



CRAFT IN AMERICA

WHO INSPIRES YOU? EDUCATION GUIDE

Background Information

"Having come from a family of my mother who is a really powerful black female and my grandmother who was an educator, who was really a powerful black female...So I feel like it's something I am really compelled to carry on." – Alison Saar

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will learn about the artists Alison Saar, Betye Saar, and Maddy Leeser whose works are inspired by the artist Simon Rodia as well as their deep interest in history, identity, and African American culture, whose style encompasses a variety of personal, artistic, and cultural references that reflect their own experiences. Their sculptures, installations, assemblages, and prints incorporate found objects including wood, old tin ceiling panels, nails, shards of pottery, glass, fabric, photographs, and other objects from popular culture. The resulting figures and objects become powerful totems exploring issues of gender, race, heritage, and history.

Key Concepts

- Artists sometimes use found objects and materials when creating art.
- Artists can find inspiration for their art making from generations of family, friends, and/or community.
- Materials and objects can have special significance, may suggest associations, and can convey meaning.

Critical Questions

- Who or what inspires you in your life and art?
- How can found objects and materials be used to convey a message?
- Why is the choice of materials and objects important in creating an artwork?

Objectives

Students will:

- Carefully describe and discuss possible meaning in some artworks by Alison Saar.
- Investigate materials, techniques, and processes for creating three-dimensional artworks using found objects and materials.
- Choose objects and materials to create an artwork that sends a message or conveys meaning.

Interdisciplinary Connections

Environmental Science: This lesson explores materials and objects found in the natural world. The artists are inspired by history, cultural traditions, and family. Science classes can investigate found materials/objects and how they are used in daily life. Students explore environmental science concepts through their exploration of the local environment. Students will use found objects that are often discarded and repurpose them to create a found object sculpture. Key concepts surrounding this project are single use and disposable items and their impact on the environment, recycling, and repurposing. Students are asked to sculpt a form that communicates a message about the environment.



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History/Social Studies: This lesson explores aspects of found materials and objects in the environment. The artist is inspired by history, stories, family and found objects. Students may investigate the history of Assemblage, materials and techniques as related to cultural traditions. What purpose did found objects and other types of materials serve in a particular family, culture or society?

Language Arts: The activity in which students are encouraged to explore who and what inspires them has a clear connection with Language Arts. Students may write a story about who inspires them and how it has influenced their life and art. They can be encouraged to consider artists in their family or community whose work is inspired by where they live. You may wish to invite an artist to class, or take your students to visit the artist, focusing on the artist's inspiration.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Anchor Standard #1, CREATING: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #2, CREATING: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #4, PRESENTING: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- Anchor Standard #8, RESPONDING: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11, CONNECTING: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

Worksheets

- Worksheet 1: Investigating the Art of Alison Saar
- Worksheet 2 : Materials, Techniques and Process

Materials

- Found Objects – from home and/or natural environment
- Various materials and resources: fabric, magazines, newspapers, butcher paper, drawing paper (fine and heavy grain), cardboard, picture books, photographs, wood, metal, tin, canvas, etc.
- Pencils, crayons, ink, paint
- Sketchbooks
- Tools/media: adhesives, thumbtacks, hammer, scissors, nails, string, yarn, etc.

About the Artists

Alison Saar

"I wanted to make art that told a story." – Alison Saar

Alison Saar is a Los Angeles, California based sculptor, mixed-media, and installation artist. Her artwork focuses on her African American heritage and Black female identity and is influenced by African, Caribbean, and Latin American folk art and spirituality.

Alison Saar combines traditional and found materials to explore African American experiences, especially for women. Alison Saar's sculptures, installations, and prints often use elements of African and Afro-Caribbean art to transform materials such as tin ceiling panels, nails, shards of pottery, and glass into pieces that evoke mythology and collective memory. Saar's artwork is influenced by her mother, artist Betye Saar, who earned renown for her own materially inventive, conceptually rich assemblages.

Betye Saar

"To me the trick is to seduce the viewer. If you can get the viewer to look at a work of art, then you might be able to give them some sort of message." - Betye Saar

Betye Saar creates installations, shrines and assemblages that reflect her own mixed ancestry and she has been greatly influenced by the artists Joseph Cornell and his assemblage boxes and Simon Rodia and his work, the Watts Towers.

The artist has also often turned to her family and its history as sources for her work. "Keep for Old Memoirs" (1976), for example, includes fragments of letters and photographs saved by the artist's great aunt Hattie, along with a pair of gloves. Saar states that her favorite place to look for objects are flea markets and she keeps her flea market finds in her studio, organized by color and theme.

Simon Rodia

"He built the towers by hand, alone, without machine tools, without nails, without scaffolding, without written plans and with no client to absorb the costs. He had no drill and used no bolts to hold together pieces of the steel he used." — Bud Goldstone and Arloa Paquin Goldstone in the book "The Los Angeles Watts Towers."

Simon Rodia was an artist mostly known for his large-scale installation in Watts, California, entitled *Nuestro Pueblo* (Our Town), but more commonly referred to as Watts Towers. He designed and built the Towers entirely himself, constructing them out of masonry, tile, and various found objects, and decorating the surfaces with hand-placed mosaics. Several structures compose the complete installation, the largest of which stands at 99 1/2 feet tall. This visionary environment has powerfully influenced generations of local LA artists, such as Betye Saar and many more around the world.