



Howard Finster, *Holy White City Coming Down #5000.280*, 1996. Enamel on wood, 15 7/8 x 20 1/8 in., Collection of Roger Manley.

Grades: 4–7

Subjects: English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts

Time Required:

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Lesson Overview

Students will learn about outsider artist Howard Finster. They will look at a painting by Finster, identify key stylistic elements, and discuss what it means to be an outsider artist. They will also consider the meaning and intent of Finster's art.

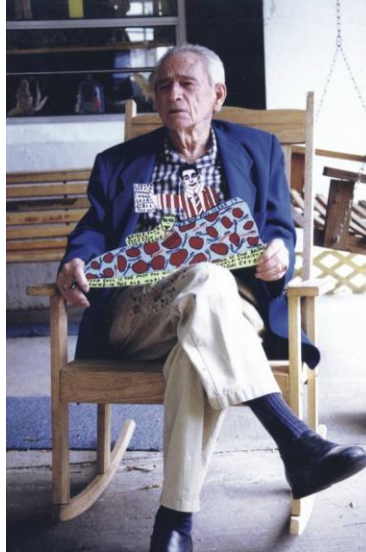
Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Holy White City Coming Down*. 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 painting. 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's going on? What makes you say that?
 - There are eleven white towers and eleven white mountains in a field. The mountains have faces with different expressions. Pairs of people decorate or

gather something from multi-colored trees surrounding the mountains. Many stars and planets are visible in the night sky, and people dressed in white ride atop clouds that resemble whales and dolphins.

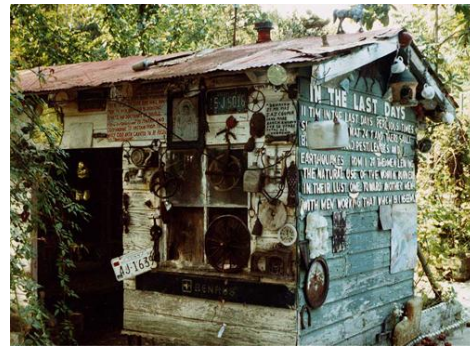
- There is also writing on the painting. As we will learn, Howard Finster was a self-taught, visionary artist. His paintings were spiritual messages, designed to inspire faith. Finster, like many visionary artists, saw his art as an extension of his own religious convictions. He often incorporated written messages into his art, combining textual and pictorial elements to arrive at a unique form of expression.
- Where is this place? What is it like?
 - The title of the painting, *Holy White City Coming Down*, refers to a passage from the Book of Revelation: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). Finster depicts the holy city as a heavenly garden full of activity. Hosts of angels or the saved move about excitedly and raise their arms, perhaps in prayer or celebration. The mountains, buildings, and clothes are all white, like the bride described in Revelation. The sky is bright and vivid, the colorful trees are in full bloom, and doves fly from branch to branch (you can see their silhouettes against some of the mountains).
 - This painting is one of Howard Finster’s many visions of Paradise. He imagines a heavenly city descending to Earth and urges the viewer to rejoice in the splendor of God.
- How is this painting 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).
 - Howard Finster was a self-taught or outsider artist, which means that he received no formal artistic training and was not necessarily familiar with the conventional ways of depicting religious subject matter in Western art. His style combines several distinctive elements:
 - He uses an all-over composition, which means that he covers the entire surface of the picture equally, without emphasizing one area
 - He doesn’t try to imitate visual reality. Many artists use a system of linear perspective to create the illusion of depth and to make their figures look like they inhabit real space. In *Holy White City Coming Down*, Finster ignores the rules of perspective and paints his figures uniform in size no matter where they appear in space. Only the towers in the back are smaller, suggesting their distance.
 - He paints with bold colors and a blocky style. 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. Finster applies the paint in broad, undifferentiated swathes of color, and sometimes he outlines shapes in black. This has the effect of flattening his figures, so that they appear to lie directly on the surface of the picture.
- 4. **Artist’s Biography:** Now let’s learn about Howard Finster’s background and what makes him and his art so distinct.
 - Finster was born in 1916 in Valley Head, Alabama. He later moved to Summerville, Georgia, where he was ordained a Baptist minister. Having lived in rural communities his whole life, Finster had little or no exposure to the mainstream art market. One

day, while he was painting a bicycle, Finster dipped his finger into a can of white paint. When he looked at the finger, he saw that the paint had formed a face, and he heard a voice command him: "Make sacred art." Finster objected that he couldn't, and the voice replied: "How do you know?" So Finster took a dollar bill from his pocket and tried to draw George Washington's portrait from it.



Howard Finster on the Porch at Paradise Garden

- In 1965, Finster received another message from God, commanding him to create the Plant Farm Museum (later called Paradise Garden) on a plot of land in Chattooga County, Georgia. He began to make and number works of art to decorate the site, transforming it into a spiritual garden. For Finster, visual art became a powerful evangelistic tool and a natural extension of his faith. "Preaching don't do much good," he said. "No one listens. But a picture gets on a brain cell." Attractions at Paradise Garden included "the Hubcap Tower," "the Bicycle Tower," "the Bible house," and "Coin Man," which mixed sculpture, painting, and architecture in a unique form of environmental art. Finster also erected the Folk Art Chapel, a museum/place of worship devoted to outsider and folk art. He frequently used found materials and house paint, which lends his art a distinctly ad hoc look. Paradise Garden became a tourist attraction where people traveled to visit Finster and to view and buy his art.



Details from Howard Finster's Paradise Garden

- The garden was an important symbol of Finster's faith, an ongoing expressive project. *Holy White City Coming Down* represents Finster's vision of the heavenly city that he prepared for here on Earth by making art, preaching, and creating Paradise Garden. His entire way of life was an outgrowth of his unique spiritual vision.

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