

Celebrating Black History in Canada

THROUGH TESSELLATION AND PORTRAITURE

Art 9 & Art 11 with Ms. Le Blanc

NWSS Art students researched prominent figures from Black History in Canada, representing their contributions in black and white tessellation patterns and portraits. Equal parts ‘black’ and ‘white’ in these art works is also meant to draw attention to the often Eurocentric-lens that is so often applied when discussing the history of our country and land – challenging our outdated narrative by featuring People of Colour (POC) and Black Canadians in an equally starring role. These students demonstrated commitment to representing their subject of choice through thoughtful imagery and artist statements.

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What is tessellation?
A tessellation is a specific shape designed to be repeated into a pattern. These shapes can 'fit' in or up against each other to create a synthesized effect without any gaps or spaces (kind of like a puzzle!) For these works, students designed their tessellation shapes to reflect the contributions and achievements of the person/persons they were researching for Black History Month in Canada. Their patterns are successful whether the use of space is in black or white. The goal was to dive deep into their research and develop an image beyond one's occupation or typical association, to not only identify their achievements, but to recognize and celebrate them.

Senior students (and some grade 9s) also drew out portraits of their chosen person/groups. Students have practised mark-making, light and shadow, proportions and form through drawing. They've applied these skills in capturing the portraits of their subject, aligned with a tessellation pattern to remind our audience that these faces have made significant and specific contributions to our country's Black history.

Why does the pattern alternate black and white?
Students have alternated their tessellation patterns in both black and white to visually represent 'equality' - by alternating black & white between 'positive/negative' space, 'black' is no longer only 'negative' space, and 'white' is no longer 'positive' space. The concept of 'tone' (black or white) representing positive or negative aspects is cancelled – resulting in equal balance.

Many of the individuals featured in this work advocated for fair treatment in Canada, the United States, in parliament, in the community - no matter one's race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, nationality or gender. Equal parts black and white in these art works is also meant to draw attention to the often Eurocentric-lens that is so often applied when discussing the history of our country and land – thus challenging our outdated narrative by featuring People of Colour (POC) and Black Canadians in an equally starring role.

Please read each student's artist statement next to their work to learn more about Black History in Canada!



Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott

by Ashlyn D., Grade 10

Descended from generations of slaves, Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott was born in Toronto, Ontario, 1837. His enrolment and pursuit of higher education allowed him to become the first Black, Canadian-born, family physician. Furthermore, his work was prominent in national and international affairs due to his progressive title and ability to work in various hospitals but also as a civil surgeon.

My portrait illustrates crosses that symbolize his contribution during the Civil War on soldiers but also his success in the medical field. The tessellation also features Canadian maple leafs, medical stethoscopes and an overall balance of black and white to represent racial equality. The black and white shading/ tones are integrated throughout the portrait and not separated. Emphasis was placed on this due to centuries of injustice and inequity for people of African descent.

What's so eminent about Abbott is, that through his achievements and successes, the need for equality remained clear- leading him to advocate for integrated schools as well as to train other Black doctors as the medical superintendent at the Provident Hospital in Chicago, IL. Real success comes in many forms particular to the individual and how they define it. Abbott's greatest work may have been what he did for
others.



Bee Quammie

by Marta D., Grade 11

My work represents Bee Quammie, a writer, radio host, TV personality and public speaker. As a Black Canadian woman, with parents who immigrated from Jamaica, she manages to raise awareness about different subjects related to race and culture, diversity and wealth.

My tessellation features a pattern of Black people speaking, bodies of Black pregnant women and seated Black figures. I chose those images to highlight the different subjects Bee Quammie advocates for through her work. She founded the “Brown Suga Mama,” a blog focused on motherhood from the perspective of a Black Canadian mother. She is fighting stigmas with openness, helping others by sharing her experiences with mental health.

Bee Quammie manages to help people to understand and accept themselves and their cultures by spreading information, therefore I decided to celebrate her.



