

20-B Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996

Martin Puryear (1941-)



20-B Martin Puryear (1941–), *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996. Wood (ash and maple), 432 x 22 3/4 in., narrowing at the top to 1 1/4 in. x 3 in. (1097.28 x 57.785 cm., narrowing to 3.175 x 7.6 cm.). Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Ruth Carter Stevenson, by Exchange.

The Art

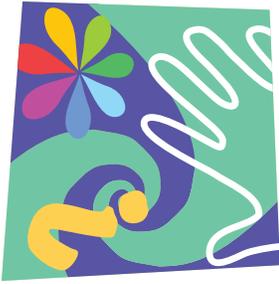
This work of art is a wood sculpture of a ladder. The ladder sculpture looks very different from a regular ladder. It is wider at the bottom and gets thinner and thinner the higher up it goes. The round rungs at the bottom of the ladder are 1 1/4 inches wide, compared to only 1/4 inches at the top. The crookedness of the ladder makes it look very hard to climb, and the different sizes of the rungs make it look longer than it really is. The ladder is actually 36 feet long. Instead of the ladder being set on the ground like a regular ladder, it dangles three feet off the floor, making it look as though it is floating in space. Wires hold the ladder in place.

The Artist

Martin Puryear was born in Washington, D.C. He studied woodworking in West Africa and Scandinavia and served in the Peace Corps. As an artist, he used the idea of a ladder that is hard to climb more than once in his art—for example, in an 85-foot, spiral wood staircase he created in a Paris church.

The Historical Perspective

Like Puryear's sculpture, the man it was named for—Booker T. Washington—could be understood in different ways. Washington was born into slavery in Virginia and became a well-known leader of the African American community. At age 25, he became the founder and first president of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Under Washington's guidance, this school for African Americans became successful and respected. Washington also became respected by many blacks and whites. However, other African American leaders thought Washington's opinions about rights for African Americans were not strong enough. He thought it was more important for them first to work hard so they did not have to depend on whites. Although Washington quietly supported ending the separation of blacks and whites, he did not speak out openly against this until the end of his life. Puryear's ladder might make people think of climbing toward freedom and independence.



Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage children to look carefully at this artwork. Introduce new vocabulary and find books that relate to it.

Describing



- ✓ Explain that the subject is the main thing in the picture. Then ask the children what they think is the subject of this artwork.
- ✓ What do you think this object is? How is it different from most ladders? Children might say it curves and gets narrower at the top.
- ✓ Ask the children if they think the ladder would be hard to climb and why. Children might say it would be very hard because it is long and curving and gets very narrow at the top.
- ✓ Where do you think this ladder goes? Children might say it leads to the light.

Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- Have you ever seen a real ladder? How is this ladder different from ladders you have seen? How is this like most ladders?
- What do people do with ladders? Have you ever seen anyone use a ladder? Have you ever used a ladder? Can you see the ladder's shadow?
- Describe climbing. What other things can you climb/use to take you up or down? Children might say stairs, steps, elevators, escalators, sliding board, monkey bars.
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this artwork?



Connecting and Extending

Introducing Vocabulary

bottom/top	high	rung
climb	ladder	sculpture
crooked	narrow	up/down
hanging	rail	width



Books

Falling for Rapunzel by Leah Wilcox (G.P. Putnam Sons, 2003)

To rescue Rapunzel from her tower, a prince yells for her to throw down her hair or a ladder. But being too far away to hear clearly, she tosses out various items from her room, including pancake batter.

Henry's Freedom Box by Ellen Levine (Scholastic Press, 2007)

A slave escapes to freedom by hiding in a box that is shipped to another city.

Books continued on page 127



Connecting and Extending continued...

Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can:

- ✓ visit their local fire station and “interview” firefighters about their daily job and routine.
- ✓ read the book *Up!* and talk about similar experiences of moving upward.
- ✓ measure how high everyone in their family can reach and who would need ladders to reach different items in their home.



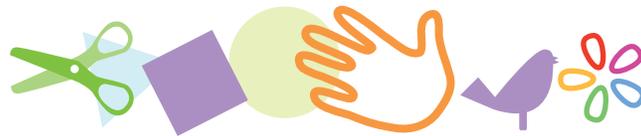
Books continued...

More than Anything Else by Marie Bradby (Orchard Books, 1995)

Nine-year-old Booker T. Washington works with his father and brother at the salt works but dreams of the day he’ll be able to read.

Up! by Kristine O’Connell George (Clarion Books, 2005)

Rhyming text and illustrations animate the feeling of “up” as experienced by a little girl with her father.



Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Children can search publications (magazines, coloring books, books, and newspapers) and find pictures of ladders or other things to climb.
- ✓ Take a neighborhood walk. Explore how many ladders or climbing structures are in your community.
- ✓ Which community helper do you immediately think of when you think of needing a ladder? Read a book about firefighters.
- ✓ If possible, take a walking trip to the fire station or have a fire truck come to you. How high is the tallest ladder firefighters use?
- ✓ Think of a way children can recreate the sculpture in the poster in your classroom or outside. They can also label the parts of a ladder to reflect the new vocabulary.
- ✓ Ask children to point to and name different objects within sight (in the classroom or outdoors). Include the ceiling, floor, light fixture, vent on walls, tree limbs, etc. Ask which ones would need a ladder to reach the object and which would not. Make sure the heights of objects vary.
- ✓ “Measure” how high each child can reach and mark it on a wall chart—or children can measure and mark each other.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children’s learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children’s learning related to the “A Head Start on Picturing America” artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.