Art played a similar role as music in the struggle against apartheid, serving as a creative way to tell the true story of the pain and suffering people were feeling as well as the hope the maintained for a better tomorrow. Artists, photographers, cartoonists, and playwrights all contributed to the anti-apartheid movement in influential ways through their creativity. The arts served to educate the masses in South Africa and abroad about the reality of apartheid. The arts served to keep hopes alive for a better tomorrow, and empowered Africans by showing that they did not have to be merely laborers and domestic workers.

Artists put their emotions onto canvas as a way of expressing their feelings of anger, but also of hope. Artists, like Ronald Harrison, Peter Clarke, and Thami Mnyele, started in the 1950s and 1960s of using art not only as an outlet, but also to educate others about apartheid, both in South Africa and abroad.

Photographers were able to capture the brutal reality of apartheid through the lens of their cameras, bringing to the world just how unjust and cruel of a system this truly was. Photographers like Sam Nzima, Peter Magubane, Alf Kumalo, and Ernest Cole, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, used their photography to expose apartheid, capturing everything from the abhorrent living conditions in hostels, the inequalities in education, and even the 1976 Soweto uprising.

Political cartoons, especially those of Jonathan Shapiro (aka. Zapiro), were an effective way of using artistic creativity to convey life under apartheid and to expose the irrationality of the Afrikaner nationalist government.

Theater also greatly contributed to the resistance through community theater, also known as protest theater or township musicals. Gibson Kente, Mbongeni Ngema, and others used theater as a way to creatively resist the apartheid government, and their musicals inspired communities to keep hope alive.

Although the apartheid government banned much of the work of these artists, and even arrested the artists themselves, their resilience and their work inspired South Africans to continue to resist apartheid in any way possible.

"We were motivated by the struggle and were dedicated to uplifting the consciousness of the society through art."
-Lefifi Tladi, South African musician, poet, and artist

“The pictures showed me, better than words, how it felt to have a lid pressing down on your hopes and dreams.”
-Diana Wylie, author of Art + Revolution: The Life and Death of Thami Mnyele
**Painting**

Painting was one way that people in South Africa used to resist apartheid. Sometimes subtle and hidden, sometimes bold and in-your-face, these artists dissented using their paintbrushes and their canvases. Their work, most relatively unknown in South Africa due to it being banned by the authorities, played an important role in the international community in raising awareness about the brutality of apartheid.

**Ronald Harrison**

Ronald Harrison is best known as an artist for his 1962 painting, *The Black Christ*, one of the single most powerful anti-apartheid statements of the whole struggle. The painting was inspired by the 1960 Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the then ANC president Albert Luthuli. It depicts the crucifixion, with Albert Luthuli as Christ, flanked by two Roman centurions, then-National Party Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd and then-Justice Minister B.J. Vorster. The painting was unveiled at St Luke's Church, an Anglican church in Cape Town in 1962. Almost immediately, Harrison was detained and tortured by the security police as a result of the painting. The painting itself was declared undesirable by the government and banned, but before the security police could confiscate it and destroy it, it was smuggled out of South Africa by anti-apartheid activists. It was taken eventually to London where it would tour Europe, helping to raise millions of dollars for the anti-apartheid movement.

> “I became obsessed with the idea of taking some constructive action in the liberation movement through the medium of my artistic talent. How could a government that professes to be Christian perpetrate such immoral deeds and inflict so much pain and suffering on its own countrymen simply because its supporters were of another race, another color, and another creed?”
>  
> - Ronald Harrison

**Peter Clarke**

Peter Clarke, the “godfather of community art” in South Africa, started painting in the 1950s and did everything from book covers to woodcuts to paintings. His opposition to apartheid in his art was subtle, but still very evident. He mainly depicted the social and political experiences and struggles of ordinary South Africans. Many of his works speak of the difficult conditions of living under apartheid, such as displaced people on the move, and the menial tasks that ensured survival, like gathering wood and water.
Peter Clarke (cont.)

Clarke also illustrated the book covers for important dissident books like Alex La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and Es’kia Mphahlele’s *The Living Dead and Other Stories* (1962). He also worked to teach art and empower young people through the arts.