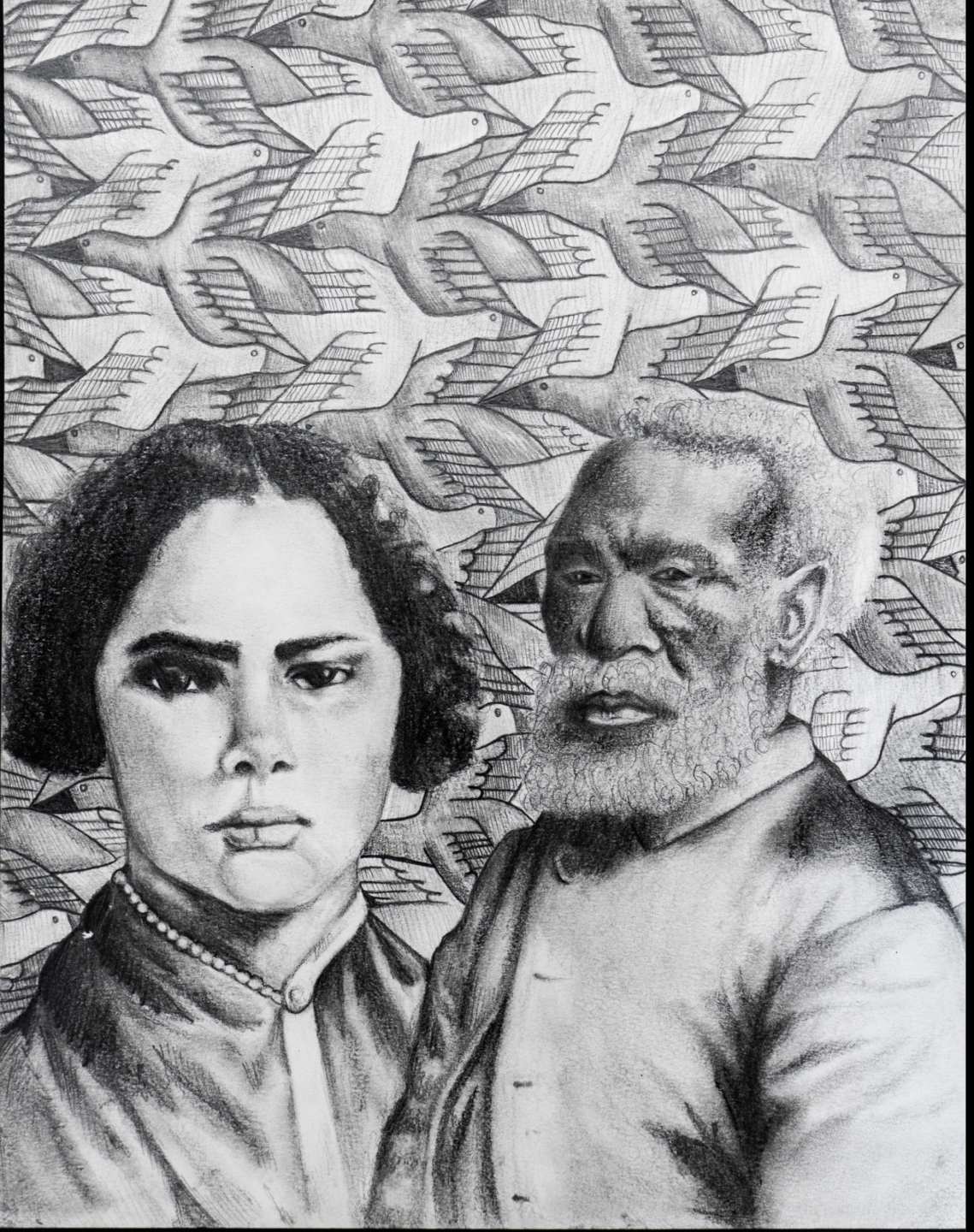
William “Billy” Beal

by Elisabette G., Grade 11

I chose to feature William “Billy” Beal in my work, as he was one of the first Black settlers in the Swan River area, Manitoba, in the early 1900s, where he worked as a steam engineer. He was a man of great talent and wide interests, and enriched the community by helping to found a school and a literary society, and taking beautiful photo of the people that he had around as he was an amateur photographer.

My piece is composed of two essential parts; the copy of a self-portrait of him and a background made as a tessellation pattern, which features 1900s` cameras, posed in a way to resemble a 3D-like composition, to highlight his skill as a photographer. Three of those blocks are actually little shelves where I put some of the items that resemble his intellectual activities, like books and pens, to celebrate his contribution to the local community in terms of education and his work as an
engineer.

Billy Beal is a man who deserves to be remembered as a brilliant example of productive integration.



