

Impact Statement

Rykese Mathis, Grade 12

Bridges of Strength, 2026

Colored pencil on paper, 17 x 17 inches

Monroe Comprehensive High School, Albany, GA

Unsung Hero: Horace King

For my ARTEFFECT project, I honored Horace King (1807–1885), a man whose life story illustrates the power of ingenuity over oppression. King was born enslaved and became the most celebrated bridge builder in the Deep South. I was drawn to King because he reflects a different type of heroism: the heroism of excellence as resistance. He also built a bridge in my hometown of Albany, Georgia in 1858. I thought that was amazing, even though the bridge in Albany was destroyed in 1897. The bridge house that it was connected to remains. In a society that was intended to deprive him of his intellect, King rendered himself indispensable by his masterful understanding of engineering. What I most admire about King is his incredibly steadfast character, he didn't just build structures; he built a reputation that transcended the rigid racial boundaries of the 19th century.

King built his bridges to last, and he built them with an integrated workforce of highly skilled artisans including both enslaved and free Black people, showing no mercy toward a world that would not return the favor. When the Country was in dire distress, remarked the Alabama Beacon in 1910, "King came to the front with plans and specifications. Then the negro proved himself a man and a citizen" recognize him as such or not. He focused on rebuilding infrastructure and advocating for civil rights. My research utilized archives from the Lowell Milken Center and historical engineering records, which highlighted his role as a pioneer for Black architects.

My artistic vision for this piece was to portray King as the visionary architect he truly was. I positioned him in the foreground, looming large over the construction site, to emphasize his leadership and intellectual authority. The formal top hat and bowtie highlight his status as a respected professional and legislator, challenging historical depictions that often limit enslaved people to roles of manual labor. The blueprints and ruler in his hands represent his cognitive labor, the vision and precision required for his craft. Meanwhile, the tool belt at his side signifies the bridge between his mind and his hands. To capture this, I used colored pencils to create a high level of texture. I focused on layering shades of brown and ochre in his coat to give it weight, while using vibrant blues in the background to make the scene feel immediate. The hatching technique in the bridge timbers reflects the actual lattice work patterns King revolutionized.

Creating this artwork has impacted my perspective. King showed me that creativity is a weapon of freedom. He didn't expect the world to treat him right; he became so good that the world had

no choice. This encouraged me to focus on my gift as a means of giving back. I strongly believe in art as an agent of change. I pray this art is seen as a visual textbook.

Many people drive across bridges every day, unaware of the hands that created them, the minds that engineered them, the Black architects, builders, and engineers written out of textbooks, hidden from history. I will share this art piece at my school's annual art showcase but also through digital platforms. I hope this project will prompt further discussions about the "Unsung Heroes" of STEAM. By shedding light on King's story, I hope others will be more curious to seek out their own hidden figures and change the narrative of our shared history. The truth is that brilliance cannot be bound by chains.