

Small Wonders: Gothic Boxwood Miniatures



Lesson Plan I – Collections, Museums & Portable Art

Grades 4–6, with a focus on the
Grade 4 curriculum

Summary

The Thomson Collection of boxwood carvings immerses students in tiny narrative worlds that are crammed with details and surprises. These sculptures (prayer beads and altars) were personal devotional art objects, commissioned and collected by private patrons, later inherited by or sold to collectors, and eventually ended up in the collections of public museums or galleries. This first series of learning activities focuses on learning from actual objects, by speculating and researching about their place in history and significance in people’s lives. These activities will help students to understand and question the reasons for collecting objects, displaying them in public collections, and the associated efforts of museum employees in making this happen. Students will also delve into the historical context of these boxwood carvings, early sixteenth-century Western Europe, in an attempt to understand where they came from, who made them, and why.

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:

SOCIAL STUDIES

Grade 4

Heritage and Identity: AI.

LANGUAGE

Grade 4

Writing (Developing Ideas) 1.2 (Research) 1.3 (Form) 2.1

Grade 5

Writing (Developing Ideas) 1.2 (Research) 1.3; (Form) 2.1

Grade 6

Writing (Developing Ideas) 1.2 (Research) 1.3 (Form) 2.1

THE ARTS – VISUAL ARTS

Grade 4

Creating and Presenting DI.2, DI.3

Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing D2., D2.3

Exploring Forms and Cultural Contexts D3.1

Grade 5

Creating and Presenting DI.2 ,DI.3

Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing D2.1 , D2.3

Exploring Forms and Cultural Contexts D3.

Grade 6

Creating and Presenting DI.2 , DI.3

Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing D2.1, D2.3

Exploring Forms and Cultural Contexts D3.1

Learning Strategies

“WHAT’S THAT?” – LEARNING FROM OBJECTS

Ask students to bring to class , with permission, a personal object that has significance for them, or an unusual object. Alternately, the teacher can assemble a variety of historical, vocational, or culture-specific artifacts. Use one or more of the following exercises to investigate these objects:

- A. Look at an object for a specified amount of time. Remove it from sight and attempt to draw it from memory. Re-examine the object, remove it, and add to the drawn record. Repeat several times to underscore how time and focused attention can reveal information and additional details that at first glance may not be apparent.
- B. Each student is given an object for which they must write a description on a recipe card. Don’t allow others to see the object right away. Collect all cards, shuffle, and redistribute to others. Have them read the description and attempt to match their card with the assembled objects.
- C. Ask student pairs to sit back-to-back. Person A is given an object, and only offers “yes” or “no” responses about its identity to person B, who can only ask fifteen questions. Person B will have to pose questions in a structured way and think carefully about the affirmative or negative answers.
- D. Working in pairs, each student is given an object that remains hidden from their partner. They each write a detailed description of their object, without naming it. Descriptions are exchanged and each student creates a drawing, based only on their partner’s written description.

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: ask the students to examine the miniature altarpiece (#34208) that shows episodes from Jesus’s childhood. Does the overall shape (or frame) of the altarpiece reminds you of anything in your experience? How is the framing of action similar to either a staged play or a television screen? How is it like a book? Why might the patron or sculptor choose to portray these events about childhood and adolescence? Research has discovered that this altarpiece was probably created by many people, rather than one. Ask the students: Have you ever collaborated with others to create an artwork? Describe the steps in your creative process and the interactions that you experienced. Look at the so-called David bead (#29361), first its exterior, then its interior. Does the shape and surface design of this tiny sculpture give you any hints about what might be inside? Why or why not? How would you describe the surface patterns? How has the sculptor designed this bead so that seven different moments from David’s life are included? Draw a diagram to illustrate this ingenious design. One inside relief sculpture shows a story from the Old Testament about David and Goliath. How do you interpret this scene – what is the artist saying? As a visual response, create a storyboard about a story from your life. What would you choose? How will you break it down into separate frames or parts?

LOST AND FOUND

Fill a suitcase with a variety of objects. Establish the scenario that this suitcase was found abandoned by security at a train station or bus terminal. The students' task is to reconstruct the life of this suitcase's owner. What are they certain about, what can be deduced, and where do they require more information? What steps would they need to follow to go about learning more information about each object? In wrapping up, discuss how this exercise simulates the difficulties of dealing with historical evidence. Ask students to write a biography, a day-in-the-life narrative, or create a storyboard or portion of a graphic novel, with captions, for this fictitious individual. This activity can also connect with the roles of art museum curators and conservators in their work with objects (See Collections and Museums activity below).