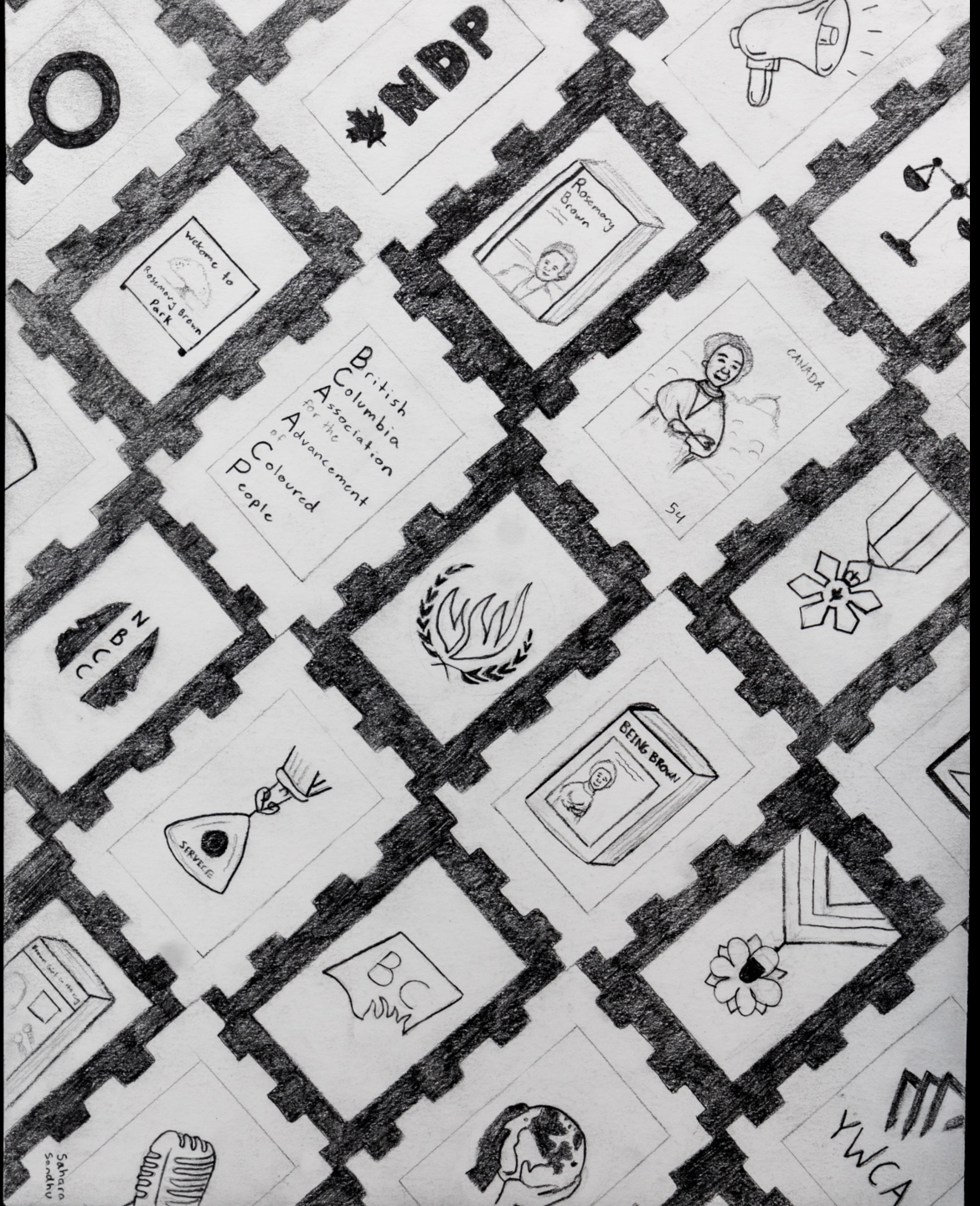
Mary Ann Shadd & Josiah Henson

by Kirsty M., Grade 10

My artwork features Mary Ann Shadd & Josiah Henson, both of whom lived to abolish slavery. Josiah Henson was born into slavery in 1789. He later escaped to upper Canada in 1830, where he founded the Dawn settlement. The Dawn settlement was created to help other black people escaping slavery. He also formed a trade-labour's school, to help refugees just like him, gain an education and important life skills.

Just like Josiah Henson, Mary Ann Shadd also established a school for black refugees. Along with being the first black woman publisher in Canada and the first black woman publisher in North America. Mary Ann Shadd was also known for many other things: a publisher, journalist, teacher and a lawyer. In the background my artwork features my tessellation pattern of birds.

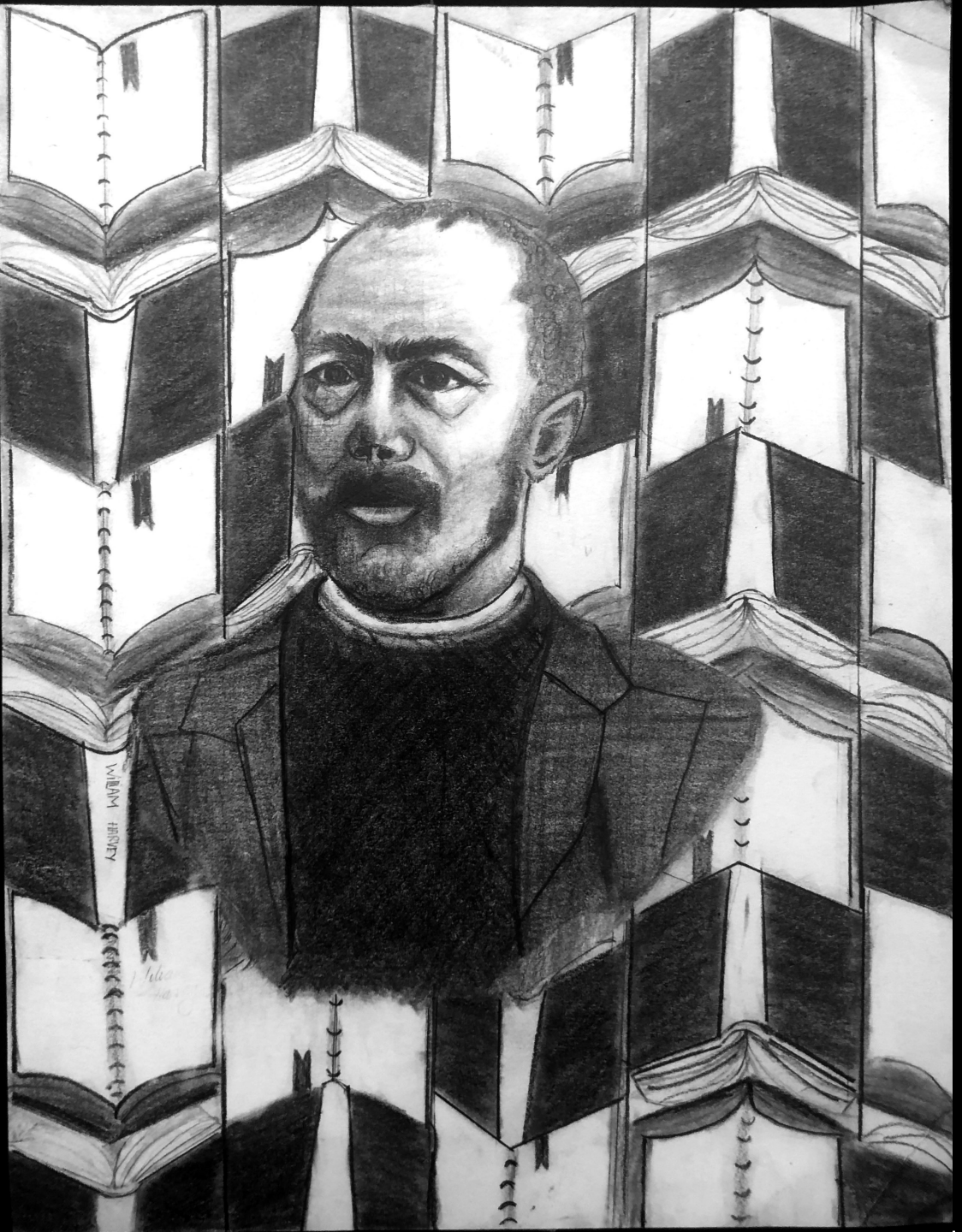
The birds in this piece are there to resemble the peace and freedom of all the people Josiah Henson and Mary Ann Shadd helped to start a new life. Josiah Henson was known to have helped over 200 black people escape which is why I chose birds to imitate them soaring free after escaping. Both Josiah Henson and Mary Ann Shadd should be honoured and celebrated for the voices they helped give back to their people; they also should be remembered as brave, courageous and fearless people.



