

For Educators: *Shades of Greatness*

From 1887 until about 1920, Blacks had little opportunity to play organized baseball, but this changed as leaders began to promote the idea of establishing enterprises specifically for the African American community. In the early decades of the twentieth century, African Americans responded to this segregation by building separate institutions of their own. In the early-twentieth century, an increasing number of African Americans migrated from the South to the growing urban industrial centers of the Northeast. This expanding black population in urban areas facilitated the establishment of separate “race-owned” and supported businesses “intended to provide increased economic opportunity, independence and employment for African Americans.” Sports, at the height of popularity in the 1920s, presented another area of opportunity for Black entrepreneurs. Early attempts to organize Black leagues were unsuccessful until 1920 when representatives from eight cities met in Kansas City and successfully formed the first Negro National League. These efforts were led by Andrew “Rube” Foster, who served as president and treasurer while overseeing the circuit’s development. Foster served as a player, manager, and league executive. His contributions to the sport earned him a place in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. The establishment of the league stood as an important symbol of black accomplishment during this period and a source of great pride for the black community. Black sports commentators of the 1920s felt that baseball was more than just a sport – that it had true potential to effectuate change. Baseball, overall, was an important symbol, as the nation’s people, white and black, felt deeply connected to what all considered to be the “national game.” The popularity of black baseball grew in the 1920s as teams relentlessly toured across the country and as black newspapers promoted their exploits. Unfortunately, the black baseball industry would face many challenges during the 1930s due to a collapsed economy from the onset of the Great Depression and World War II. Somehow the industry survived this turmoil and bounced back in 1939 making modest profits. The League, however, would continue to suffer from poor organization and difficulties with running a successful business in a segregated society, including scheduling challenges and the expense of ballpark and stadium rentals. World War II was a turning point for race relations in the United States, and the “movement toward integrated baseball received a major lift from the changing racial climate ushered in by the War.” By the end of the war, the social climate was ready for integrated baseball, and in 1947, former Negro League player Jackie Robinson took the field with the Brooklyn Dodgers, officially breaking baseball’s color barrier. This event was a symbolic victory for the nation’s African Americans and part of a series of developments that would gradually bring black Americans into the mainstream America that had previously been closed to them.

In 2003, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, MO brought together 28 professional artists from around the country to create works of art that interpret the Negro Leagues experience, both on and off the playing field. Artists were given time to explore and research at the museum before creating their pieces. Some artists chose to base their piece (s) on real life people and players associated with the Negro Leagues while others created more

contemplative pieces about the role that baseball played for African Americans in a segregated society. All total, there are 32 original works of art that make up the Shades of Greatness exhibit.

Why do you think the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum chose the title “Shades of Greatness”?

Ask your students to look through the image gallery of all the works and once they have given time for each piece, choose one to answer the following questions about.

1. Why did you choose this piece? What do you like, or dislike, about it?
2. Take a moment to look at all areas of the piece, (background, foreground, etc.) before answering the following:
 - a. What do you think is happening?
 - b. How do you think the person/people in this piece are feeling?
 - c. How does this piece make you feel? Why?
3. Why do you think the artist created this piece?

Group discussion topics:

1. How do these pieces help us to understand the role that baseball played in Black America during the early part of the 20th century?
2. In what ways did the segregation of professional baseball impact the African American community?
3. In what ways did the eventual integration of professional baseball impact the African American community?