

# 6 Portraits in black and white

IDENTITÉS

CONFLITS

CONTACTS DES CULTURES



Kindred McLEARY, *Lower East Side*, from *Scenes of New York* (1938)  
Mural study (Madison Square Postal Station, New York City)

# CLOSE-UP 6

## 1. Asserting one's identity

Look at the two paintings and read the corresponding texts on p. 23, then answer the following questions.

1. What message is conveyed in Leutze's painting? Study the use of light, form, motion and proportion carefully to justify your answer.
2. Describe Colescott's painting.
3. Compare the two paintings: what are their common points? (Think of aesthetics.)

4. In your opinion, what were Colescott's intentions when working on this painting in 1975? Do you think that his message was understood by everybody?
5. Do you know other paintings which have been transformed? Which one(s)? What for?

Emanuel Gottlieb LEUTZE,  
*George Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851)



Robert COLESCOTT,  
*George Washington Carver  
Crossing the Delaware:*  
*Page from an American  
History Textbook* (1975)

**George Washington Crossing the Delaware**, a revered icon of the American Revolution, describes the historic moment when General George Washington led the American revolutionary troops across the Delaware River in order to surprise the English regiments at the Battle of Trenton (1776).

**Robert COLESCOTT**, an African American, was born in 1925. He received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1952. During a stay in Paris (1949-50), Colescott studied with French painter Fernand Léger.



Born a slave in Missouri, on the farm of Moses Carver, **George Washington Carver** (1864-1943) was kidnapped from his owner's plantation by a band of slave raiders. His mother was sold and sent away to Arkansas, but

Carver's master reclaimed him after the war and brought him up as his own child.

He was admitted as the first black student of Simpson College, Indianola, Iowa and received a Master's degree in agricultural science. He devoted his life to research projects connected with southern

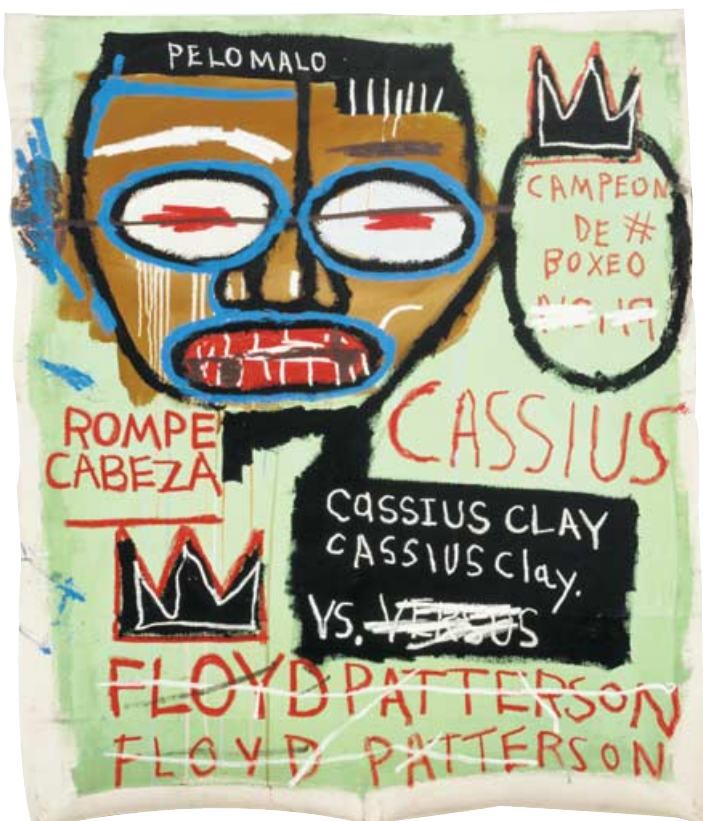
agriculture, which had been devastated by years of civil war.

Carver did not make a profit from his discoveries: he gave them freely to mankind. In 1940 he donated his life's savings to a foundation for continuing research in agriculture.

The area of his childhood is preserved as a park, which was the first designated national monument to an African American in the United States.

The epitaph on his grave reads: *He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.*

## 2. Enhancing one's self-image



1. First, say what you know about Cassius Clay and Floyd Patterson. (Browse the Internet if necessary.)
2. What message is conveyed in this painting? What does it reveal about the painter?
3. Do you like this painting (style, colours, symbols...)? Explain why or why not.



Born in 1960 in New York City to a Puerto Rican mother and Haitian father, **Jean-Michel BASQUIAT** grew up in Brooklyn. In 1978 he started selling hand-painted postcards and T-shirts in the street, living in a cardboard box. His street painting and

graffiti were then discovered by New York's art world and Basquiat soon became a celebrated painter. He died of a heroin overdose in 1988. He was 27.

### 3. The Tree

1. Explain the message of the poem. Would you say that it is deeply American? Justify.
2. How far does Julie Nicholls' painting provide an appropriate illustration for *The Tree*?
3. Choose a few lines you particularly like in the poem and translate them into French.

Julie NICHOLLS,  
*Multicultural America* (1999)



Today, the first and last of every Tree  
Speaks to humankind.  
Come to me, here beside the River.  
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.  
5 Each of you descendant of some passed  
On traveller, has been paid for.

You, who gave me my first name, you,  
Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you  
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then  
10 Forced on bloody feet,  
Left me to the employment of  
Other seekers<sup>1</sup> – desperate for gain,  
Starving<sup>2</sup> for gold.

You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede,  
15 The German, the Eskimo, the Scot,  
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru<sup>3</sup>, bought,  
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare  
Praying for a dream.

Here, root yourself beside me.  
20 I am that tree planted by the River,  
Which will not be moved.  
I, the Rock, I, the River, I, the Tree,  
I am yours – your passages have been paid.  
Lift up<sup>4</sup> your faces, you have a piercing<sup>5</sup> need  
25 For this bright morning dawning<sup>6</sup> for you.  
History, despite its wrenching<sup>7</sup> pain,  
Cannot be un-lived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.  
Lift up your eyes upon  
30 This day breaking<sup>8</sup> for you.  
Give birth again  
To the dream.

Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands,  
35 Mould<sup>9</sup> it into the shape of your most  
Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts.  
Each new hour holds new chances  
40 For a new beginning.  
Do not be wedded<sup>10</sup> forever  
To fear, yoked<sup>11</sup> eternally  
To brutishness.  
The horizon leans forward,  
45 Offering you space to place new steps of change.  
Here, on the pulse<sup>12</sup> of this fine day  
You may have the courage  
To look up and out and upon me, the  
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country. [...]  
50 Here, on the pulse of this new day  
You may have the grace to look up and out  
And into your sister's eyes, and into  
Your brother's face, your country  
And say simply  
55 With hope –  
Good morning.

Maya ANGELOU, *On the Pulse of Morning* (1993)

1. *chercheur* – 2. *affamé* – 3. Ashanti, Yoruba, Kru: African ethnic groups – 4. *lever* – 5. *irrésistible* – 6. *naître* – 7. *déchirant* – 8. *se lever* – 9. *façonner* – 10. *marier* – 11. *accoupler* – 12. *pouls*



*The Tree* was read by African American author and poetess **Maya ANGELOU** at the inauguration of Bill Clinton as President of the USA in January 1993. Angelou was born in St Louis, Missouri in 1928. Her most prominent novel is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970). Her work stresses the themes of racism, courage, perseverance and survival.