Rosemary Brown

by Sahara S., Grade 9

My work represents Rosemary Brown, a politician, feminist, writer, educator, and lecturer that has contributed much to B.C. and Canada. She was the 1st black woman elected to a Canadian Provincial Legislature (B.C.) and has helped to create the British Columbia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (BCAACP) in 1956 to help advocate for housing, employment, and human rights legislation. My tessellation features the accomplishments of Rosemary Brown, from the various awards she has won to the books she has published. These accomplishments are shown in an alternating pattern of black and white stamps, representing her feature on a Canadian postage stamp released on February 2, 2009. Rosemary Brown faced discrimination throughout her life, it was through persevering that she found her purpose against racism and sexism and this is something to be celebrated.



William Harvey Goler

by Hee N., Grade 10

My Black History Project is that of an educator, church leader, and president of Livingstone College in Salisbury, and he is William Harvey Goler. He was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Orphaned at an early age, but he never gave up. Then he was able to attend the Halifax public school. He became an apprentice bricklayer and plasterer in 1861.

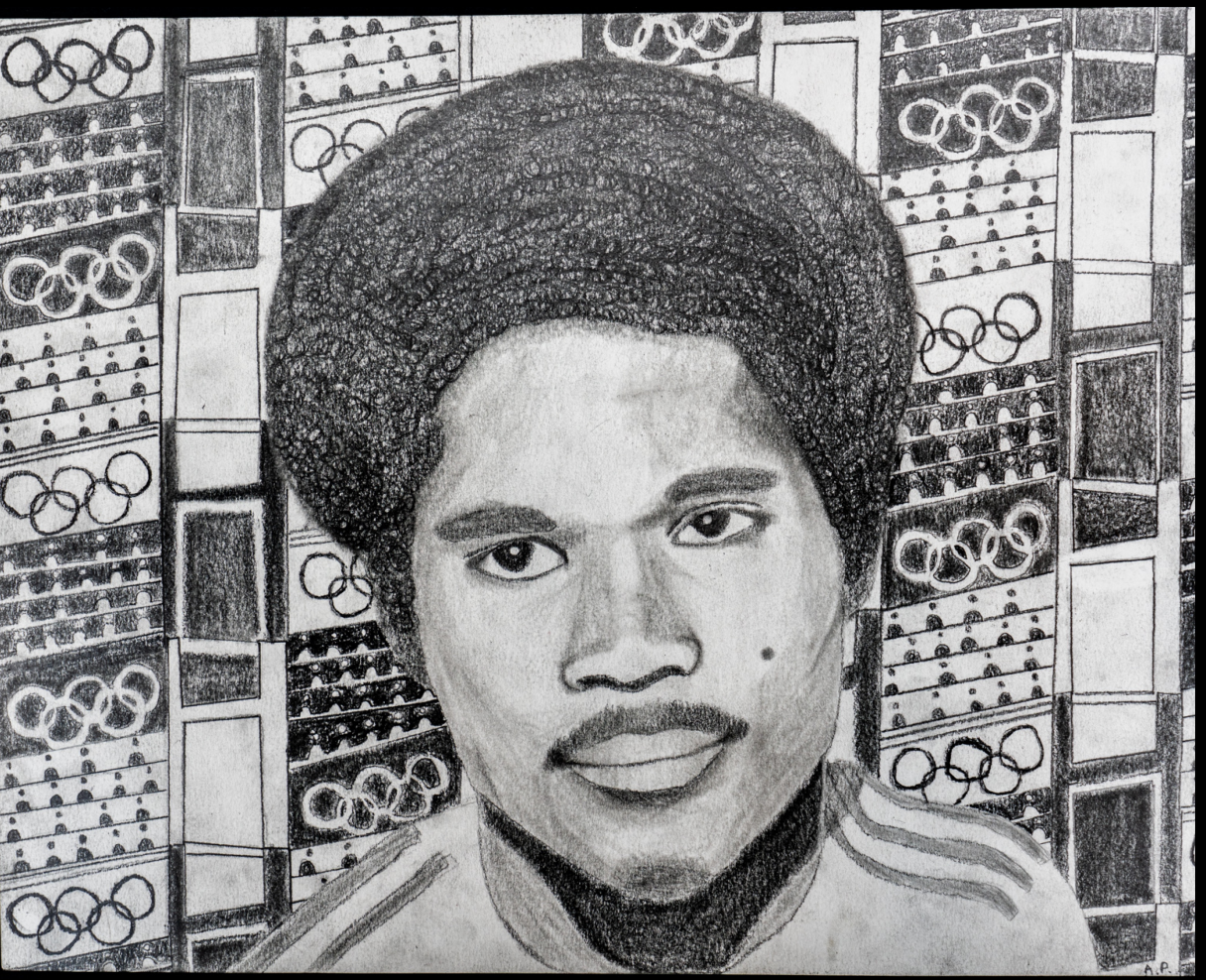
My tessellation features an old book because William Harvey is an educator and in his life, he never stopped learning. Although he had a difficult situation, books and studying were his motivation for being a good person. Why did I choose the old book for my tessellation? Because he spent half of his life studying and reading books to be an educator.



Barbara Howard

by Daniel C., Grade 9

Barbara Howard, the person that I chose, was born in Vancouver, Canada in 1920. She was a competitive athlete who was the first Black Canadian to participate in international sports, and thus, paved the way for more recent Black Canadian athletes such as Angela James and Andre de Grasse. The imagery that I used to depict her achievements is the logo of the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame. I picked this image because it's very unique and also easy to put into any shape since the interior part is quite small. The achievement this image depicts is the admission of Mrs. Howard to the Hall of Fame in 2015, two years before her death. Like with a lot of her other achievements, this was a first for Black Canadian women. This further inspired Black Canadians to take up competitive sports, regardless of the still-endemic racism issue. Because of all this, it goes without question that Barbara Howard was an important figure in Black Canadian history.



