate bus systems in the South and orchestrated and supported churches’ involvement in the civil rights movement. The Conference and their work received strong opposition from white supremacist organizations like the White Citizens’ Council and the Ku Klux Klan, as well as the overwhelmingly racist police force in the region. In 1968, the SCLC led the Poor People’s Campaign, in which three thousand people occupied the National Mall for six weeks to protest for economic and political equality for African Americans.

Spiral Art Collective

- Charles Alston, *Black and White #7*, 1961
- Emma Amos, *Three Figures*, 1966
- Romare Bearden, *Watching the Good Trains Go By*, 1964
- Romare Bearden, *Evening Meal of Prophet Peterson*, 1964

Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, and Hale Woodruff founded the Spiral Art Collective on July 5, 1963. The group initially came together to plan their trip to Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington, which was to take place in August of that year. However, after this first meeting the group began to discuss artistic concerns and articulate the roles they as artists could play in the civil rights movement. The members of the Spiral Art Collective aimed to address the dearth of works by black artists represented in major exhibitions and museums. They had their only group exhibition, *First Group Showing: Works in Black and White*, during the summer of 1965. Because the members of the group worked in different styles and media, the group decided to disband, but they continued to advocate for artists’ engagement in the civil rights movement.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

- Charles W. White, *Awaken from the Unknowing*, 1961
- Norman W. Lewis, *Double Cross*, 1971
- Danny Lyon, *The Leesburg Stockade, Georgia*, 1963
- Daniel LaRue Johnson, *Freedom Now, Number 1*, 1963–64
- Richard Avedon, *Julian Bond and Members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Atlanta, Georgia, March 23*, 1963, 1963
The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was founded in 1960 as a response to Jim Crow laws and the racial segregation of public spaces such as restaurants, libraries, pools, and parks. Made up mostly of college students, SNCC famously staged sit-ins at lunch counters, and the group also participated in Mississippi’s Freedom Summer and the Freedom Rides. Additionally, SNCC helped organize and promote the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech. According to SNCC co-founder Julian Bond, “A final SNCC legacy is the destruction of the psychological shackles which had kept black southerners in physical and mental peonage; SNCC helped break those chains forever. It demonstrated that ordinary women and men, young and old, could perform extraordinary tasks.” Though the group was founded to employ nonviolent strategies to advocate for integration and racial equality, many SNCC members—overwhelmed by the brutality they and others endured because of their protests—became dissatisfied by their nonviolent approach. By 1969, the organization’s name was changed to the Student National Coordinating Committee, and some members even distanced themselves from the SNCC and joined the Black Panther Party.

Viola Liuzzo

Viola Gregg Liuzzo traveled to Alabama in March 1965 to help the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—with its efforts to register African American voters in Selma. Not long after her arrival, Liuzzo was murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan while driving a black man from Montgomery to Selma.

Politically and socially active, Liuzzo was a member of the Detroit chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She knew firsthand about the racial injustices that African Americans often suffered in the South, having spent some of her youth in Tennessee and Georgia, among other places.

On March 21, 1965, more than 3,000 marchers led by Martin Luther King Jr. began their trek from Selma to Montgomery to campaign for voting rights for African Americans in the South. Unlike previous attempts, activists on this march were protected from outside interference by U.S. Army and National Guard troops. The group reached Montgomery on March 25, 1965, and King gave a speech on the steps of the state capitol building to a crowd of approximately 25,000 people.

That night, Liuzzo was driving another civil rights worker with the SCLC—an African American teenager named Leroy Moton—back to Selma on Highway 80, when another car pulled alongside her vehicle. One of the passengers in the neighboring car shot at Liuzzo, striking her in the face.
and killing her. The car ended up in a ditch, and Moton survived the attack by pretending to be dead.

The following day, President Lyndon B. Johnson appeared on television to announce that Liuzzo’s killers had been caught. The police arrested four members of the Ku Klux Klan for the killing: Eugene Thomas, Collie Leroy Wilkins Jr., William O. Eaton, and Gary Thomas Rowe (who was later revealed to be an F.B.I. informant).

Michigan Governor George Romney visited with Liuzzo’s family after the murder, and stated that Liuzzo “gave her life for what she believed in, and what she believed in is the cause of humanity everywhere,” according to an article in The New York Times.

On March 30, 1965, roughly 350 people attended Liuzzo’s funeral in Detroit, including Martin Luther King Jr., United Automobile Workers Union President Walter P. Reuther, Jimmy Hoffa of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and United States Attorney Lawrence Gubow.

**Voting Rights Act of 1965**

- Charles Moore, *Voter Registration*, 1963–64
- Moneta Sleet Jr., *Selma Marchers on Road to Montgomery*, 1965, printed about 1970
- Betye Saar, *Is Jim Crow Really Dead?*, 1972

After the marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to protest African Americans’ exclusion from voting and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson at the hands of the police, President Lyndon B. Johnson called for a more expansive voting rights bill. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law on August 6 of that year. The Voting Rights Act was a landmark piece of legislation that was meant to address some of the shortcomings of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The new act prohibited discrimination in voting by banning state and local governments from writing or enforcing any laws that disenfranchised a specific group of people from voting based on their race. The act also declared unconstitutional literacy tests, poll taxes, and other tools meant to make voting inaccessible. Additionally, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 mandated that regions with a large percentage of people who speak other languages provide ballots and election materials in those languages.

**Watts Uprising, 1965**

- Daniel LaRue Johnson, *Freedom Now, Number 1*, 1963–64
- John T. Riddle Jr., *Untitled (Fist)*, about 1965
- Virginia Jaramillo, *Divide*, 1964

On the night of August 11, 1965, Lee Minikus, a white police officer, stopped 21-year-old African American Marquette Frye in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, on suspicion of being drunk. The two had a long altercation that also involved Frye’s brother and mother and required backup police. A crowd gathered to observe the confrontation and witnessed the
family’s battery and harassment. Appalled by the scene, onlookers yelled at the police, threw objects at them, and a riot broke out. The Watts Uprising lasted for six days and caused over forty million dollars of property damage. Thirty-four people died, and over a thousand people reported injuries. For African Americans in Los Angeles, who had been struggling because of poor-quality housing, inadequate education systems, and high unemployment rates, Frye’s arrest was the last straw. The Watts Uprising is considered “the largest and costliest urban rebellion of the civil rights era,” and demonstrates how high the tensions were between African Americans and the predominately white police force. Many artists, including John T. Riddle and husband and wife Daniel LaRue Johnson and Virginia Jaramillo, were present at the Watts Uprising.