

THE JAZZ AGE

1914-1940

in Paris



Josephine Baker souvenir postcard from the Casino de Paris, 1930 (Smithsonian Institution)



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Dear Educator:

“The Jazz Age in Paris, 1914-1940” is based on the Smithsonian’s travelling exhibit focusing on the 1920s and 1930s in Paris. Although the number of cities hosting this exhibit was limited, the content of the exhibit is now available to your students everywhere through this study guide. This guide offers an exciting glimpse of the unique period, the special places and the extraordinary talents of an acclaimed group of writers, musicians, painters, philosophers, dancers and entrepreneurs. Of special interest to social science, language arts, art and music students on the junior and senior high school level as well as college students, this program explores ragtime music, the Parisian taste for exotic entertainment, the impact of World War I, the expatriate experience, cabaret life and café society, and changing social and artistic developments during the 1930s.

“The Jazz Age in Paris, 1914-1940 will encourage students to learn more about important Jazz Age personalities, including the “syncopated soldier” James Reese Europe, jazz-club entrepreneur Ada “Bricktop” Smith, legendary performer and songstress Josephine Baker, and saxophonist Sidney Bechet. Literary powerhouses such as Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein were all part of the Paris landscape during the ‘20s and ‘30s. Their writing styles were direct results of the unique philosophical and political climate they experienced there. It was this extraordinary combination that not only fueled literary works, but kindled the creative explosions of artists and musicians almost unprecedented in one time period and location.

To help your students familiarize themselves with the period and the personalities and to enrich their experience, this guide includes background material and activity ideas for social studies, language arts, music and art students. Duplicate the activities and suggestions in this guide and share them with your colleagues in various curricular areas.

Social Studies

Background

★ Why did Americans go to Paris? For many, it was because they could afford it. While the French economy wasn't as bad as the triple-digit inflation in Germany and Austria, it was weak. The franc was worth about 6¢ in 1921 and dropped to 4¢ in 1926. Anyone with dollars to spend could live comfortably. In fact, in 1925, author William Faulkner spent about a dollar a day to live—and that included 55¢ for his room.

★ How did people get there? As a result of a World War I naval battle near Denmark's Jutland peninsula in 1916, England decided to produce more mobile destroyers that would be less of a target for U-boats than big cruisers. They also produced merchant ships to escort convoys of goods and soldiers. When the war was over, shipping firms converted these vessels into ocean liners and competed for passengers by offering low prices to fill their cabins. It became easier and cheaper to cross the Atlantic than the United States.

★ Why Paris? Many U.S. soldiers passed through Paris during the first World War, and they had seen its beauty and excitement. For artists, the city had an appealing reputation of artistic independence. Paris provided artists with everything they needed—quality printers, galleries and bookshops, art schools, intellectuals, patrons and buyers, concert halls and salons, and a sympathetic press. Almost every American newspaper and periodical had a branch in Paris because news from Paris was hot in the U.S. There was also greater racial tolerance in Paris than in the United States in the 1920s and '30s.

★ What was going on at home? American intellectuals and artists felt uncomfortable in the U.S. They feared a new Puritanism of which the Eighteenth Amendment (Prohibition) was only a part. U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer authorized raids on homes and businesses to stop "a red menace." The U.S. Post Office and the New York Port Authority were allowed to intercept mail and destroy material they deemed dangerous. Warren G. Harding, soon to be President, said, "America's need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, not agitation, but adjustment; not experiment, but equipoise."

Activities

★ Ask your students to think about the term *expatriate*. Were the artists in Paris in the '20s and '30s truly expatriates? Were they really *exiles*?



Jazz musician Sidney Bechet, circa 1930
(Duncan P. Schiedt Collection)

★ Cole Porter penned these lyrics: "You come to Paris, you come to play: You have a wonderful time, you go away. And, from then on, you talk of Paris knowingly, You may know Paris, you don't know Páree." What do your students think he meant by that?