Mit Ottey

by Aiden P., Grade 10

This is Mit Ottey, He was born 1959 in May Pen Clarendon, Jamaca, and moved to Canada at the age of 10. At his school, he quickly found a love for track and field. He graduated and received a full athletic scholarship from the University of Texas. He then went on to the Olympics and won gold twice, bronze twice and was the number one ranked high jumper in the world in 1982. After that, he got his Bachelor's degree in Education and coached at many universities for several years. My tessellation pattern is fairly straight forward; it's a high jump bar with an Olympic mat below and a crowd in the background. I found Milt Ottey by just looking up my birthday and he happened to have the same one. But I enjoyed learning about his various achievements and where he is now. And currently he is the CEO of OT fitness.



George Carter

by Hala A., Grade 9

My art highlights the successes of George Cater, the first Canadian-born, Black judge in the country. His successes are highlighted within my tessellation as it features an alternating pattern of a judge's gavel and a scale. The purpose of the gavel and scale is to demonstrate the over-all fact of him becoming a judge, having to work tire-lessly for each and every opportunity he received, as well as the struggles he had to face such as serving as a porter to pay for his law school. George Carter is not just an inspiration to several Black individuals alone, but an inspiration to all of Canada as a whole. He, as an individual, along with his accomplishments, should be praised and acknowledged as prime examples of how perse-verance and intelligence ultimately pay off. This man can simply be labeled as an intellectual role model.



Francesca Ekwuyasi

by Melita M., Grade 11

This is Francesca Ekwuyasi. She is a Canadian writer and multi-disciplinary artist in Nova Scotia. The tessellation pattern behind her are books to represent all the different writing pieces she has written. The alternation of black and white in the background is for equality between races especially for Black people who have been oppressed for generations.

Some other symbols seen in the background are:

A pencil and book to represent writing. The clapperboard and old film reel represents the films she has made. The X-acto knife and paper cut out art is one of the types of art she makes and the award ribbons represents the awards she has in any work she has done that has been nominated or shown in any awards or film festivals.

The “Butter Honey Pig Bread”, written in the background, is her debut novel that has been a contender for the Canada Reads 2021 and Giller prize. Below it, is “Black + Belonging”, which is the title of her short documentary about how Black artists find belonging through their craft. This was first shown at the Halifax Black Film Festival in 2019.

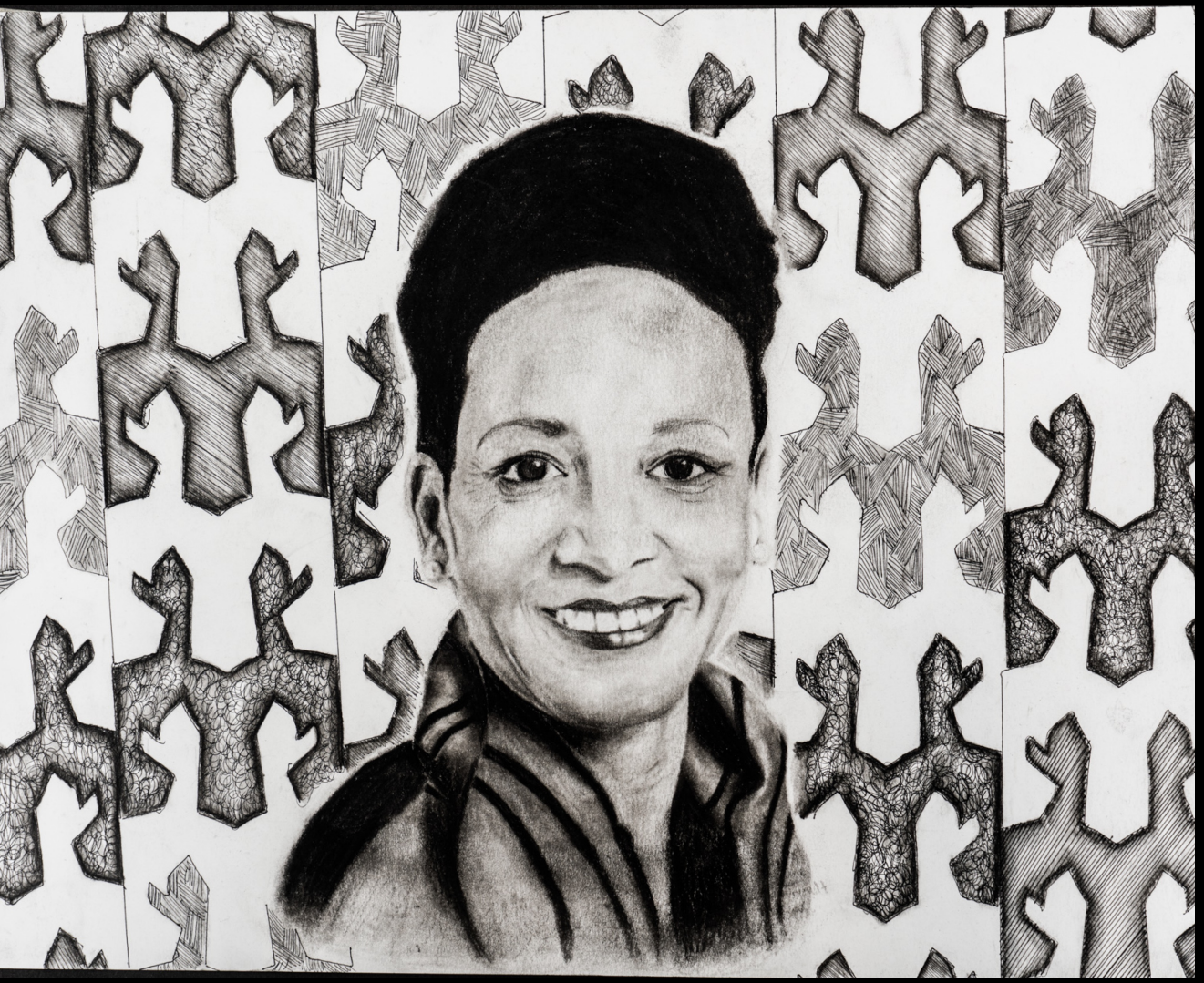
Francesca Ekwuyasi should be celebrated for being an upcoming Canadian Black author that explores the sense of family, faith, queerness and belonging.



