



At-Home Art Activity: Shape your City

Get inspired by artist Benjamin Wigfall and how he used simple shapes and colors to create abstract art.

Grade Level:	Grades 3-5, Grades K-2
Collection:	African American Art, Modern and Contemporary Art
Subject Area:	African American, Fine Arts, Visual Arts
Activity Type:	Hands-On Activity, Special Exhibition

INTRODUCTION



Chimneys, 1951, Benjamin Wigfall
(American, 1930–2017), oil on canvas.
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, General
Endowment Fund, 51.7.5

Benjamin Wigfall was born in Richmond and grew up in Church Hill, spending a lot of time at VMFA during his senior year at Armstrong High School. Wigfall's painting, *Chimneys*, straddles the line between abstraction and representation. In *Chimneys*, painted when he was 20 years old and bought by VMFA in 1951, Wigfall imagines a scene near Church Hill using simple shapes and colors. The painting illustrates the chimneys on the tops of buildings that he observed while walking home from school. Wigfall explained:

“And I remember it was becoming dusk, and I saw these smokestacks, and I refer to them as still whispering because I always thought at a certain time of day you could see them billowing with smoke, and they were busy. And oh! It was such a serene, quiet thing. It was such a noble thing the silhouette of these; they begin to have personalities almost, and

| character.”

CREATE

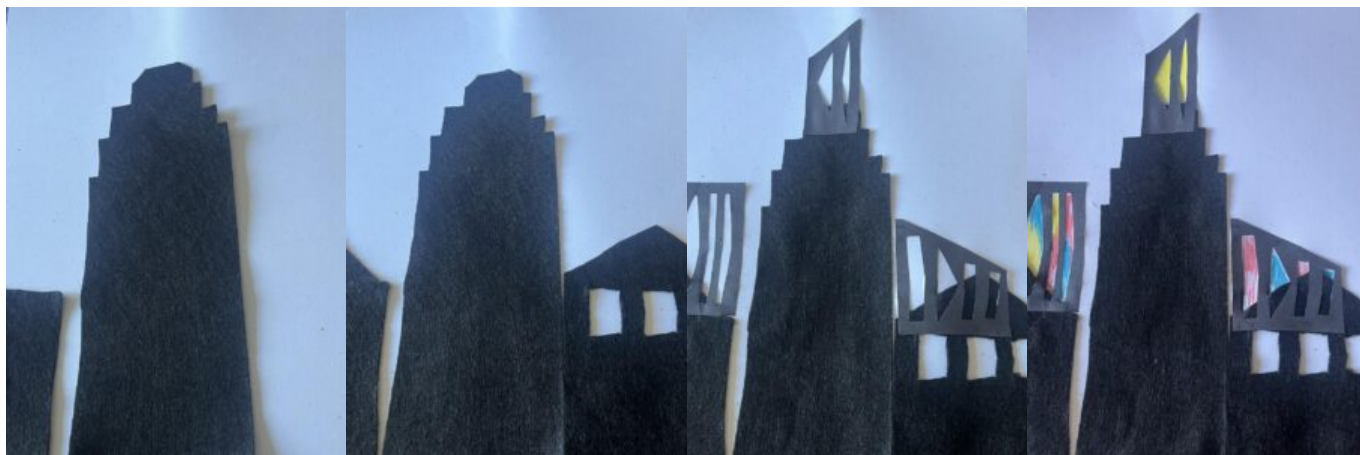
Feeling inspired by how Wigfall imagined his neighborhood? Consider the buildings in your own community. Follow the steps below to shape and color your own city!

Materials:

- White cardstock (8.5 x 11)
- Crayons
- Black felt or black construction paper
- [Chimney template](#)
- Glue
- Scissors

Instructions:

1. Consider the buildings that you see in your own community to decide if you will place your paper horizontal or vertical. Then, using the black felt or construction paper and the scissors, cut out 3-4 different rectangle and square shapes, some taller and some wider than the others. These will be the base of your buildings.
2. For details, fold your felt in half to cut out smaller squares to add windows. Use a few drops of glue to attach these to the bottom of the white cardstock.
3. Print out the provided [chimneys template](#) on 8.5 x 11 printer paper. Choose a few of the chimney shapes to cut out from the template and glue them to the top of your buildings. Add a small amount of glue to attach the chimney overtop of 1-2 of your buildings.
4. Consider the personalities and styles of each building. Using crayons, color the cut-out areas of the roof or chimneys.
5. Display the city that you created!



COLLECTION CONNECTION



Benjamin Wigfall received two VMFA fellowships in 1949 and 1951 while attending Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). When VMFA purchased *Chimneys* in 1951, Wigfall was only 20 years old, the youngest artist to have a work enter the collection. A prestigious jury, which included artist Stuart Davis, unanimously selected the work for the first prize in an exhibition of Virginia artists. According to one jurist, the collective feeling was that Wigfall, “possesses very considerable talent and if he continues to progress, should become one of the most interesting of the young Virginia painters.” Wigfall later earned an MFA from Yale School of Design before returning to teach at Hampton in the mid 1950s and late `60s. Decades later he still recalled *Chimneys* as one of his favorite works, because it functions as both an abstraction and an illustration of a real place: the smokestacks he observed at sunset on his near daily commute across the old Marshall Street Viaduct (since destroyed) while coming home from school.

This activity was developed in conjunction with the special exhibition [Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village](#) on view in 2023.