THEN AND NOW: THINKING ABOUT LATE MEDIEVAL CULTURE

What was life like in early sixteenth-century Western Europe, in what were called The Low Countries – modern day Holland, Belgium and Northern France? The boxwood sculptures illustrate aspects of daily life and religious belief, but not much more. Here's an opportunity for students to conduct research into the lived lives of late medieval (gothic) life. Students can identify aspects of their own Canadian daily lives and culture (e.g., family, work, education, food, dress, leisure time, responsibilities, home, religious/spiritual practices, celebrations, etc.), and create a T-chart to compare with people's lives in late the medieval era. Have them discover visual evidence, either museum artifacts, examples of existing buildings, or contemporary cultural recreations of medieval times. Summary responses: What is the biggest difference between our present culture/community and life in late Gothic times? On a ratings scale from "great" to "no thanks," assess what it would be like to live during this time period given the quality of life and cultural practices. Write about, dramatize or illustrate what your imagined life might be like if you lived in Western Europe during the early 1500s. Finally, ask students why it is difficult to know with any certainty what it was like to live in historical times.

COLLECTIONS & MUSEUMS

Students can share their personal collections from home, in a more thoughtful "show and tell." Why do they collect what they do? Make a list of what types of things are collected. What is it about people's passions and interest in certain material things that makes collecting such a serious, dedicated activity? How might a collection show us something about imagination and human diversity? Discuss the extremely personal nature of collections and the sensitivity that needs to be exercised by all viewers.

Moving beyond personal collections to private and public ones, students can explore the nature and varied functions of museums and art galleries, ideally culminating in a field trip to the Art Gallery of Ontario or a local museum. Researching the roles of art gallery and museum staff gives

students a special behind-the-scenes understanding of gallery/museum work and provides opportunity for career/pathways exploration. Invite a guest speaker – parent or community member – to talk and respond to questions about their museum or gallery work.

THE PORTABLE MUSEUM

Just as the boxwood sculptures were purposely made miniature in order to be easily transportable, students can create their own portable museum to house their collection (or part of it). Depending on the size and nature of their artifacts, a variety of containers could be used, e.g. old suitcases or briefcases; banker's or other sturdy cardboard boxes; small toolboxes or sets of drawers; a card file or recipe box; knapsacks or messenger satchels; shadow boxes. Collected objects can be mounted and appropriately labeled with descriptions (e.g. things from nature, vacation souvenirs, movie memories) and interpretive questions for viewers (e.g. Which celebrity does this rock look like? How are these coins similar and different?). A title sign can be added to the decoration and overall design of the portable museum, a design that should somehow emulate the character of the collection. Arrange for these young curators to have their portable museums displayed for parents/guardians and the rest of the school community.

Additional Resources

Annenberg Learner: The Middle Ages

[<https://www.learner.org/interactives/middleages.html>]

Burnham, Rika & Kai-Ke, Elliott. 2011. **Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience**. Los Angeles, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Henry, Carol. 2010. **The Museum Experience: The Discovery of Meaning**. Reston, VA: NAEA.

Idema, Johan. 2014. **How to Visit an Art Museum**. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: BIS Publishers.

Langley, Andrew. 2011. **Eyewitness Medieval Life**. New York, NY: DK Publishing.

Stone, Denise. 2001. **Using the Art Museum**. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications.

Verde, Susan & Reynolds, Peter H. 2013. **The Museum**. New York, NY: Abrams.

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.

DESCRIPTION

- 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?
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ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

- 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

CULTURAL CONTEXT

- 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**
1. **Ask open-ended, inquiry based questions**
1. **Listen for a range of responses**
1. **Scaffold learning by introducing contextual information**
1. **Encourage connections using hands-on activities/strategies**
1. **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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Lesson Plan 1 – Small Art, Big Ideas: Contemporary Connections

Related Images



Prayer Bead: Scenes from the Life of David (1500–1525), Thomson Collection at The Art Gallery of Ontario. (#29361)

<http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/david-beheading-goliath-david-kneeling-samuel>



Prayer Bead: Scenes from the Life of David (1500–1525), Thomson Collection at The Art Gallery of Ontario. (#29361)

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Miniature Altarpiece (Triptych): Adoration of the Magi, Annunciation and Journey into Bethlehem, Presentation, Flight into Egypt, Christ in the Temple (1654–60), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario. (#34208)

<http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/miniature-altarpiece-0>