Janaya “Future” Khan

by Liya L., Grade 9

My work features Janaya “Future” Khan, a queer and gender-nonconforming activist who helped Black and LGBTQ+ communities in Toronto. My tessellation is a combination of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) logo and the non-binary symbol. The BLM logo, a fist, symbolizes their contributions as the co-founder of BLM Toronto. The non-binary symbol is important as there are not many Black activists who are gender-nonconforming. Janaya Khan’s work mainly focuses on the BLM movement and queer theory, as well as organizing protests. The two symbols are what best represent them and are extremely important. Janaya Khan should be acknowledged for their contributions to Toronto for the Black community.



Nadine Girault

by Reina D., Grade 10

This piece showcases Nadine Girault's accomplishments throughout her career. Born in the United States and moved to Canada. She became a member of International Relations, elected at the National Assembly of Quebec and is also a member of the Coalition Avenir Quebec representing the electoral district of Bertrand. Nadine Girault was one of the three ministers who presented the creation of the new ministerial position that focuses on the fight against racism, ban of random arrest, as well as to incorporate these topics (fights against racism) in the Ethics and Religion Culture curriculum in elementary and high schools. Considering all that, my tessellation piece revolves around her position in the political world. The two hands under a book, represents her service as a politician, while the book signifies her contributions towards establishing political decisions for the good of society.

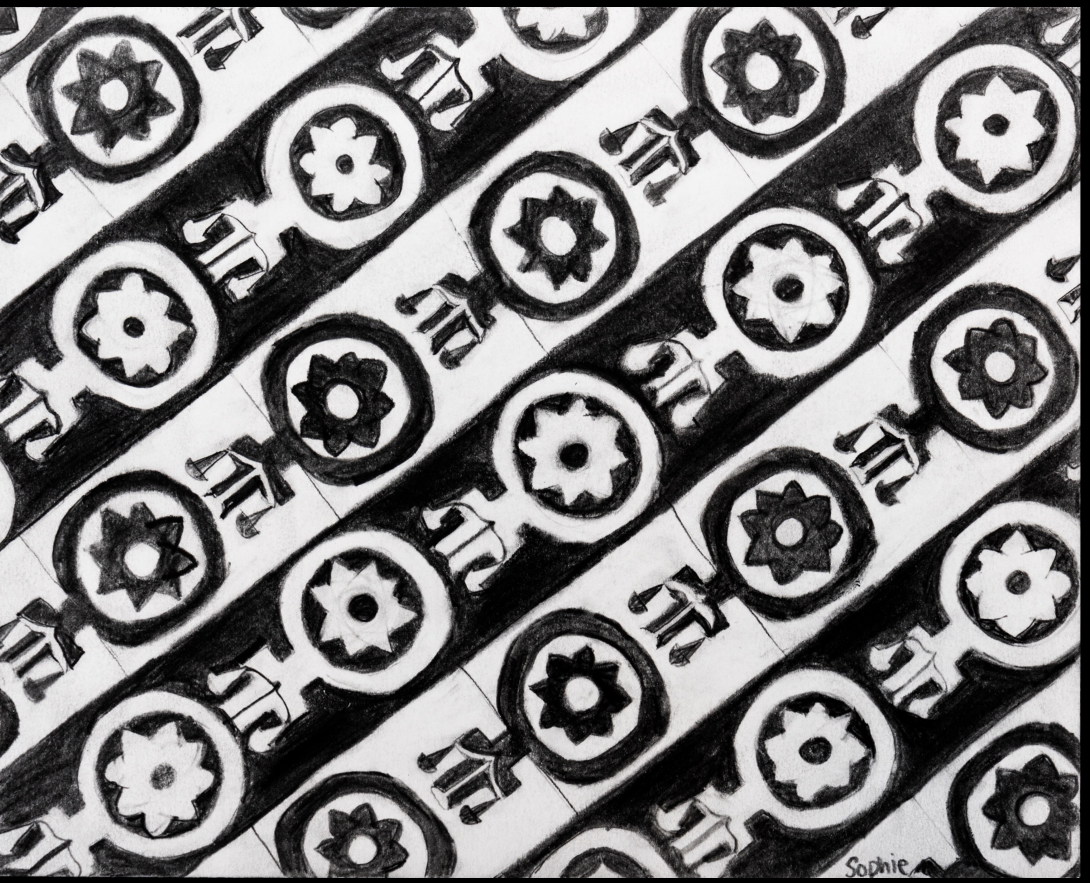


Allan Bundy

by Olivia M., Grade 9

My work displays the achievement of Allan Bundy, the first Black Canadian to ever stand up and become the first combat pilot in WW2. My tessellation artwork is made up of repeating patterns of a combat airplane used in WW2. The airplane symbolizes Allan's determination to become a combat pilot, after being rejected from the Royal Canadian Air Force, believing it to be from racial prejudice. Soon after, Allan went back to try entering the air force once again. This time he was recruited; however, he was not allowed to become a combat pilot. Allan was serious in joining the Air Force, he argued for it, and demanded to have a chance as a pilot.

Three years later he could become the first Black man in the RCAF, along with others following behind him. Allan Bundy should be recognized for his determination to let the military allow Black Canadians contribute to the military.