“Before [my exhibition], I was just another ‘coloured’ man. Our people took it for granted that only whites could do such things. Now people are becoming aware of the fact that they can do these things too; they are human beings.”
- Peter Clarke in 1957

Thamsanqa "Thami" Mnyele

Thami Mnyele was an artist who not only painted, but also organized art exhibitions, taught art classes in the community, and created posters and banners for political marches and meetings. He knew the power that art could play and called for artists in struggling communities to use their talent to express people's demands. In 1976, Mnyele and others held an art exhibition in Soweto, inspired by the 1976 Soweto uprising. Titled "A New Day," the goal of the exhibition was summed up by author Diana Wylie in her book, *Art + Revolution: The Life and Death of Thami Mnyele*: “The artists had often expressed their anger at ‘township art,’ a genre which made Africans into pitiable or adorable children for white consumers to use in decorating their homes. This show was their reply. Further, the artists took pains to show a reality counter to the billboard images of happy Africans…”

Mnyele was also part of a group of artists from the townships who fled into exile into Botswana in the late 1970s. They established the cultural organization Medu Art Ensemble, teaching young exiles how to use music, photography, poetry, theater, and visual arts to resist apartheid.
Thamsanqa "Thami" Mnyele (cont.)

While in exile, he also designed posters for the African National Congress (ANC) in Lusaka, Zambia, and in 1984, he even created the current ANC logo that became a symbol worldwide of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Thami Mnyele is remembered as a cultural revolutionary, someone who used art as a way of creating political and social change.

“For me as a craftsman, the act of creating art should compliment the act of...liberating the country for my people. This is culture.”
- Thami Mnyele

Photography

Photography served many roles in the anti-apartheid resistance, from keeping hope alive through the banned photograph of Nelson Mandela to bringing to light the cruelty of the system through the photograph of 12-year-old Hector Pieterson after he had been shot and killed during the 1976 Soweto uprising. Photographs shed light on the system in a way that no speech or newspaper article could. These images spoke of the despair, anger, and suffering that people were dealing with during apartheid, and they helped the international community see the appalling reality of this system. The government knew the power these photographs could have, and thus banned or imprisoned many of the photographers and prevented newspapers in the country from publishing the images in their publications.
Peter Magubane worked as a photographer for *Drum* magazine in the 1950s and the *Rand Daily Mail* starting in the late 1960s. He photographed some of the most significant events of the apartheid era, including the 1956 women’s anti-pass march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the Rivonia Trial, the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, and the 1976 Soweto uprising. The government considered his photographs so dangerous that he was arrested, detained in solitary confinement, and eventually banned from photography for five years. Magubane’s photos tell the history of the apartheid era.

“We were not allowed to carry a camera in the open if the police were involved, so I often had to hide my camera to get the pictures I wanted. On occasion I hid my camera in a hollowed-out Bible, firing with a cable release in my pocket. At another time... I hid my [camera] in a hollowed-out loaf of bread and pretended to eat while I was actually shooting pictures; when the bread went down, I bought milk and hid the camera in the carton.”

-Peter Magubane
Ernest Cole

Ernest Cole was a black photographer in South Africa who told the story of the hardships and humiliation of blacks living under apartheid in the 1960s. He worked as a photographer for *Drum* magazine in the late 1950s, and then the newspaper *Bantu World*, before becoming a freelance photographer. He wanted to record the evils and social effects of apartheid through photographs. He photographed the inequalities of black schools, the brutal working conditions and degradation of working in the mines, and the struggle of everyday living for black people.

He used photographs to tell the world what it was like, and what it meant, to be black under apartheid. His photos were banned, but he was able to smuggle the prints out of the country with him and he published them in the U.S. in 1967 in his book, *House of Bondage*. In the book, Cole summed up what his photos represented: “Three-hundred years of white supremacy in South Africa has placed us in bondage, stripped us of our dignity, robbed us of our self-esteem and surrounded us with hate.” His work helped the world see what was really happening in South Africa.

