

Inspiration On and Off the Field

Baltimore Bus Stop, Ernie Barnes



Ernie Barnes. *Baltimore Bus Stop*. c.1974. Acrylic on canvas. Unframed: 24 × 48 in. (61 × 121.9 cm) Framed: 30 ¼ × 54 ½ × 2 in. (76.8 × 137.5 × 5.1 cm). Private Collection, on extended loan to the Baltimore Museum of Art. © Ernie Barnes

Ernie Barnes (1938–2009) was an African American actor, football player, and painter. In his painting *Baltimore Bus Stop*, an energetic crowd of people runs after a bus, which is driving away under a stormy sky. In the chaos, a man in a brown suit falls off the sidewalk, a muscular older woman with gray hair charges ahead, a woman in a blue dress stretches her arm in front of a man pressed against a brick wall, a woman wearing a brown cardigan clutches her grocery bag at the end of the frenzy, and other would-be riders dynamically react as the bus pulls away.

Ernie Barnes was born in 1938 in Durham, North Carolina, at a time when many communities were deeply segregated between Black and white Americans. In his childhood, Ernie developed an interest in art history through books and magazines. Ernie, who was often teased by his classmates, would cope with bullying by drawing in sketchbooks. He was encouraged to play sports by one of his high school teachers. Ernie became a talented and dedicated athlete and earned a full athletic scholarship to North Carolina College at Durham (now North Carolina Central University), where he studied art. Ernie was eventually drafted to the NFL, playing for the San Diego Chargers and Denver Broncos. He was equally dedicated to football and art, interested in both anatomy and how bodies moved. He would observe his teammates on the field and take inspiration from what he saw. The joyful movements of everyday life, like children playing in the street or people dancing to music, also inspired him to paint.

Ernie continued to paint throughout his career in the NFL. In 1966, he retired from professional football and began painting full-time. Ernie quickly developed his personal style, which critics called

“neo-mannerist,” easily recognized by elongated, fluid figures in motion like the ones featured in *Baltimore Bus Stop*.

Activities

As a class, create a list of feeling words like *happy, sad, tired, angry, surprised, nervous, proud*. Write each word on a piece of paper or a flashcard. Shuffle your cards with the feeling words facing down so no one can see them. Have students stand in a circle. Invite a student to pick a card and share the feeling word out loud. Students mime the feeling, first with their faces, then with their arms, then their legs. On the count of three, everyone strikes a pose! Go through your stack of words and practice different poses based on the feeling, like the figures in Ernie Barnes’ painting.

In Ernie’s painting, we can see how football, music, and movement influenced the way he painted bodies. Invite students to draw themselves in Ernie’s style. Encourage them to create figures with long limbs and defined muscles. Ask them to think about how to create a sense of motion in a still image.

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