

## Symbols: A Benny Andrews Study



Ulrich Museum of Art

**Object:** Benny Andrews, *Symbols*, 1971. Oil paint and collage on canvas.  
Ulrich Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. Milton Ratner.

### Description:

Students will learn about the use of symbols by examining Andrews' painting. They will then create their plan out their own symbols for an artwork they will create

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject:** Art, US History

**Length of Lesson:** Two class sessions.

### Standards:

VA:Cr1.1.I Use multiple approaches to begin creative endeavors.

VA: Cr1.2.II Choose from a range of materials and methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices to plan works of art and design.

VA:Cr1.1.III Visualize and hypothesize to generate plans for ideas and directions for creating art and design that can affect social change.

VA: Re7.2.I Analyze how one's understanding of the world is affected by experiencing visual imagery.

VA:Cn10.1.I Document the process of developing ideas from early stages to fully elaborated ideas.

VA:Cn10.1.II Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

### Materials:

Worksheet

Pencil

Art materials for whichever medium they choose

### Resources:

More info on the artwork: <https://de1.zetcom-group.de/MpWeb-mpWichitaUlrich/v?mode=online#!m/Object/AOTLkKnWQmutch5JcFlgjq/form/ObjCatalogViewFrm>

More info on Benny Andrews: <https://www.bennyandrews.com/>

The book *Symbols and Allegories in Art (A guide to Imagery)* by Matilde Battistini



Benny Andrews, *Symbols*, 1971. Oil paint and collage on canvas. Ulrich Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. Milton Ratner.

Benny Andrews (1930-2006) was an African American artist and activist. *Symbols*, a monumental work (8 feet tall and 37 feet wide), is one of his most personal, with much of the imagery coming from his life growing up in the South. What follows are some close-ups of this work with more information on the **symbols** used.

A symbol is something that stands for something else, like a material object that represents can represent an idea, feeling, or experience. For example, a red rose often symbolizes love.

Artists have used symbols in their artworks for centuries to convey a deeper meaning than simply what we see visually. For instance, a common symbol in artwork is a dog. If a painting of a couple includes an image of a dog, the dog symbolizes their loyalty to each other, as dogs are known for being very loyal.



The objects on the far left side of the mural come from his childhood in rural Georgia where he worked as a sharecropper with his family. Benny Andrews once said, "I hated [those cotton fields] so until whenever I think of them today, I cringe"

A sharecropper is when someone owns the house and farm you live on, and you pay to live and work there by giving them a portion of your crops for free. Many African Americans in the South became sharecroppers after slavery was abolished. Many sharecroppers were unable to make enough to pay back their landowners for rent and supplies. It was a harsh life.

The couple in the car symbolize the many African Americans who left the rural and poor South to find a better life elsewhere.

Benny Andrews left the rural south to join the Air Force and later studied art at the University of Chicago



In the center of the work there is a figure in a Ku Klux Klan hood carrying a stretcher. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is an American white nationalist hate group that targets African Americans and other minorities like Jews, immigrants, and homosexuals. The figure carries a stretcher with pieces of what looks like a small, human-like figure. This fragmented body on the stretcher wears an American flag.

Benny Andrews uses the figure on the stretcher to show the damaging effects racism has had on America and American ideals.

Next to this, children are shown playing on a tree. Benny Andrews was one of ten children in his family and was father to three children. The innocent children are having fun, yet the image of them hanging from a tree reminds us of lynching.

Lynching is when a mob of people kills someone by hanging them from a tree. It was usually done without a trial, sometimes it was large and official, other times it was a smaller, secretive group. After the Civil War and during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow South, most who were lynched were African American men. It was a terrible tool to promote racism and increase fear in those who might protest.



The right side of Andrews' painting has less obvious symbols. A man sits in a fancy chair on a fancy Persian rug to show that he is wealthy. A bride and groom nearby are half-naked and disheveled. An African American musician holds a guitar. The ambiguity of these figures causes us to pause and consider what they might mean. Perhaps Andrews is exploring what figure or groups of figures symbolize America as the country celebrated its Bicentennial.

If you were to make an artwork on your life experiences and/or on your perception of America, what themes or ideas would you want to convey?

Decide what object or figure could act as a symbol for each of your themes/ideas?

Now plan an artwork with those objects and figures you settled on. Decide how they will be arranged and what medium you want to use for your artwork.