
Belle Johnson (1864-1945)

Mendota, Missouri native Bella Johnson was known as an eccentric, unorthodox artist, whose creativity was uninhibited by conventional photographic techniques. Early examples of her work demonstrate that she signed her photographs Miss Belle Johnson, followed later by Belle Johnson, and eventually a much abbreviated B.J. Her studio was located on the top floor of a building in Monroe City, Missouri.

Her 200-some photographs which are in the collection of the Massillon Museum were donated by friend and fellow photographer, William L. Bennett. The Museum is fortunate to have a significant number of his prints and negatives in the collection as well. With him, Johnson exchanged ideas and techniques, and some of her photographs bear the inscription "To William L. Bennett." One such example is that of two children, one of whom is captured expressively in the midst of crying.

Johnson was an active member and officer of the Women's Federation, organized in 1910 by Mary Carnell as a forum for women photographers. As told in an account by Belle Johnson scholar Juanita Yates, the photographer was once asked whether or not it was hard for a woman to get ahead in the world of men photographers. Johnson responded with 'No,' adding that she made sure to it that she was better than they were at photography.

Her photographs are known worldwide, which is attributed largely to their reproduction in books and magazines. Her photograph of three unidentified women with long hair that nearly reaches the floor was reproduced in the *Smithsonian* magazine (1997) as well as in Naomi Rosenblum's book, *A History of Women Photographers*.

Belle Johnson Gallery



Three Women with Long Hair
Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
NC



Youth, 1898
Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of William L. Bennett
BC 1877.1.2



Three Old Women, 1896-1905
Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of William L. Bennett
BC 1877.6.7A



My Lost Youth
Sepia Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of William L. Bennett
BC 1877.1.9



Sepia Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of William L. Bennett
BC 1877.6.76



Black and White Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of William L. Bennett
BC 1877.8.6



Sepia Photograph
Collection of the Massillon Museum
Gift of William L. Bennett
BC 1877.6.94

Belle Johnson/Abel Fletcher and Photography

Teacher Guide

Preparation

- Students should be introduced to a brief history of photography, including photographic techniques and processes (i.e. daguerreotypes, tintypes and ambrotypes).
 - This preparation can include observing the photography timeline at this web-site as well as the early daguerreotypes, tintypes and ambrotypes included at this web-site.

Project

- A classroom discussion based on the comparison of a portrait done by Abel Fletcher in the 1840s to a portrait by Belle Johnson done in the 1890s or early 1900s.
 - The discussion should include a description of the two images, their similarities and differences.
 - The teacher can guide the discussion toward student discovery of clothing and hair style changes, limitations of the photo processes and their impact on the subjects of the photos, and the differences in mannerisms, attitude and demeanor of the subjects within the historic times that they lived.
 - The discussion should bring the student to the realization that photographs are very valuable insights into the lives and styles of past generations.

Abel Fletcher/Belle Johnson

Lesson Plan for Photography

Class discussion and participation:

Introduction: Various forms of visual art give us a picture of life at different times. These images can include examples of clothing, hair and furniture styles; personal and physical appearances and attitudes and how a particular location can look so different from the way it looks today. Photography, a relatively recent form of visual art, gives us an accurate reflection of all of those different aspects of life, from the 1840s to the very recent past.

Goal: Each student will gain an awareness, understanding and appreciation of the ability of photography to provide an accurate image of lifestyles of the past 160 years.

Objectives:

1. Show students that photographs are more accurate in showing past times than are other visual mediums.
2. Demonstrate changes of lifestyles of a relatively brief period of time (50 years) by comparing photos from different generations.
3. Illustrate the value of photography as a tool for research.
4. Investigate the limitations of earlier forms of photography in capturing an image.
5. Demonstrate the impact of developing photographic technology on the artists ability to capture images.

Materials: No production materials are necessary. Students need to be able to reference the Web Educational Program on the Massillon Museum's web-site, either on individual monitors or by computer projection, controlled by the teacher.

Note: This web page includes a photograph by Abel Fletcher from the 1840s and a photograph by Belle Johnson from the 1890s. Additional photographs can be accessed and moved to this web page from the gallery pages of these and other photographers represented in the permanent collection of the Massillon Museum. This feature allows the teacher to tailor the class discussion to his/her own goals and objectives.

Procedures: This plan is designed to be used as a question and answer format within a class discussion situation. The teacher should formulate a series of questions designed to lead discussion toward the achievement of the stated goal and objectives or toward goals and objective formulated by the teacher.

Note: This plan can easily be altered to an individual written, question and answer format.

Assessment: A set of rubrics that are used with consistency can eliminate most of the variable subjectivity of an assessment. The rubrics listed below are some suggestions.

Rubrics:

1. Was the student alert and attentive during the discussion?
2. Did the student volunteer any contribution to the discussion?
3. Did the student ask questions?
4. Did the student write notes, if and when instructed to do so by the teacher?
5. Did the student passively participate by manipulating the web-site when asked to acquire further images?

Notes:

1. A short written assessment can be formulated in the form of short answer or in the form of a short reflective essay.
2. A suggested follow-up student exercise might be to ask each student to bring to class a photo from home that was taken very recently and another photo that was taken at least 10 or more years ago. The teacher would then ask for written responses to a series of questions designed to reinforce the goals and objectives of this plan.