★ Here are just a few of the artists who found themselves in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s: Writers F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, sculptor Constantin Brancusi, author Kay Boyle, author James Joyce, musician George Antheil, poet Andre Breton, singer Josephine Baker, and authors James Thurber and Anais Nin. Have your students research one of these artists to find out what he or she produced or created during that time.

★ Ask your students to research the mood and attitudes of America between 1920 and 1940. Have them look into racial attitudes, the era of Prohibition, and the lives and philosophies of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and President Warren G. Harding.

★ Students can examine the term "the lost generation" to discover what social, economic and emotional factors affected Americans and Europeans after World War I, propelling many artists to seek refuge in Paris.

★ Ask your students to define *la vie de bohème*—the Bohemian life—as it pertains to Paris from 1920-1940, to aspects of American culture today, and to other periods of 20th-century America.

★ Have students work in teams to create a timeline tracing major political events, cultural trends and scientific breakthroughs between the two world wars and present their findings to their classmates.

Language Arts

Background

☾ How did they get their start? Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson and Thornton Wilder were just a few of the many famous writers flourishing in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s due, in part, to the support of writer Gertrude Stein. Her apartment was the center of literary development and exploration. In 1919, Sylvia Beach, daughter of an American clergyman, founded the English-language bookstore Shakespeare and Company on 8 rue de l'Odéon (she later moved down the street to number 12), lending books to struggling writers like Hemingway and Joyce, allowing them to finish studies that had been interrupted by the war.

Beach and her partner recognized Joyce's genius and published his masterpiece *Ulysses* in 1922. Basing his work on the themes of Homer's *Odyssey*, Joyce developed the *stream of consciousness* technique—an attempt to write the way thoughts and memory actually work in the mind. *Ulysses* was banned in the U.S. until 1933 because of its erotic, scatological content.

☾ What is imagist poetry? This type of poetry was made popular by poets such as Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams and Carl Sandburg—many of whom lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Imagist poetics follow three basic rules: They give direct treatment to the subject. They omit any word that does not contribute to the meaning. They compose their poetry in the meter of a musical phrase.

Ask students to find an imagist poem and to think about the images presented and how they are related.

☾ What is surrealism? Founded by French poet and critic Andre Breton, surrealism was a literary and artistic movement that emphasized the role of the unconscious in creative activity. Breton published his *Surrealistic Manifesto* in Paris in 1924. Pure surrealist writers wrote whatever came into their heads, refusing to change a single word. They viewed rewriting as interfering with the pure act of creation. They felt that this free flow of thought would form a subconscious bond with their readers. The unconscious and subconscious were new and controversial concepts during the '20s and '30s. It was during this time period that Sigmund Freud began applying his controversial theories on the sexual origin of neuroses to interpretations of religion, art and literature. This captivated artists and intellectuals alike.

☾ What is the "lost generation"? Gertrude Stein penned that famous phrase to describe 20-year-olds like Ernest Hemingway whose lives were changed and whose outlooks were misshapen because the natural order of their lives was interrupted by war. This phrase soon became a label



Duke Ellington (standing third from right) and his orchestra in Paris

for all the artists arriving in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, living a bohemian lifestyle. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, published in 1926, features characters who lead a disorderly life of pleasure, seeking to experience the moment, giving little thought to the future. Writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, who became a close friend of Hemingway, lived a life of partying and excess while in Paris, even reportedly bicycling drunk down the Champs d'Elysees, Paris's largest boulevard, hitting hotel doormen he

passed with a loaf of bread. Many members of the "lost generation" found their talents. Many more found "la vie de bohème."

Activities

Ask your students to analyze one or two imagist poems to discover how:

- Form and meaning coexist.
- The poems rebel against past poetry.
- The poems only focus on telling images.
- The poems try to capture a pure intellectual and emotional moment in time.

Then, ask them to write their own imagist poem.

