The core curriculum at our school includes American history. Keeping this in mind, I wanted to devote the year to the study of American artists in my fifth-grade art-history units. (Also appropriate for other grade levels.)

African-Americans played an important role in our country’s history, and I wanted to illustrate their position in the visual arts. Therefore, the opening artist in the unit was Aaron Douglas, a Harlem-Renaissance artist. Douglas used clean contours, stylized images, flat fields and monochromatic values to represent the origins, history and evolution of black America. The art techniques of contour lines and color-mixing to create shades and tints is a key way for fifth-grade students to gain skills and experience in drawing and painting.

We began with a discussion about the life of Aaron Douglas, and the culture of the Harlem Renaissance. Students also examined the role art plays in reflecting social and individual concerns. Students then began to talk about their own environment and what images represent their lives.

When analyzing Douglas’ art with the students I spoke about contour lines, the absence of details and flat fields of color lacking shadows and highlight. Photos and prints of The Crucifix, Study for God’s Trombone, Noah’s Ark and Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South served as visual models.

I briefly described the project: Students would first be asked to make a simple contour drawing, then place lines in...
any direction and style over the image, or simply redraw around it, tracing it over and over until the lines go off the page (leave about 1 inch between tracings for easier painting). This gives the picture sections, much like a grid.

They would then paint the pictures with values of colors they mixed using white to create shades, and black to create tints. They were to switch colors whenever there was a new section separated by a line. Students could choose to paint one image with the same color values and change the color of paint for the next, or continue to paint a monochromatic picture (using the values of one color).

There are five important aspects of the lesson. First, students should draw large, simple contour images lacking detail. Then they should draw continuous lines starting at one end and reaching the other—either from top to bottom or side to side—over the image, with ample space between the lines. This will make it easier to paint and identify the multiple images they have drawn.

Second, students should choose only two to three colors for their color palette: making shades and tints of each color, which takes time, and when too many colors are used, the image can get lost in the color and become too confusing to paint and to see.

Third, before painting, students should use a light pencil mark to label the images and spaces with the colors they will be painted (for example, blue, light blue, light-light blue and so on). This will help them carefully think about color placement and easily fix any mistakes.

Fourth, students should mix only one color and paint the sections of those color values first, then move on to the next color. This will avoid having to throw out paint they did not use. If they need more paint of a specific value, they can mix it at that time, preventing the chance of not getting the same color value next time.

Fifth, alternate values of a color whenever there is a line separating a section. The same color should not touch or be placed next to itself. Students should shift to the next lighter or darker value of the color when separated by a line.

Although this project was done with fifth-graders, its complexity can be altered for other grade levels. The patience and multiple stages of this lesson help students appreciate the methods used in making art, while they develop experience in a variety of different techniques, such as drawing, color mixing and painting.

My students worked hard to document images of importance to them, and gained an understanding of the relationship between art, society, politics and originality. In the end, they felt very proud of their finished piece.

At the time of this project, Xanthippi Cynthia Stylianou was teaching art at Rowland Hall, St. Mark’s Lower School in Salt Lake City, Utah. She is now living and working in Cyprus.