“The life was dedicated to showing the world the reality of Apartheid, and to bring image and light to tales of oppression.”
—photographer Jurgen Schadeburg

Poverty and malnutrition in the townships
Children in the prisons

“Mine Recruitment”
Ernest Cole took this picture of gold-mine recruits, who had been lined up for a group examination, after sneaking his camera into the mine inside his lunch bag.
Alf Kumalo

Alf Kumalo was a photographer in the 1950s for *Bantu World* and the *Golden City Post*, and eventually for *Drum* magazine, as well. Kumalo photographed many of the historic moments of the apartheid era in South Africa, including the Treason Trial, the Rivonia Trial, the emergence of Black Consciousness, the Soweto Uprising of 1976, and the 1980s State of Emergency, as well as images of everyday life of life for Africans during this time period. Kumalo risked his freedom and life to document the reality of apartheid, and was harassed, detained, and arrested numerous times during his career. Kumalo continued to force the world to acknowledge reality of South African politics from the 1950s through his photography. Kumalo is a self-taught photographer that was attracted to photography because of the visual impact of a picture. Kumalo is an award-winning photographer and an icon in South Africa, and his work helps tell the story of South Africa during the second half of the 20th century.
Sam Nzima

Sam Nzima was a photographer for *The World* starting in the late 1960s. He was assigned by the newspaper to cover the Soweto student protests in June 1976, where on June 16th, the police opened fire into the crowd. Through the lens of his camera, Nzima captured the emotional scene of the fatally-wounded 12-year-old Hector Pieterson being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo (18), with Hector’s sister Antoinette (17) running in anguish beside them. *The World* published the photograph, and by that afternoon, the image had been transmitted worldwide. Nzima was hunted down by police and forced to leave Soweto, where he lived with his wife and four children. He was harassed by the police for years as a result of this one photograph as they knew the damage it had done to the government. The photo became not only the symbolic image of the Soweto uprising, but also the singular image that showed the world what the apartheid government was really like. The image of a dead 12-year-old unarmed, innocent schoolboy, which the police had shot in broad daylight in the middle of the street, shocked not just South Africa, but also the international community. The brutality of apartheid could not be hidden or disguised any longer. Sam Nzima’s photograph brought international condemnation of South Africa, including boycotts, protests, and sanctions. This photo signaled the beginning of the end of apartheid in South Africa.

You could see the whole of Soweto in those three children’s faces.”
– Sam Nzima

Political Cartoons

Political cartoons, published both in newspapers in South Africa and abroad, served to simplify the social and political situation in South Africa in an effort to reach a broader audience. Most used visual metaphors and caricatures to address complicated political situations. They were a creative way of visually showing the reader what was happening in an entertaining and humorous way, even if the event itself was tragic. Political cartoons were able to tell people what was happening in a way that no newspaper article or speech could. It was not just the cartoonists, though, that drew the political cartoons, but the newspapers also played a vital role in deciding to publish these rebellious statements, especially inside South Africa.
Jonathan Shapiro (aka. Zapiro)

Jonathan Shapiro first became an activist in the early 1980s with the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), which opposed compulsory military service for white men in South Africa. He funneled his activism through his artwork and became the editorial cartoonist the newspaper *South* in 1987. He quickly became one of the most popular South African political cartoonists, and his work became well-known throughout the world. Through his pen-name Zapiro, his cartoons became powerful weapons in the anti-apartheid movement.

Mocking the evolution of leadership in South Africa, from the apartheid leaders of South Africa (Verwoerd, Vorster, Botha, and de Klerk) to Nelson Mandela.

A late 1980s political cartoon portraying then South African President P.W. Botha as Jekyll and Hyde, due to his mixed messages of reform and repression, punishing the prisoner, representing South Africa.

Cartoon from the 1950s showing then-Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd, the “architect of apartheid”

This cartoon included the following quote as a caption by then Minister of Justice of South Africa, B.J. Vorster: “It is anybody’s right to oppose or campaign against apartheid.”
Theater

Another example of the arts being used as resistance and dissent to apartheid was through theater. Community theater, also known as “protest theater” or “township musicals,” provided a creative outlet for the playwrights, actors, and actresses, and served to not only entertain but also to socially and politically conscientize audiences. These theatrical productions used humor, song, and dance to tell stories of struggle and perseverance, targeting African audiences in the townships. These productions were illegal, and thus had to be performed secretly in most instances. With little or no budget for props, costumes, and backdrops, these productions had to rely on the creative talents of the actors and imaginations of the audience. To avoid being banned, many of these playwrights used creative metaphors and inference to get their messages across. Community theater spread messages of hope to the masses.

Gibson Kente

Widely recognized as the “Father of Black Theatre” in South Africa, Gibson Kente was one of the first playwrights to deal with life in the South African black townships. His work included laughter, dance and music that made the "township musical" a dominant means of expression and exuberance in South Africa. Several of Kente’s plays were banned by the apartheid government, including How Long (1973), I Believe (1974) and Too Late (1975). His work primarily dealt with the realities of life in the townships, including social issues such as crime, poverty, and the brutality and degradation of apartheid. Kente himself was arrested in the 1970s as the government saw both he and his musicals as a threat to the country. His work also helped launch the careers of many South African actors and musicians over the years.