Have your students write a paragraph in the surrealist style, using whatever words come into their heads. Ask them to have a classmate read their writing to see what message the words conveyed.

Ask students to read works by other writers living in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s—Sherwood Anderson, who wrote about empty Midwestern American lives; the English chronicler of World War I, Ford Madox Ford; the poet Ezra Pound, who later adopted Italian Fascism and was institutionalized in the United States; the American novelist John Dos Passos, whose epic novels included the trilogy *U.S.A.*, or the Irish novelist, playwright and friend of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett—and to speculate how living in Paris affected their works.

Ask students to consult newspapers and magazines from the 1920s and 1930s to get a sense of the philosophical and political climates in Paris.



Norton and Margot, American ballroom dance team, at Les Ambassadeurs club, Paris, 1937 (Courtesy Margot Webb)

Art

Background

How were the visual arts influenced during the Jazz Age? The rebellion against European traditionalism that began to take hold in the late 1800s found its locus in the Parisian quarter of Montmartre. This "artist's colony" became a magnet for poets, musicians, artists and dancers. By the early 1900s, the clubs and streets of Paris provided inspiration and the freedom of expression to interpret the new century through cultural influences outside the "norm." The French fascination with African art, music, costume, and dance stemmed from the country's colonial experience in Africa. There was an interest in, and appetite for, anything that seemed exotic to the "civilized" European world. To the *artistes* of the day, the "primitivism" of ancient or tribal peoples of Africa, Asia and the Pacific seemed more authentic, spiritual, vital, and "unspoiled."

What were the predominant art styles of the day? Cubism, Fauvism, surrealism and Dadaism represented forms of abstraction in art that were completely fresh and outside the "rules." The cubists' paintings focused on the rearrangement of composition, geometric shapes, movement, pattern and color. They believed that sight alone was insufficient to "see"—that one's perception depended upon use of the imagination. Arguably the most famous painter of the period, Pablo Picasso, was greatly influenced by the art of ancient Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, the Iberian Peninsula, and that of "primitives."

What was the Harlem Renaissance? Moving north to seek opportunities in U.S. cities from the racial persecution and poverty of the post-Civil War South, African American artists, writers, and musicians flocked to the neighborhood of Manhattan called Harlem, creating a cultural revolution called the "Harlem Renaissance" that then spread from America to Europe where it became known as "Negritude." There, American blacks found freedom of expression to affirm their identity and gain acceptance and appreciation. The cultural affinity between African Americans and Africa—a continent already appealing and interesting to the post-war French—gave black Americans ready access to exposure and recognition in Paris. This opened doors that otherwise would have been closed to them in America.

Activities

"In Zürich in 1915, losing interest in the slaughterhouses of the world war, . . . we searched for an elementary art that would, we thought, save mankind from the furious folly of these times." — sculptor, painter and poet Hans Arp. Have students cite some

examples from Jazz Age art styles to reinforce Arp's statement.

👁️ American artists were, at first, hostile to European art forms, but after a large exhibit in February 1913 of contemporary European artists at the Armory in New York City, American artists began to experiment with new styles and techniques, influenced by their European counterparts. Have students learn more about this important exhibit, which European artists participated, and the subsequent effects on American artistic expression.

👁️ The post-war theme of the Jazz Age centered around rebellion against tradition, experimenting with the unknown, breaking the rules, innovation and, above all, exposing "the sham of western civilization." Has there been another, more recent period in American history in which it could be said that this type of rebellion took place in society and in all forms of the arts? Have students compare and contrast the genesis for the counterculture movement of the late 1960s—both abroad and in America—with that of the Jazz Age. How were the motivating factors similar? Different?

👁️ In contrast to European cubists, American artists of the time tended to focus on the emotional sensations created by the abstractness of the images. Ask students to name some American artists of that period whose work was derived from the Jazz Age styles of Europe. How, for example, can Georgia O'Keeffe's art be said to derive from the abstractness of French-based artists?