Annamie Paul

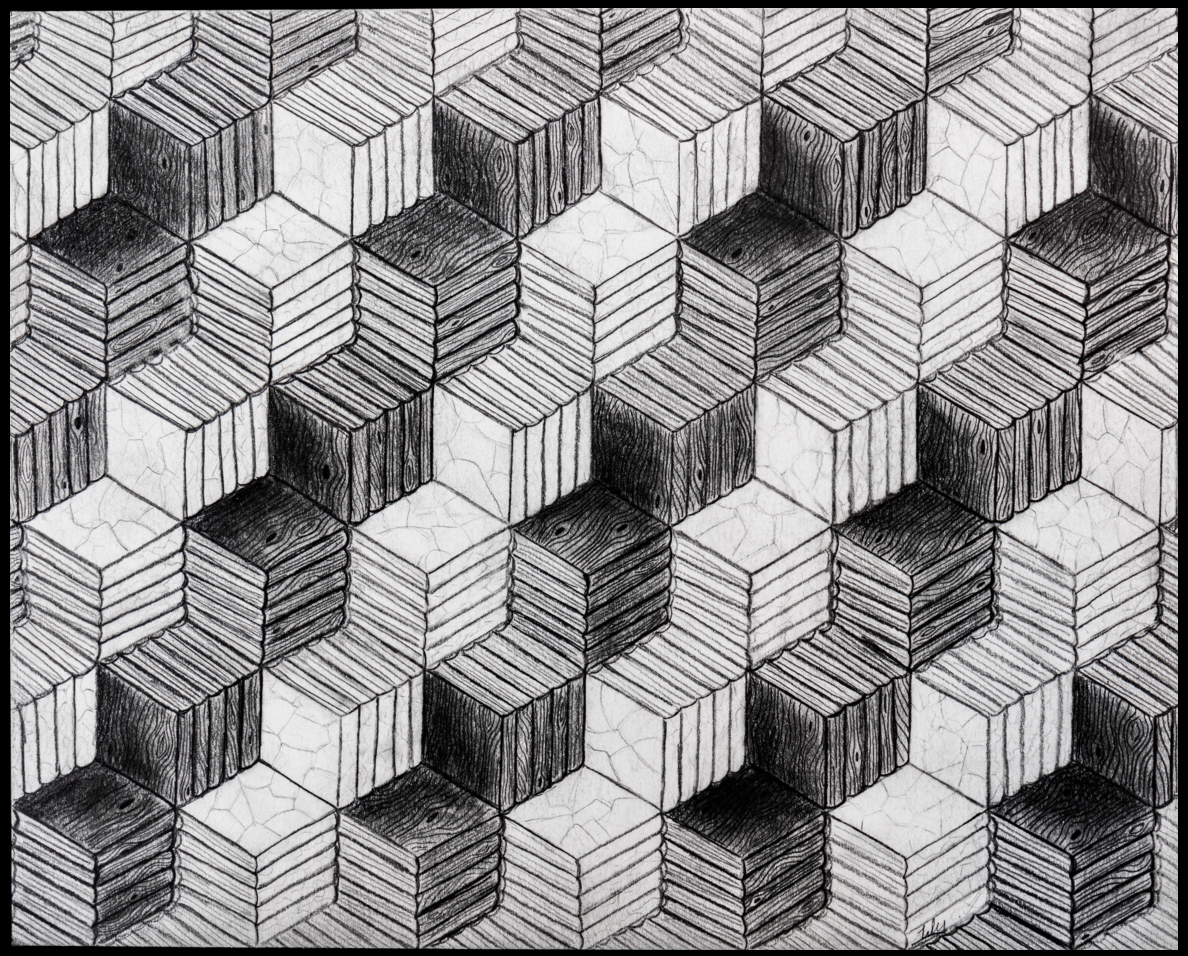
by Sophie L., Grade 9

Annamie Paul; First Black and Jewish leader of a Canadian Political Party.

On October 3rd, 2020, Annamie Paul made Canadian history by becoming the first Black and Jewish leader of a Canadian political party. Not only is Annamie Paul the leader of the Canadian Green Party (2020) but she is also an activist and a lawyer. Annamie founded and directed the Canadian Centre for Political Leadership, which helped encourage women and underrepresented minorities to vote.

I had so many ideas for a tessellation because Annamie has accomplished so much; my first idea was to draw the Canadian flag. I then wanted to a tessellation of the "lawyer symbol," but that alone did not represent Annamie enough. Then I wanted to draw the green party logo, but the flower logo was impossible to cut out into a repeating drawing.

Finally, I decided to draw the female sign because Annamie is currently the only female leader of a political party and she has done so much to help women (Canadian Center for Political Leadership). Next, I decided to draw a flower in the center as the main piece of my tessellation because one of Annamie's biggest accomplishments is being the first Black and Jewish leader of a political party. Lasty, I drew the lawyer symbol because Annamie started off as a lawyer and then made these accomplishments afterwards. Overall, Annamie Paul is an incredible person who has accomplished so much and helped so many people.



Mairuth Sarsfield

by Lily L., Grade 9

My tessellation features the achievements of Mairuth Sarsfield. Born in 1925, in Montreal, Sarsfield was a Canadian activist, journalist, researcher, television personality, broadcaster, civil servant, and best-selling author. She was a host for CBC, CTV, and TV Ontario. She had advocated for 88 years, telling the stories of what it is like to live as a Black Canadian to the world. My art shows many staircases made of books, alternating between black and white. This is supposed to represent Mairuth Sarsfield's Canadian best-selling novel, "No Crystal Stair"; a book about what it is like to live in a black community within a white society, which was chosen for inclusion in Canada Reads 2005 and awarded the Chevalier a L'Ordre National du Quebec in 1986. She was able to share her experience and raise awareness to the difficulties faced when dealing with racism in society.

