



Leroy Almon, *Thomas Dorsey*, 1994. Paint on carved wood, 27 ½ x 35 5/8 in., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1996.156.

**Grades:** 4-7

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

**Time Required:**

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## Lesson Overview

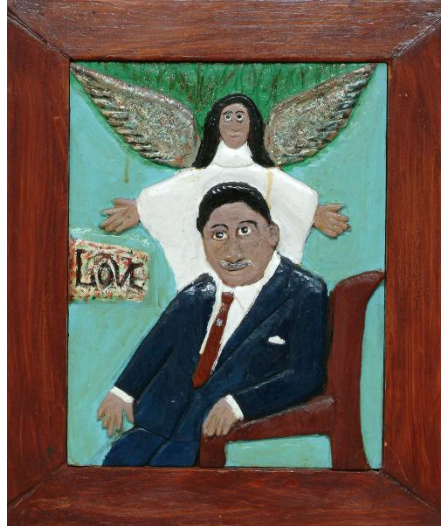
Students will look at a carving by outsider artist Leroy Almon. They will learn about the life of Thomas Dorsey, the father of Gospel music and the subject of Almon's carving, and about how Almon's religious faith motivated him to become an artist. The discussion of Almon's biography will also touch on his friendship with the renowned carver Elijah Pierce, a self-taught artist who was Almon's spiritual and artistic role model.

## Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Thomas Dorsey*. 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?
    - The figure of Thomas Dorsey appears in the center of the panel. We see him from the waist up, playing a piano and flanked by a gospel choir. Overhead, a banner lists the years of Dorsey's life: 1899–1993. This might lead us to

imagine that the scene shows Dorsey in heaven, leading a choir of the saved in celebration of the afterlife. It is a tribute to his memory. Floating beside the banner are two coffins labeled “Wife” and “Son,” respectively. At the top, in the center of the panel, a disembodied eye looks down and enshrines Dorsey in a pyramid of glittering light. A horizontal band along the bottom shows the sinful world of Blues music. In contrast to the orderly rows of the choir singers above, here groups of people huddle and dance with demons, smoking, drinking, and listening to the Blues while the flames of Hell lick their feet.

- What do you think this piece is made of? What techniques did the artist use?
  - Leroy Almon trained with the self-taught carver Elijah Pierce. Like Pierce, he worked with a pocket knife and sometimes a chisel in wood. Typical of Almon, *Thomas Dorsey* is a relief carving, which means that the figures are carved against a flat ground. In other words, they project from the surface of the material in which they are carved. This particular style of relief carving is very shallow, called low- or bas-relief (pronounced BAH-relief).
- What does the scene tell you about Thomas Dorsey? What kind of person was he? What clues does Almon give you to Dorsey’s life?
  - Born in 1899, the son of a preacher, Thomas Dorsey spent his childhood in Atlanta, Georgia, where he taught himself to play piano by watching musicians on the street. At 16, Dorsey moved to Chicago and met Ma Rainey and Tampa Red, important Chicago Blues musicians. He quickly rose to prominence playing the blues and made a name for himself in the Blues scene in Chicago. But in 1932, Dorsey faced a major personal tragedy with the death of his wife and newborn child. In response, he composed “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” and broke with the Blues entirely, devoting himself instead to spreading God’s word with his music. Dorsey drew extensively on his background in the Blues to diversify the already lively tradition of African-American religious songs. The result was the distinctive blend of sounds that earned Dorsey the title “father of Gospel.”
  - Almon’s carving depicts Dorsey like a saint, surrounded by iconography related to his life and religious mission. The coffins of his wife and child represent the moment of Dorsey’s religious conversion and his rejection of the Blues. His piano, the source of his Gospel music, acts as a visual barrier between the heavenly choir and the damnation of the Blues club below. The whole composition pivots on music: abused, it leads straight to perdition, but in the right hands (like those of Dorsey), music can save.
- How is this work different from traditional religious artwork? (For instance, compare it to a Renaissance or Baroque sculpture from LUMA—images available at [http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collections\\_martindarcy.html](http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collections_martindarcy.html)).
  - Although he apprenticed with well-known self-taught carver Elijah Pierce (also on view in this show), Almon is still considered to be an 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. Like Pierce, Almon uses repeated patterns and schematic organization, both of which lend his work a distinctive visual rhythm. More importantly, Almon frequently combines biblical imagery and Christian vision with memory and African-American cultural history. In this way, he breaks down distinctions between personal and religious life, between history, politics, and faith. He is interested in both the religious and social dimensions of the African American experience.



Elijah Pierce, *Martin Luther King Jr. (Love)*, 1969. Paint on carved wood. Photograph courtesy of <http://foundationstart.org>.

4. **Artist's Biography:** Now let's learn about Leroy Almon's life to help us understand what makes his art so unique.
- Leroy Almon was born in 1938 in Tallapoosa, Georgia. His family then moved to Ohio, where he grew up. He didn't begin making art until late in life. As an adult, he worked as a shoe salesperson and then for Coca-Cola. Almon came into contact with Pierce as a patron of the barbershop that Pierce operated in Columbus, Ohio. A self-taught carver, Pierce displayed his work in the shop and had converted the back room into a studio. Almon admired Pierce, both as a spiritual guide and as an artist and asked to become his student. Of his time with Pierce, Almon later said, "Elijah Pierce was my spiritual teacher. For one whole year I listened to him. I watched him. I believed him. I began to carve." Around 1980, Almon moved back to Tallapoosa, where he became an ordained minister and continued making art. He styled himself as a folk-art preacher, using his woodcarvings to communicate his belief in the power of religious salvation.



Leroy Almon in his studio

## **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