



Sister Gertrude Morgan, *New Jerusalem*, 1970s. Gouache and pencil on cardboard, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., Collection of Bob Roth.

Grades: 4–7

Subjects: English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts

Time Required:

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Lesson Overview

Students will learn about the life and art of Sister Gertrude Morgan. They will look at a painting by Sister Gertrude and come to understand the symbolic significance of the New Jerusalem in her work. Additionally, students will consider Sister Gertrude's biography and her religious faith to help them deepen their appreciation for the uniqueness of her art.

Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *New Jerusalem*. 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?
 - A woman dressed as a bride stands with a man in the bottom left corner of the painting. Behind them and filling the rest of the picture is a tall, white building. There are dozens of rooms in the building, and there are many figures in the rooms. Most of the people are wearing white and blue. Angels

with bright red halos fly around the building. The whole scene is extremely lively and full of movement. The colors are primarily light, warm, and bright, which reinforces the ecstatic quality of the imagery.

- As the title tells us, this painting is how Sister Gertrude Morgan imagines the New Jerusalem. Her imagery is based on the Book of Revelation, which represents the Christian vision of the end times. Revelation tells of the final battle between good and evil, the second coming of Christ, and the foundation of the New Jerusalem, the eternal reign of heaven on earth. The holy white city is a popular motif in much outsider art, but it is especially important to Sister Gertrude. Let's see if we can figure out why.
- Look around at some other works by Sister Gertrude Morgan (if you are at LUMA, you can find several other artworks by Sister Gertrude in the galleries; otherwise, you can visit this website: <http://foundationstart.org/artists/sister-gertrude-morgan>): what do you notice about them? Do they help you discover anything about the painting we're discussing?
 - Sister Gertrude returned again and again to the theme of the New Jerusalem. In fact, there are two other paintings called *New Jerusalem* in this show. All three have similar formats and make use of similar imagery. The figure of the bride appears in at least two of the paintings. Drawing on Christian tradition, Sister Gertrude portrays herself as the bride of Christ, a role symbolic of her spiritual commitment to the Lord. She also keys into an important passage from the Book of Revelation, 21:2, which reads: "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." The marriage between Sister Gertrude and Christ relies on the same metaphorical logic that the writer of Revelation uses to describe the union between heaven and the earth represented by the New Jerusalem.
 - 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).
 - Sister Gertrude Morgan was a self-taught or outsider artist, which means that she received no formal artistic training and was not necessarily familiar with the conventional ways of depicting religious subject matter in Western art. Her style combines several distinctive elements:
 - She uses an all-over composition, which means that she distributes interest across the entire picture, without emphasizing any one area in particular. Further, she often covers every part of the picture with activity. This tendency is called *horror vacui* or fear of empty spaces, which means that she does not like to leave empty spaces (or voids) in her paintings. Instead, they are full of action, which lends visual force to her exuberant subject matter.
 - 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. Sister Gertrude works in a flat, schematic style, so that her figures appear to lie directly on the surface of the picture.
- 4. **Artist's Biography:** Now let's learn about Sister Gertrude Morgan's life to help us understand her art.
 - Sister Gertrude Morgan was born in 1900 in rural Alabama. She moved around with her family, eventually settling in Georgia where she turned to religion and

began a strident commitment to faith that would occupy the rest of her life. In 1928, she married a man named Will Morgan. Then, in 1934, she received the first of her revelations from the Lord, which compelled her to leave behind her secular life and to preach the Gospel. Three years later, she received another revelation, and in 1938 she set off for New Orleans, leaving behind her husband and family. In New Orleans in 1939, she met Mother Margaret Parker and Sister Cora Williams, and the three women established a mission house in Parker's 18-room home on Flake Avenue in the Gentilly neighborhood. The house took in orphans and served as a base of operations for the women's mission work. The women raised money through street performances, believing that song and dance were important ways of communicating with God. After years of preaching on the streets of New Orleans, Sister Gertrude began to experiment with making art as another way to get in touch with God and to preach his message. Around the same time, she received a vision in which she became the bride of Christ, and she started wearing all white.



Sister Gertrude Morgan

- In 1957, after the death of Mother Margaret Parker, Sister Gertrude left the Flake Avenue home and drifted around New Orleans for several years, continuing to preach in the streets and to make artwork. In 1963, she established her own church, The Everlasting Gospel Ministry, in a simple, white shotgun house that belonged to an elderly widow she knew. Here, Sister Gertrude held prayer services, incorporating song and dance into her sermons and illustrating them with her art. She also met local art dealer E. Lorenz "Larry" Borenstein. Enthusiastic about her work, Borenstein began to look after Sister Gertrude, buying her groceries, supporting her modest needs, and showing her work in his gallery, which helped to build her reputation as an artist.
- In 1974, Sister Gertrude surprised friends and patrons when she announced that God had commanded her to stop making art and to focus instead on her poetry. Her art, she said, was generating too much fame and income and had become unacceptable to God. Sister Gertrude Morgan died on July 8, 1980 and was buried in a pauper's grave.

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