👁️ Archibald Motley Jr., Aaron Douglas, Henry O. Tanner, and Francis Picabia were some of the artists whose work flourished during this period. Have students discuss the styles and subjects of their work—Motley, whose attempt to portray black culture realistically drew some criticism that might today be termed "politically correct"; Douglas, whose work reflected spirituality and the relationship of man to nature; Tanner, who painted American soldiers in France, and Picabia, who celebrated the world of African-influenced theatrical performance.

👁️ Have students view Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and analyze how the lines and forms used in this painting reflect African sculpture.

Music

Background

🔥 Why did jazz—known as a musical form born in America—flourish in post-war Europe? African American troops sent abroad to fight during World War I were attached to the French army. They brought with them their own rich musical heritage. The 369th Infantry Central Postal Directory Band, under the direction of Lt. James Reese Europe, brought syncopated rhythms to France as they and other African American infantry bands marched through the countryside, enchanting the French. The emotion of this music—in stark contrast to marching and ragtime music known previously—was an important factor in the evolution of Europe's "jazz fever." Legendary clubs such as La Coupole, the Hot Club, and the Casino de Paris catered to Parisians' passions for dancing and jazz.

🔥 How was George Gershwin influenced by his experiences abroad? In 1928, Gershwin visited Europe and renewed his acquaintance with Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud, and other composers. In May of that year, the European premiere of Gershwin's *Concerto in F* took place; while abroad, Gershwin drafted and brought back to New York *An American in Paris*, which premiered on December 13th at Carnegie Hall.



(l to r): Louis Cole, Ada "Bricktop" Smith; (on bar): Jimmy Donahue, Mabel Mercer, Alberta Hunter, circa 1927 (Frank Driggs Collection)

🔥 How did ragtime differ from New Orleans-style jazz? Ragtime music, the basis for the Hellfighters Band's syncopated variations, contained unison passages and a simple focus on melody and accompaniment. New Orleans music—the first true jazz—was fronted by cornet, clarinet and trombone, but the three interacted in a polyphonic texture. The cornet carried the melodic voice, the clarinet an obligato duet, and the trombone a bass role—together implicating the piece's harmony. Each instrument provided its own improvisation.

🔥 Musically, how was the Hellfighters Band transitional in evolving music from ragtime to jazz? The intensity, brashness, and "looseness" of rhythms that previously were rigid and stiff brought a "hot," wild, reckless feel to the music. The solo breaks were perhaps the earliest examples of recorded improvisation by soloists. The bold excitement of this new music form mirrored the sheer exuberance that followed "the war to end all wars" and led to a freedom of expression that helped the Jazz Age flourish in newfound musical creativity.

🔥 What were Sidney Bechet's and Louis Armstrong's contributions? Bechet first toured France as a member of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra and then with the 70 Black Devils of the 350th Field Artillery. He became the first important saxophonist in jazz. Louis Armstrong is considered the first solo genius of jazz. He became known as America's "jazz ambassador to the world."

Activities

🔥 Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong changed improvisation from embellishing the melody to expanding on the harmonic elements of a composition. Have students listen to *Cake Walking Babies (from Home)* and analyze the give and take between Bechet's soprano saxophone and Armstrong's trumpet. Does one or the other dominate? How do they complement each other?

🔥 Ask students to research and discuss how jazz was transitioned from the New Orleans style through the "big band" style introduced by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra of New York City in the 1920s. How did Coleman Hawkins and his bandmates become a precursor to the Duke Ellington Orchestra?

🔥 By the 1930s, American jazz artists in Paris began influencing a new generation of native-born jazz musicians. One of those, Django Reinhardt, became the first non-American to be recognized as a gifted jazz artist. Have students research the life and accomplishments of Reinhardt, famed as the Gypsy guitarist.

