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Author(s): Carol Argiro
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Teaching With Public Art

BY CAROL ARGIRO

Recommended for Grade Levels: 5-8

"Public art" is a broad term that refers to art in public spaces and includes architecture, landscape, and urban design. Public art makes public spaces more beautiful, encourages us to pause and interact with our environment, or reminds us of important people and events. Just as often, public sculptures become such a part of our everyday experience that we overlook them altogether. However, when given a close, fresh look, these sculptures can be amazing teaching tools, and provide a great jumping-off point for discussions of history, math, science, and art.

This unit suggests ways to use public art as a teaching tool in the classroom. With each sculpture explored here, discussion questions and activities are suggested as a means of stimulating thought about the following questions.

- What are the symbols of a community's past, present, and future?
- What are the different ways to interpret those symbols in works of art?
- How does art stimulate our thinking and imagination?
- How do students interpret their own community?

A concluding classroom activity for designing a public sculpture for the community is outlined here.

Symbols: The Importance of Local History

Directly or symbolically, public art works often refer to local history and local identity. Begin exploring art by exploring your community's history. There may already be public sculptures in your community that commemorate historical events or people. It is useful to create a complete timeline of your town that ranges from the first known history through today's events. Existing works of art will fall somewhere within that timeline.

As you re-create your community history, identify the following: Who are the important people of the past and present? Who were the first inhabitants? What happened to them and why? Do their names survive in local street, park, or building names? What important events have occurred in your community, and how did they affect how your town looks now? What industries existed in your community both 100 years ago and now? Why these industries in particular? These questions refer to historical information that is "visible" now and imaginable in visual form. History that can be visualized is the basis for much public art. The examples given in this Instructional Resource are from the community of Dublin, Ohio (near Columbus) and reflect its particular history as a small farming community that quickly grew into a larger corporate town. Your town may have also changed in interesting ways within a specified time period. Exploration of those changes through sculpture is a way to make historical change visible to present and future generations.
Objectives

The students will:

1. Define “public art” and provide examples of art that is and is not “public.”
2. Identify and explain a symbol represented in a work of public art from the examples in this unit or elsewhere.
3. Discuss at least two ways public art can serve a community.
4. Suggest designs inspired by existing examples of public art that have been adapted to new locales.
5. Collaboratively design and defend a proposal for a sculpture for a specific locale in their community.

Leatherlips, Ralph Helmick, 1990
Scioto Park, Dublin, Ohio

Leatherlips is a 10-foot high sculpture of a Wyandot Native American chief who lived in Ohio in the late 18th century. Leatherlips was well liked by the White settlers and was committed to living peacefully. He refused to join Tecumseh in his quest to defeat the White man—a decision that probably cost him his life. Many communities have statues of their first settlers, whether Native American or immigrants from elsewhere in the country, or the world. Each statue has a story. Here is Leatherlips’ story.
The Story of Chief Leatherlips

The Wyandot were among the first people to settle in Ohio. As other tribes journeyed to this area, Leatherlips, who lived and hunted on the banks of the Scioto River, offered them land and friendship. The chief befriended the local White settlers. They gave him the name "Leatherlips" because of his admirable trait of never breaking a promise.

In 1795, after the Battle at Fallen Timbers, Leatherlips was one of many tribal leaders who signed the Treaty of Greenville, and promised never again to fight against the United States. This treaty created great tension among the Native Americans, as the Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, was trying to unite tribes in a last effort against the White Americans. Chief Leatherlips held to his promise of peace and did not join Tecumseh.

The Wyandot found their chief guilty of witchcraft and eventually condemned him to death. Chief Leatherlips had a small meal, washed and dressed himself in his best apparel, and painted his face. Executed by a blow to the back of the head, it is said that Chief Leatherlips died with the same dignity with which he lived.

Discussion and Classroom Activities

1. If Chief Leatherlips was alive today, what might he say to your community? What might he say to our world? Ask students to choose an audience (the class, a group of parents, the Mayor, descendants of the Wyandot) and write a speech for Chief Leatherlips. Create symbolic props for Leatherlips and his audience and read your speeches aloud. In small groups, sketch the scene where Leatherlips will conduct his speech to each audience. Respond to these questions: How are the scenes different for various audiences? Which scene would you select to complete as a mural for your school?

2. Leatherlips is made from a rock indigenous to the community where the sculpture was made. What materials are indigenous to your community? If you were to create a sculpture of an important local person, what indigenous material would you use? Be creative. Local materials might include recycled materials, whole trees, products of local industry, or parts of demolished buildings. Students should discuss why some of these materials might be more appropriate than others.

3. A legend is a story, passed down through oral tradition and popularly accepted as historically accurate. Legends evolve over time. One legend says that Leatherlips' ghost still remains along the banks of the river where he lived. Here is part of that legend:

   "... a grave digger, during his late night travels, reported several sightings of an Indian in ceremonial dress and a medicine bag standing near the grave site. When looking a second time, the ghostly image of the Indian was gone."

Ask an older family member to tell a family story. Next, list visible symbols that could represent the story in a sculpture. Tell your story to a friend who has never heard it and then ask that friend to tell another friend. Make a list of the visible symbols in the last story in this chain. How are they different from the original family story? Design a sculpture that includes at least one of these symbols.

Artist Information

Ralph Helmick received his MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Tufts University, Medford, MA (joint program). Most recently Helmick created a public art sculpture in the Federal Courthouse in East St. Louis, Illinois. (http://www.dowhile.org/physical/people/helmickr.html)
**Out of Bounds, Lloyd Hamrol, 1992**  
Avery Park, Dublin, Ohio

Out of Bounds is composed of seven 10-foot high forms representing soccer balls. These differently colored tessellated forms represent local teams and are randomly scattered throughout a park, like balls out of bounds. The entire park becomes the sculpture, with multiple focal points. The sculpture “fits” the park, which is used for recreational and athletic purposes.

**Discussion and Classroom Activities**

1. Look at the photo of Out of Bounds, or at a group of soccer balls on a lawn or a classroom table. Discuss the principles of tessellations, and show other examples (M.C. Escher, bathroom tiles). Design your own tessellations on flat paper, and suggest ways that these patterns could be used, including designing a new tessellation pattern for soccer balls. Create a gallery of “bathroom tile designs and other modern tessellations,” or re-create Out of Bounds with soccer balls showing new tessellation designs. Write critiques of the exhibition.

2. Out of Bounds is a huge version of something familiar. Explore the sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, such as his Baseball Bat, Giant Three-Way Plug, and his “soft sculptures” of huge hamburgers and typewriters. Sketch designs for at least four other everyday objects “bigger than life” for outdoor spaces. Select your favorite sketch, develop it in colored pencil, and add it to a photograph of a street or park in your town. If all students use the same photograph, post the results and discuss which giant sculptures best fit the site and why.

3. Artists who design public sculpture must think about the relationship between the sculpture and the selected site. Think of at least four places in your town where public sculpture might be installed. What might be the subjects, sizes, and materials for sculptures there, and why? Students should write a letter to the mayor in which they describe their favorite of the four ideas. The meaning of the sculpture and how people would react to it should be considered. Include a sketch and a title of the sculpture.

**Artist Information**

Lloyd Hamrol has created over a dozen public art projects. His work has been displayed in the Smithsonian Institution and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Hamrol is the recipient of four Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. He recently installed a public art sculpture at the Staples Center in Los Angeles.  
(http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/la/pubart/Downtown/figueroa/press.html)
Field of Corn (with Osage Orange Trees), Malcolm Cochran, 1994
Sam and Eulalia Frantz Park, Dublin, Ohio

Field of Corn (with Osage Orange Trees) is made of 109 realistic concrete corncobs standing in upright rows, each taller than a tall person (7 feet tall). The sculpture symbolizes the history of one town’s farming legacy and serves as a memorial to rural landscapes being developed into urban communities.

Discussion and Classroom Activities

1. Refer again to Claes Oldenburg’s sculptures of human-made objects. Pretend that you are having one ear of corn from Field of Corn (with Osage Orange Trees) for dinner. Write a letter to Claes Oldenburg and invite him to create dishes for your meal of giant food. How big would the plate the corn is sitting on have to be to be proportionately correct? What else is needed? Would Oldenburg use plain concrete or colored concrete? Suggest additional items of local food that make an appropriate subject of a sculpture for your town. Ask students to consider how Malcolm Cochran might arrange these sculptures. What food, how big, and what colors? Ask students to write a letter to Malcolm Cochran and describe their ideas and designs.

2. A landmark is a place in a neighborhood or city that almost everyone recognizes. Historical landmarks are old buildings or places that help people remember the past. Name some places in your community or country that are considered landmarks. What do these landmarks tell you about the community or country? Design a landmark to commemorate one historical event—or regional food item—in your town. The model landmarks can be made from paper, clay, styrofoam, or other three-dimensional materials. Arrange them in a display and critique the works for their effectiveness as landmarks. Which do students choose as the most elegant? Which is the most informative? The funniest?

3. How has your own community changed over time? Is there a sculpture in your community that reflects an historical event? Design such a sculpture for future residents to enjoy. Think about what kind of sculpture would best record life in your town today. What kind of image or symbol should be chosen? What kind of materials? Where should the sculpture be

Watch House is a copper house atop a circular earthen mound. The center of the mound is sunken and is home to prairie grass and sunflowers, which reference the garden crops of the Hopewell Native Americans, believed to be Ohio’s first farmers. Watch House is a symbol of the connection between the native and contemporary cultures of its surrounding community.