Mairuth Sarsfield is a significant role model for many when it comes to staying unbothered when faced with prejudice. At a ribbon cutting ceremony in Japan, Sarsfield was chosen to be the one to cut the ribbon. However, a Japanese official did not believe that Black women could be a Canadian representative. Sarsfield ignored them and continued to get her job done. The white books in my tessellation are supposed to be made of crystal, as said in the title of the book which is a reference to the phrase "*Life for me ain't been no crystal stair*" from the poem "Mother to Son." The black books are made of wood to represent the global environmental campaign "For Every Child a Tree" which Sarsfield had helped develop and launch when she was a Senior Information Officer for the United Nations Environment Programme in Kenya. Mairuth Sarsfield was an amazing Canadian whose efforts and achievements should not, and will not, be forgotten.

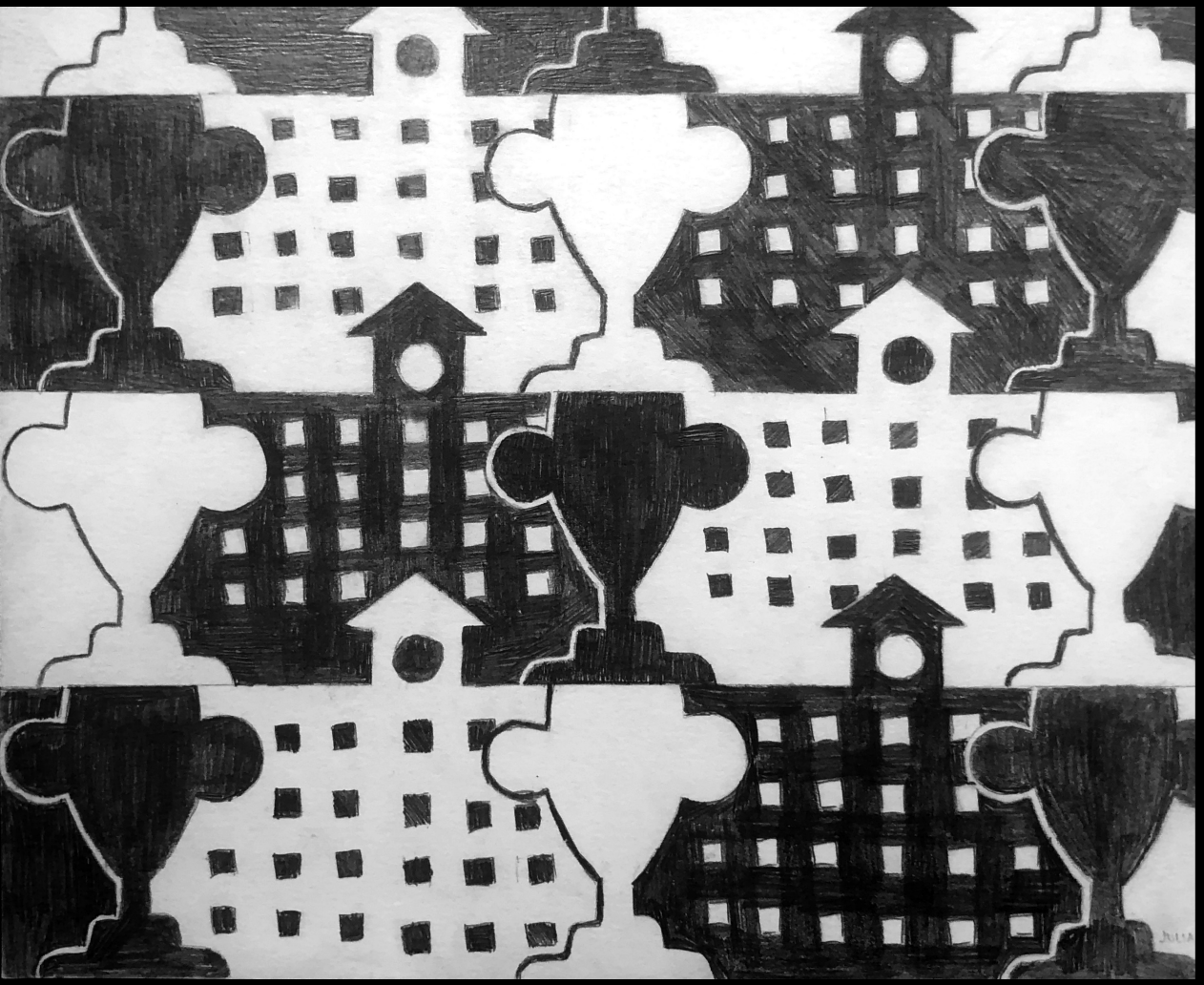


Oscar Emmanuel Peterson

By Jude B., Grade 9

Oscar Emmanuel Peterson was a Canadian jazz pianist and a composer. He was known as the “Maharaja of the keyboard” by Duke Ellington. He was also called the “King of the Inside Wing” in the jazz community. He was born on August 15, 1925, in the city of Montreal, Canada. He was one of the greatest Canadian pianists, and he influenced many Canadians to pursue their musical careers. He received many awards and composed 32 songs in total. One of his most significant ones was “The Hymn to Freedom.” Written in 1962, it was embraced by people over the world as the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement.

I designed my tessellation project to represent this song. I drew a lot of birds with music notes embedded to their body as a symbol for freedom and music. The number of the musical notes represents the total number of the songs he composed.



Donovan Bailey

by Julia Y., Grade 9

My work represents the contributions of Donovan Bailey to Canadian Black History. Donovan Bailey is known as the best Canadian sprinter of all time. He was born in Jamaica and moved to Canada when he was young. He is an inspiration for Black Canadians and immigrants because he shows people that your race and nationality don't define your talents. He also founded the Donovan Bailey Foundation, which funds research on prostate cancer and Alzheimer's. The organization built a school in Jamaica. The buildings in my tessellation represent schools and education because of Donovan Bailey's contribution to education and the trophies represent talent because his organization helps people use their talents to become successful.