🔥 Have students listen to music samples from the Hellfighters Band, Louis Armstrong, and Coleman Hawkins, and then write their own analyses of how the music of these musicians is similar to, and different from, each other.

🔥 At the same time that George Gershwin and Aaron Copland were defining new forms of jazz in America, Darius Milhaud was among several French composers who used jazz to help break away from what might be called "Teutonic Romanticism." Ask students to listen to Milhaud's *La création du monde* (1923) and identify the bluesy elements in it. What other European composers can students name from this same period who also embraced jazz elements in their music?

The Jazz Age in Paris: A Self-Test

How much do you know about The Jazz Age? Answers can be found on the back panel.

1. How did the cake walk reflect African Americans' newfound ability to express themselves freely in the Paris of the Jazz Age?

2. What famous artist illustrated the sheet music for Stravinsky's "Ragtime"?

3. Vernon and Irene Castle were a famed dance team of the '20s. With whom did they form a musical partnership?

4. Who wrote the *Roots* of its day? _____

5. Who was the first of the Harlem Renaissance writers to arrive in France?

6. Picasso was quoted as attributing newfound inspiration to the purchase of a Negro mask in 1906. What painting of his, completed the following year, reflected this influence?

7. Nancy Cunard of the Cunard shipping line was famous for what?

8. How did Josephine Baker first gain attention?

9. Of Josephine Baker's performance, George Antheil, an American composer, observed, "Rhythmically it comes from the groin, the hips, and the sexual organs. . . It is angular and elliptical like. . . the sculptures of the African Negroes themselves." How does this observation tie in to conservative white American fears in the 1950s when the music of African American singers and composers in the form of rock 'n roll began to gain acceptance with white audiences?

10. What did writer Langston Hughes think of the "purity" of African culture as it became blended with jazz?

11. In what ways could Josephine Baker be called the Madonna of her day?

12. Why was Paris an attraction to American artists, writers and musicians, as well as to America's rich and famous?

13. How were American women viewed in France in the mid-'20s as evidenced by a quote from Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, a French musician?

14. What famous American novelist lived in Paris in 1925 with his wife and daughter?



Drummer Louis Mitchell, the "King of Noise," with the Jazz Kings, the house band at the Casino de Paris, circa 1919 (Frank Driggs Collection)

15. What American writer/publisher published James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, igniting a storm of protest and litigation over charges of obscenity?

16. What is Dadaism?

17. Who was responsible for keeping the Harlem community informed about the news in Paris?

18. Who or what did soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet credit as his "only music teacher"?

19. Who said, "I play what I live"? _____

20. Name some dance crazes of the day.

21. How did Prohibition contribute to the flourishing of the Jazz Age in Paris?

22. Whom did composer Cole Porter invite to his home to teach his friends the Charleston?

23. What American expatriate became a successful businesswoman in a style that was way ahead of her time?

24. What event helped signal the end of the Jazz Age in Paris?

25. Name some great American jazz stars who toured Europe in the '30s.

26. The first native European jazz musician was known as the Gypsy guitarist. Name him.

27. With whom did Django Reinhardt pair as soloists in a French jazz combo in 1934?

Resources

Social Studies

Expatriate Paris, A Cultural and Literary Guide to Paris of the 1920s, by J. Hansen Arlen. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990.

Fireworks at Dusk: Paris in the Thirties, by Olivier Bernier. 1st Edition. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993.

Paris (Timeless Places), by Judith Mahoney Pasternak. New York: Friedman/Fairfax Publishers, 2000.

The Crazy Years, Paris in the Twenties, by William Wiser. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

Language Arts

A Moveable Feast, by Ernest Hemingway. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964.

From Harlem to Paris: Black Writers in Paris, 1840-1980. New York: Meridan Books, 1959.

Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920s, by Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988.

Art

Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie, by Nancy Perloff. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Nightlife of Paris: The Art of Toulouse-Lautrec, by Patrick O'Conner. New York: Universe, 1991.

The Age of Illusion: Art and Politics in France 1918-1940, by Douglas and Madeleine Johnson. New York: Rizzoli, 1987.

Music

Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development, by Gunther Schuller. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

The Jazz Age: Popular Music in the 1920s, by Arnold Shaw. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

The Jazz Exiles: American Musicians Abroad, by Bill Moody. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1993.

Web Sites

Smithsonian Institution's Web site for **The Jazz Age in Paris**: <http://www.si.edu/ajazzh/jazzage.htm>

America's Jazz Heritage: <http://www.si.edu/sites>

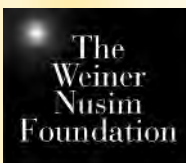
International Association of Jazz Educators: <http://www.iaje.org>

Jazz Links of the World: <http://www.pk.edu.pl~pmj/jazzlinks>

Answers to Self-Test Checklist

1. The cake walk mocked the preening and posturing—as African Americans saw it—of southern plantation owners—something they could never have done in America.
2. Pablo Picasso, 1919
3. James Reese Europe
4. W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, traced the African roots of African American culture. Its publication helped lead to the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s.
5. Alain Locke, in 1912
6. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*
7. Her possession of bohemian ways and her collection of African bracelets
8. Baker was a sensation in the concluding dance performance, la danse sauvage—"the wild dance"—of La Revue nègre, an American stage revue, in 1925.
9. Some white Americans thought that the "race music" of African American singers and composers of the 1950s that became the basis of rock 'n roll was highly suggestive and sexual in nature.
10. Hughes' poem, *Jazzonia*, questioned whether African culture was being diluted and modified as it was blended into the jazz medium.
11. Her performances were provocative in dress and attitude, making her the media rage of the day. She also acted in films.
12. It was inexpensive to live in Paris, and there was a sense of "decadence" unavailable in the U.S.
13. They seemed free to be whatever they wanted to be.
14. F. Scott Fitzgerald, his wife Zelda and daughter Scotty
15. Sylvia Beach ran Shakespeare and Company, a Paris bookstore, where she cultivated, and even published, writers—including James Joyce.
16. Dadaism was a movement that mocked middle-class values and overturned all rules of art. Dada artists took nothing serious—not even themselves.
17. American singer Alberta Hunter wrote letters to the New York *Amsterdam News* in 1927.
18. Life
19. Sidney Bechet
20. Tango, foxtrot, shimmy, black bottom and Charleston
21. That which was prohibited at home was flaunted even more abroad, where there were no restrictions.
22. Ada "Bricktop" Smith
23. Ada "Bricktop" Smith, whose eye for talent and business acumen helped her succeed as the owner of a string of jazz clubs
24. Ada "Bricktop" Smith's departure from Paris in 1939, on the eve of war
25. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Una Mae Carlisle, Garnet Clark, Joe Turner
26. Jean-Baptiste "Django" Reinhardt
27. Violinist Stéphane Grappelly

This resource guide is brought to you as a public service of
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(l to r): Louis Cole, Ada "Bricktop" Smith; (on bar): Jimmy Donahue, Mabel Mercer, Alberta Hunter, circa 1927 (Frank Driggs Collection).



Drummer Louis Mitchell, the "King of Noise," with the Jazz Kings, the house band at the Casino de Paris, circa 1919 (Frank Driggs Collection).

You're Invited
to Experience

King of
Noise



Jazz musician Sidney Bechet, circa 1930 (Duncan P. Schiedt Collection).

Sidney
Bechet

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Norton and Margot, American ballroom dance team, at Les Ambassadeurs club, Paris, 1937 (Courtesy Margot Webb).

Norton
& Margot

Duke
Ellington

Duke Ellington (standing third from right) and his orchestra in Paris.



J'ai deux amours (I Have Two Loves), Josephine Baker's theme song, was the subject of this advertising card for a Casino de Paris stage kit (Smithsonian Institution).

Josephine Baker

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