



Ronald and Jessie Cooper, *Heavenly Chour Praying God*, 1989. Painted wood box construction, 17 ½ x 19 x 11 in., Arient Family Collection. Photo by Jeffrey Rose.

**Grades:** 4–7

**Subjects:** English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts

**Time Required:**

**Author:** Written by Michael Svedman, edited by Ann Meehan and Molly Tarbell

## Lesson Overview

Students will look at an artwork by outsider artists Ronald and Jessie Cooper. They will learn about the Coopers' collaborative process and learn to identify key characteristics of their imagery and style. Additionally, students will consider their biographies and the role that faith plays in their art.

## Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Heavenly Chour Praying God*. See how much students can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get students started before sharing with the whole class.
  - **Pair Share:** Students turn to a partner and take turns making observations about the sculpture. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion:
  - What do you see? What can you find out about the work?
  - What is it made of? What techniques did the artist(s) use?
    - The sculpture is a wooden box with heavenly scenes painted on its faces. On top of the box are four figures with outstretched arms. Ronald and Jessie Cooper collaborate to carve and paint many of their works of art.
  - What's going on? What figures do you see? Who are they and what are they doing?

- Ten women stand in two rows of five against a blue background. Clouds swirl around the perimeter of the group and birds fly by. The women wear red dresses and white gloves. They raise their right arms and sing. In front of them, with his back to us, a man in a white suit preaches. Beside him is an altar. He seems to lead the group in prayer. This is the heavenly choir that the title refers to.
- Across the top of the scene are the words: HEAVENLY CHOUR PRAYSING GOD. Like other self-taught artists we will look at, Ronald and Jessie Cooper incorporate writing into their art in order to communicate a spiritual message.
- Carved on the lid of the box, four figures in white robes stand with outstretched arms. Their bodies make the shape of the cross, an important symbol of Christian piety. They also resemble orants, ancient Christian prayer figures who spread and raise their arms in devotion.
- Where is this place? What is it like?
  - The figures on the box float against a bright blue and crystal clear sky. Airy clouds surround them. People sing and dance and throw their arms open in expressive worship. The Coopers' vision of heaven is exuberant and harmonious. The whole work is keyed into the enthusiasm of the heavenly choir, and like them, it sings the praises of God and faith.
- How is this work different from traditional religious artwork? (For instance, compare it to a Renaissance or Baroque painting from LUMA—images available at [http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collections\\_martindarcy.html](http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collections_martindarcy.html)).
  - Ronald and Jessie Cooper were self-taught or outsider artists, which means that they received no formal artistic training and were not necessarily familiar with the conventional ways of depicting religious subject matter in Western art. Their style combines several distinctive elements:
    - Ronald and Jessie's collaborative process involves both pieces carved by Ronald and found objects, such as radios, shoes, rocks, and furniture. Sometimes, Ronald carves and Jessie paints, but both of them make different kinds of work together and separately.
    - Their work often has a specific religious message. The words and images work together to teach a religious lesson or elaborate on a spiritual theme.
    - Ronald's carving incorporates stylized figures and repeated motifs, often cleverly combined with household objects (e.g. a box, a kerosene heater, or a clock). Ronald and Jessie's painting is flat and frontal and uses bold colors and a blocky application. Formally trained artists use techniques like chiaroscuro (an Italian word meaning light and dark) to shade and highlight their figures, modeling them to make them look three-dimensional. Instead of constructing the illusion of depth with a system of perspective, Ronald and Jessie organize figures on the surface of the picture. They appear flat and are arranged according to the height of the picture plane.
- 4. **Artists' Biography:** Now let's learn about Ronald and Jessie Cooper's lives to help us understand what makes their art so unique.
  - Ronald (b. 1931) and Jessie (b. 1932) married in 1949 (at ages 17 and 16) in Flemingsburg, Kentucky, where they continued to live and eventually managed a grocery store. Jessie had been making art her whole life. She used crayons up until her marriage, when Ronald bought her first set of paints.



**Ronald and Jessie Cooper**

- In the succeeding years, the Coopers faced financial difficulties, and Ronald suffered two separate heart attacks. Then, in 1984, Ronald was involved in a terrible accident. His car was wrecked in an eight-car pileup, and Ronald was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital. Amazingly, he recovered, but his leg was so severely broken that Doctors told him he would never walk again. Back at home, Ronald was depressed, and Jessie encouraged him to explore art-making as a creative outlet for his frustration. He began carving and found he had a knack for it. Ronald said, “After my accident, I had nightmares where walking snakes chased me. I carved the snakes and put them in hell, where I was living.” He used art to cope with all of his fear, anger, and sadness.
- Friends began to request and buy work from Ronald, and he and Jessie started collaborating—often, Ronald carves pieces and Jessie paints and decorates them. Together, they use their artwork to preach religious messages. They both pull imagery from the Bible and scenes of country life and find their materials and inspiration at local flea markets. A sense of humor infuses their work, which also deals with frightening and joyous subject matter.

## **Illinois Learning Standards**

### English Language Arts

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

5 – Researching

### Social Science

16 – History

18 – Social Systems

### Fine Arts

25 – Language of the Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization