Small Wonders:
Gothic Boxwood Miniatures

Lesson Plan 3 – Small Art, Big Ideas:
Contemporary Connections

Visual Arts, Grades 11 and 12
Summary

Just as the anonymous artists of these sixteenth-century devotional boxwood carvings created powerful, universal narratives with compelling imagery that was personal in scale, contemporary artists are adept at manipulating diverse materials and means of representation to produce tiny objects that spark imaginations and demand quiet, deeper investigation. Contemporary popular culture often relies on the creation of spectacle, images, and actions that are loud, huge in scale, attention-getting, and even awe inspiring. This idea of “bigger is better” permeated much of twentieth-century visual culture, with artists challenging conventions and one another to create larger and larger monumental-scale paintings, sculptures, and photographs, not to mention the use of billboards, earthworks in vast outdoor settings, and art installations that occupy entire galleries. However, a handful of modernists and many current artists and designers maintained and have successfully exploited a tradition of working in a smaller, more intimate scale, comparable to the sixteenth-century miniatures in this exhibition. Students today are exceedingly familiar with small-scale images thanks to ubiquitous cell phones, digital watches, and video games.

The Boxwood Project Online tool

Go online to view the entire collection of objects from multiple angles, zoom into objects to see details, and compare object features. http://www.boxwood.ago.ca

ONTARIO CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS:

AVI3M
Creating and Presenting A1. 2, I.3; A2.1; A3.1, 3.2
Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing B1.1, I.2, I.3; B2.1, 2.2
Foundations C1.1, I.2; C2.1, 2.2

AVI4M
Creating and Presenting A1. 2, I.3; A2.1, 2.2; A3.1, 3.2
Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing B1.1, I.2, I.3; B2.1, 2.2
Foundations C1.1, I.2; C2.1, 2.2
Learning Strategies

LAND OF THE GIANTS

Provide students with miniature human figures, similar to those used for model train sets or found in toy stores, or have them bring some from home; alternately, digitally print and cut out small scale figures, no bigger than 3 or 4 centimetres, on heavy card stock and make sure they can stand upright. Use these tiny humans as inspiration for a small-scale installation artwork. Find a location and/or objects around the school that will emphasize their tiny scale, by contrast. Students can document their imaginative results in a cell phone photograph. Share or print out resulting photos and discuss how the implications of scale change contribute to visual meaning.

SEEING – CRITICAL ANALYSIS PROCESS

Using the Critical Analysis Process for exploring an artwork, print off the related images with the captions on the reverse. Further inquiry: Examine the two prayer beads or beads (paterenoster) in the shape of skulls (#29282, #29283). Why are these beads so compelling when first encountered? What is it about the skull image that might captivate teens? What does it symbolize? How do the interior narrative reliefs connect with the bead’s carved exterior? How are these events from the Passion of Christ humanized and made more personal? Analyze the prayer bead depicting the episode about St. Hubert (#29359). What is this scene meant to symbolize? Explain how the private scale of these scenes makes them more or less effective as devotional images.

Technological advances have revealed further dimensions to curators and conservators researching these boxwood carvings. Using microscopy, X-radiography, CT scans, and micro-computed tomography (cross sections), researchers have discovered details about wood construction, design strategies, and hand carving that partially demystify the artistry and imaginative manufacture of these miniature narratives. Initially, ask students to speculate about the construction techniques and possible design solutions employed by these gothic sculptors – how were they made? Why do we need to understand these older approaches to sculpting, compared to current methods of construction? Does this degree of detailed investigation take away some of the awe or sacredness that surrounds these fascinating objects?

SEEING WITH – AESTHETIC INQUIRY

Give students opportunities to pose and respond to aesthetic inquiry questions about the boxwood sculptures. Use the AGO’s Tips for Teaching with Works of Art [link to PDF] and these further suggestions for conducting structured inquiry: allow students to devise their own definitions, rather than imposing an expert’s; use a coaching model of instruction to maintain dynamic student interactions; have students play “devil’s advocate” or role-play another view-point; refer to real-
life examples or concrete images; take an occasional survey to test consensus; and involve the class in establishing guidelines for discussion. Small groupings that focus on different questions can make for lively exchanges and diverse viewpoints. The following topics and questions start with the boxwood miniatures, but can broaden beyond these particular objects:

How is “small” generally perceived in popular culture, technology, and among Canadian cultures? Is the miniaturization of many aspects of our world a positive or adverse phenomenon? How do artworks support or reinforce spiritual beliefs? Why do some religions embrace visual imagery while others do not? Why are people fascinated by puzzles? How important is artistic skill in determining the value of an artwork? What other criteria can be used to judge or evaluate artworks? Why do people collect things? How do everyday objects become significant when displayed in a gallery or museum?

**BARELY VISIBLE: MINISCULE & SMALL SCALE CONTEMPORARY ART**

Examine miniature and small-scale artworks created by current artists. Students may very well know of some from internet research and social media feeds. See websites like “Colossal” and “Artsy.” Use the AGO’s Inquiring Qs About Contemporary Art to analyze and interpret meaning(s) in these works. In addition, key design principles of scale and proportion, as well as directional force, should be highlighted and analyzed as strategies for effective visual expression. Have students investigate the following artists: Kim Adams, Daniel Agdag, Jon Almeda, Christopher Boffoli, Geoffrey Farmer, Joe Fig, Tom Friedman, Dalton Ghetti, Joe Iurato, Charles LeDray, Lorraine Loots, Ron Mueck, Lori Nix & Kathleen Gerber, Joel Shapiro, Charles Simmonds, Slinkachu, Tracey Snelling, Do Ho Suh, Tatsuya Tanaka, Robert Therrien. Students can present their findings about their artist in a brief illustrated presentation, as an entry for a contemporary art publication, with abbreviated bio and explained examples of their work, or as a website page.

**MADE VISIBLE: CREATING SMALL SCALE ARTWORK**

As a personal art-making response to the boxwood miniatures and small scale works by contemporary artists, have students create something small in scale that has a significant (large) affect or impact. They can make the artwork’s scale and meaning contradict one another, or base their creation on a theme or concept (e.g. memory/history, dreams, absence/presence, place, inside out, etc.) Students should be permitted to use any available medium, and coach them to investigate new learnings, rather than rehashing previous understandings (i.e. symbols of self). In keeping with Ontario curriculum guidelines, insist that students document various phases of their creative process with drawings or photographs, supported by reflective writing.
Additional Resources

Artsy
[https://www.artsy.net]


Colossal | A blog about art and ingenuity (search “miniature art”) [http://www.thisiscolossal.com]


### The Critical Analysis Process at the AGO

The Critical Analysis Process is a central part of the Ontario arts curriculum. The process helps students develop and express an informed response to an image or work of art – in this case, the boxwood miniatures – using critical thinking skills. In the curriculum, the process has five stages at the elementary level and four stages at the secondary level.

At the AGO, the Critical Analysis Process we use with both elementary- and secondary-level students has three stages: Description, Analysis and Interpretation, and Cultural Context. Our process begins with a description of the concrete visual information found in the work (what you see), moves through a critical analysis based on contextual information provided as needed (understanding what you see), and encourages interpretation through personal meaning-making (what you think about what you see). Woven throughout these stages is cultural context: the personal, social, and historical context of the creator and the work (what was happening at the time).

These questions have been adapted for exploring the Thomson Collection of boxwood sculptures.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION</th>
<th>CULTURAL CONTEXT</th>
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| - What is your first impression?  
- What captures your attention?  
- How does this sculpture make you feel?  
- What does this sculpture remind you of?  
- What puzzles you? What questions do you have?  
- What is happening in this sculpture?  
- What do you see that makes you say that?  
- What clues tell you when this sculpture was carved?  
- | - How does this sculpture evoke feelings, ideas, and images?  
- What do you think the theme or subject of the carving is? Why?  
- What message or meaning do you think the sculpture communicates?  
- What do you think is the purpose of this sculpture?  
- Has your point of view changed from your initial reaction? How and why?  
- How effective are the artist’s choices in communicating the intended message?  
- | - When and where was the work created? By whom?  
- What was happening in society during that time? Socially? Historically? Politically?  
- What was daily life like when the sculpture was created?  
- Who was the intended audience for the sculpture? How has the audience changed?  
- Whose voices do we hear? Whose voices do we not hear?  
- |
AGO’s Tips for Teaching with Works of Art

1. Start with students’ initial reactions
2. Ask open-ended, inquiry based questions
3. Listen for a range of responses
4. Scaffold learning by introducing contextual information
5. Encourage connections using hands-on activities/strategies
6. Allow for sharing and reflection time

Inquiring Q’s about Contemporary Art

1. Does this artwork tell a story or communicate a specific point of view? Explain your thinking.
2. Which of your senses are activated by this artwork?
3. Which, if any, images, symbols, or objects do you recognize? Is the artist trying to make you think about something else?
4. Does this artwork have a title? If so, does it add to or complicate the meaning of this work?
5. Are any global issues or human concerns highlighted in this artwork? Explain what these are.
6. What materials has the artist used? How do these specific materials affect your experience of the artwork?
7. How does the artwork interact with its surrounding space? Does the work have to be experienced in a particular place?
8. How much time should you spend looking at this artwork? Does it change or take on more meaning as time passes?
9. Does this artwork challenge or confirm your ideas about what art should be? Has it changed your thinking in any way?
10. What is this artwork about? Does it communicate a clear meaning or purpose or is it somehow confusing or ambiguous? What further information is required?
11. Why is this a work of art? What is its relationship to everyday life?
12. What kinds of decisions did this artist have to make?
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Related Images
Prayer Bead in the Form of a Skull: The Temptation and the Crucifixion (c.1480–1500), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29282)

http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/temptation-crucifixion
Prayer Bead in the Form of a Skull: The Temptation and the Crucifixion (c.1480–1500), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario. (#29282)
http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/temptation-crucifixion
Prayer Bead in the Form of a Skull: The Entry into Jerusalem and the Carrying of the Cross (c.1480–1500), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29283)
http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/christ-entering-jerusalem-christ-carrying-cross
Prayer Bead in the Form of a Skull: The Entry into Jerusalem and the Carrying of the Cross (c.1480–1500), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29283)

http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/christ-entering-jerusalem-christ-carrying-cross
Prayer Bead: The Vision of St. Hubert (1500–1525), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario. (#29359)

http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/vision-st-hubert
Prayer Bead: The Vision of St. Hubert (1500–1525), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29359)

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