The copper house has a planetarium-like domed ceiling with cutouts of household items. The artist cut out shapes of familiar household items in the dome of Watch House so that when you are standing inside—in “the past”—you look through the “present” items up to the sky to “the future.” You can see through holes shaped like chairs, silverware, a tea pot, and a table. Todd Slaughter states, “These cut out symbols … refer to a family dining scene and domestic things we perceive to be precious.”

Artist Information
Malcolm Cochran lives in Columbus, Ohio. He received his BA from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and his MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. He is a professor in the Sculpture and Foundation Program of The Ohio State University Department of Art. Recently, Cochran’s work was featured in the exhibition “Malcolm Cochran: A Mid-Career Survey.”

(http://www.arts.ohio-state.edu/Art/faculty/malcolm/malcolm.html)
Discussion and Classroom Activities

1. Identify six precious objects in your home. Write a brief story that includes three of these objects and explain why each is precious. Using strips of butcher paper, make a paper cut-out mural that covers the windows of your classroom and includes shapes important to each student, as a kind of self-portrait of the class through objects.

2. Research Native American mound building. Which tribes participated in mound building and why? Consider what is being done now to protect these burial sites. (A major mound site to research is Cahokia Mounds, in southern Illinois). As an exercise in interpretation, list four reasons why the artist might have felt it important to build a mound as part of his sculpture. Work in teams of three to write class “labels” for the Watch House that give different explanations as to why it is on a mound.

3. Watch House looks like an early rural cabin, with a futuristic dome on top, and reflects two different time periods. What two unlikely architectural traditions could you combine to reflect your community? Sketch a combination building and write an explanation. Make the buildings in paper, foil, cardboard, or clay, and arrange them as an exhibition of “time-traveled buildings.”

Artist Information

Todd Slaughter was born in Memphis, Tennessee and received a BFA from the University of Texas in Austin and an M.I.D. from Pratt Institute in New York. He is currently an associate professor in the Ohio State University Department of Art in the Sculpture and Art & Technology programs.

(http://www.arts.ohio-state.edu/Art/faculty/todd_slaughter/todd_slaughter.htm)
Design a Community Sculpture

Preparing for the project. As a class, select a site for your sculpture. Who will visit the location and what will visitors do there? Is it a place where children play, or a place for quiet study? Is it inside or outside?

Determine the criteria for the public sculpture. Here are some to start with:

- The sculpture should fit the site, in both size and meaning.
- The sculpture should refer to your community's history or values.
- The sculpture should be visible from a distance, attracting visitors.

Arrange the students into teams of three jurors. Each team will use the determined criteria to judge the proposed sculptures. The teams may come to quite different conclusions. Each student will create a design and also serve on a jury for other designs.

Creating the proposals. Students can work independently or in groups. They should create a public art proposal to be presented to the jury. Students should keep in mind the agreed-upon criteria. The proposals should include at least the following elements:

- a written description of the sculpture: size, materials, exact location, etc.
- sketches of the sculpture from at least two angles
- a three-dimensional model of the sculpture
- reasons why the proposal should be approved

The presentations. Each team of jurors should be given a rating sheet for proposals where they can make notes and write questions. Students will use their rating sheets when selecting a winning proposal.

Each proposal will be presented for consideration to all jury groups at the same time. Students should make brief presentations about the projects and show their models. The juries should ask questions. At the conclusion of the presentations, each jury will discuss the proposals until they agree on the one piece that best meets all of the established criteria. Finally, the jurors will announce their decisions and discuss the reasons why they selected a particular project. Jurors should suggest other locations for all non-selected designs, with specific reasons.

Research Note

If public art is not easily accessible to your classroom, you can find images in books and on the Internet. Use the Washington Monument, Mount Rushmore, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and other national monuments. Try an Internet search with the words “public art” and descriptors such as stone, concrete, and park. The following websites offer images, artists' biographies, and other useful information about public art.

- Public Art in LA. http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/la/pubart/

While often taken for granted, public works of art provide all of the opportunities for discussion listed here and can help students see and understand these works in fresh ways.

This Instructional Resources unit was adapted from the Art in Public Places unit included in “ARTconnection: A Teacher Resource Guide Connecting Programs of the Dublin Arts Council to the Classroom.” The entire unit can be found on the Dublin Arts Council website, http://www.dublinarts.org/inschool/resource.html.

Carol Argiro is education director for the Dublin Arts Council, Dublin, Ohio. E-mail: argiro@dublinarts.org

ENDNOTES

1From an oral history account of legend by a community member, unpublished.