Mbongeni Ngema

Mbongeni Ngema studied under Gibson Kente and went on to write and direct some of the most well-known “township musicals” of the apartheid era. He was one of the writers of Woza Albert! (1981), in which Christ comes back to earth in South Africa during apartheid. In the play, the apartheid government is so threatened by Christ that they have him arrested, but when he escapes they resort to dropping a nuclear bomb on him. The play ends with Christ resurrecting again, and he raises from the dead a number of heroes from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, including former ANC leader Albert Luthuli, which is where the play gets its name from as it translates as “Rise Albert!” He also was the writer, composer, and director of the musical Sarafina! (1987), which depicts students involved in the 1976 Soweto uprising in opposition to apartheid, and the subsequent State of Emergency during the 1980s.
The arts, whether it be the fine arts, theater, photography, or cartoons, have consistently been utilized as a form of rebellion and protest throughout world history. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, Albrecht Dürer famously illustrated many of Martin Luther’s works with his satirical portrayals of the Catholic Church and the Pope. During the Napoleonic Wars, the Spanish artist Francisco Goya expressed the brutality of the French invasion of Spain through a series of his paintings. William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* famously questioned anti-Semitism in society in his play from the late 1500s. Throughout history, paintings, plays, and photographs have proven to be powerful and influential calls for change, leading to everything from reform to revolution.

The following are a few of the many examples throughout 20th century world history of the role the arts have played in resistance and dissent:

**Painting:** In the 20th century, several artists have been influential in influencing the public by bringing atrocities or injustices to light. Marcel Duchamp, a French Dada artist in the early 20th century, Ai Weiwei, a modern Chinese artist, and Diego Rivera, a prominent Mexican artist in the early to mid-20th century, are just a few of the many artists who have used their art to protest authoritarianism, war, and inequality in society. Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), a visual protest of fascism and war (specifically Spanish dictator Francisco Franco and the Spanish Civil War), is one of modern art's most powerful political and anti-war statements. The painting helped to raise consciousness about the brutality of war and the threat of fascism in the late 1930s.

*Guernica* (1937), Picasso’s nightmarish portrayal of the Spanish Civil War

*“Painting is not done to decorate apartments.”*  
- Pablo Picasso

Photography has proven to be an incredibly effective way of informing the public of injustices around the world. It has been able to turn public opinion against a war, as in the case of the United States during the Vietnam War, and has been effective with holding governments accountable for atrocities they have committed, as in the case of the Holocaust. Photographs can stir emotions and lead to social and political protest, and they have consistently done this throughout the 20th century.

*This photo of 9-year-old Kim Phuc, a Vietnamese girl whose village had just been bombed by the U.S. in 1972 during the Vietnam War, helped to expose the brutality of the war.*

*This 1963 photo from South Vietnam showing a 73-year-old Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, self-immolating himself in protest, shocked the world.*

*“Tank Man” (June 1989)*  
This photo, taken in Tiananmen Square in China after the Chinese army had forcibly cleared the square of pro-democracy protestors, symbolizes the Chinese democracy movement and has been called one of the photos that has changed the world.
Discussion Questions

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS:

1) Why was the government so afraid of Ronald Harrison’s *The Black Christ* that they banned it?

2) What was the Medu Art Ensemble trying to accomplish through its work in Botswana?

3) How did photographers like Peter Magubane, Ernest Cole, and Alf Kumalo contribute to the struggle?

4) Why was Sam Nzima’s photograph of Hector Pieterson considered so powerful?

5) What statement was Ernest Cole trying to make with his “Boy in School” and “Mine Recruitment” photographs?

6) In your opinion, what one painting/photograph had the most impact? Why?

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

1) Why is art an ideal vehicle for social criticism and political protest?

2) What can a political cartoon do that other forms of resistance or activism can’t?

3) How can a photograph mobilize people to action?

4) What role should artists take in protesting or trying to influence society and politics?

5) What risks are artists/photographers taking when they decide to use their work for social criticism and political protest?

6) How can theater help the change a social or political situation?

7) What issue would you focus on if you were to paint a picture, draw a political cartoon, direct a musical, or take a photograph?