

# Small Wonders: Gothic Boxwood Miniatures



## Lesson Plan 2 – The Design of Storytelling

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: Early Societies A3

### LANGUAGE

#### Grade 4

Reading (Demonstrating Understanding) I.4

(Extending Understanding) I.6

(Analyzing Texts) I.7

#### Grade 5

Reading (Demonstrating Understanding) I.4

(Extending Understanding) I.6

(Analyzing Texts) I.7

#### Grade 6

Reading (Demonstrating Understanding) I.4

(Extending Understanding) I.6

(Analyzing Texts) I.7

### MATHEMATICS

#### Grade 4

Measurement (Attributes, Units & Measurement Sense) – estimate, measure, and record mass of objects; (Measurement Relationships) – solve problems involving relationship between years and decades, and between decades and centuries

Geometry & Spatial Sense (Location & Movement) – create and analyze symmetrical designs by reflecting a shape, or shapes, using a variety of tools

Patterning & Algebra (Patterns & Relationships) – extend and create repeating patterns that result from reflections, through investigation using a variety of tools

#### Grade 5

Measurement (Attributes, Units & Measurement Sense) – estimate and determine elapsed time, with and without using a time line, given the durations of events expressed in

minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or years; (Measurement Relationships) – select and justify the most appropriate standard unit to measure mass

Geometry & Spatial Sense (Location & Movement) – create and analyze designs by translating and/or reflecting a shape, or shapes, using a variety of tools

Patterning & Algebra (Patterns & Relationships) – create, identify, and extend numeric and geometric patterns, using a variety of tools; extend and create repeating patterns that result from translations, using a variety of tools

#### Grade 6

Measurement (Attributes, Units & Measurement Sense) – demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between estimated and precise measurements, and determine and justify when each kind is appropriate

Geometry & Spatial Sense (Location & Movement) – create and analyze designs by reflecting, translating, and/or rotating a shape, or shapes, by 90° or 180°

Patterning & Algebra (Patterns & Relationships) – extend and create repeating patterns that result from rotations, through investigation using a variety of tools

### THE ARTS – VISUAL ARTS

#### Grade 4

Creating and Presenting DI.1, DI.3, DI.4

Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing D2.1, D2.2

Exploring Forms and Cultural D3.2

#### Grade 5

Creating and Presenting DI.1, DI.2, DI.3, DI.4

Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing D2.1, D2.2

Exploring Forms and Cultural Contexts D3.2

#### Grade 6

Creating and Presenting DI.1, DI.2, DI.3, DI.4

Reflecting, Responding, and Analyzing D2.1, D2.2

Exploring Forms and Cultural Contexts D3.2

# Learning Strategies

## AS IT HAPPENS: TYPES OF VISUAL NARRATIVE

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. Create a visual narrative from a sequenced arrangement of random postcard images (or other visual media) chosen by the students or teacher. Review the key components of an effective story (e.g., setting, characters, sequence of events, crisis, climax, etc.). Allow students time to invent and talk about connecting incidents, and have them present their final stories, accompanied by the images. Try this as a storyboard exercise. Follow up by citing visual culture examples of sequential or episodic stories as found in graphic novels and comics, films and videos, and other artworks (e.g. Norval Morrisseau's *Man Changing into Thunderbird*; *The Column of Trajan in Rome*; Egyptian hieroglyphs).
- B. Next, ask students to re-present their invented narrative as a single picture in a painting, drawing or cut-paper collage. This picture must show three different moments that are separated by time. How can a story be effectively communicated all at once? What details or incidents will be included and what will be omitted? How can a single character be depicted doing different things, at different moments, and still be understood? Show art examples to provide ideas (e.g. Pieter Brueghel's *Landscape with The Fall of Icarus*; Kent Monkman's *The Academy*; Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*; Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*) and a boxwood carved relief (e.g. prayer bead #29365, *The Last Judgement*). Compare the Thomson Collection boxwood to the Sistine Chapel fresco: how are they similar and unique?

## 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 prayer bead in the form of a skull (#29283). Why does this bead capture attention when first seen? What is the skull and what does it symbolize? What connection can you make with the inside narrative reliefs and the bead's carved exterior? Speculate about how the sculptor might have carved those small scenes using sections or pieces of wood, assembled them like a puzzle, and fastened everything in place? What tools would be necessary? Inspect the Monumentino of Ottoviano Jannella (#29339), with its carving tools and eyeglasses for magnifying. Ask students if they have ever made anything in such a small scale. Ask students if they have ever carved or whittled a piece of wood. Describe how it happens or how they think it happens. What is so special about boxwood for carving? What problems about space and form would an artist have to consider when designing and carving these boxwood miniatures (e.g. visualizing tracery designs on a round, rather than flat, surface; imagining what a figure will look like carved from a solid piece of wood; reflecting a pattern to create symmetry)? Compare

the Carrying of the Cross scenes from the roundel from a triptych altarpiece (#107464) and the prayer bead in the form of a skull (#29283). What similarities and differences do you see between these reliefs in depicting a similar story about the near end of Jesus's life? How have the makers of each work made different choices to portray a similar story? Are there additional questions that would connect students' lives to these works?

## BY THE NUMBERS: APPLYING MATH TO BOXWOOD SCULPTURES

- A. Have students estimate the mass of the Last Judgement prayer bead, based on given measurements of its circumference, height, and width.
- B. Talk with students about time measurements. The year 1482 belongs to which hundred-year era? Which century does it belong to? Which decade? What is the average length of time of a generation in this (twenty-first) century? What about the average length of a late-fifteenth-century generation; how long did people live back then? This will require some research into life expectancy as it was affected by social practices, work, and health. Students could use a graph to record their findings.
- C. Review concepts of symmetry and asymmetry in arrangements of shapes and forms. Have students collect images and identify symmetry/asymmetry in both natural and human-created objects. In drawings, record the symmetrical designs of the boxwood bead exteriors, using reflections to indicate where symmetry occurs (the skull of #29238). Consider the symmetry of the Carrying of the Cross roundel, including its supporting base (predella). How would you change these designs to make them asymmetrical? What other lines of symmetry exist in these prayer beads?
- D. Ask students to locate a pattern in the classroom. What defines a pattern? How is the design principle of rhythm important to pattern? Search for examples of regular pattern, alternating pattern, and progressive patterns. Study the Last Judgement prayer bead's exterior and explain its pattern type by describing the carved shapes, and how they are arranged and repeat. Use reflections to create a similar pattern, either alternating or progressive. How is the design principle of variety used in these carved patterns?
- E. Explore other applications of mathematics and geometry to these sculptures: altarpieces appear as triptychs (three sections) or diptychs (two sections); the prayer beads have concave and convex surfaces; a sphere can be divided into two hemispheres; accurate measurements for interior relief carvings would require precision due to their tiny containers; compare sizes, using ratios, of prayer beads to other objects (e.g. coins, their hands, tools like those used to carve them – Ottoviano Jannella's, for example), or derive a comparative ratio between the Carrying of the Cross roundel and typical full-size altarpieces; practice various spatial reasoning skills (e.g. mental rotation, visual-spatial working memory) using these boxwood carvings.

## **MORE THAN FLAT: RELIEF SCULPTURE & SYMBOLISM**

Ask students to take out any coins that they might have with them. Look at the designs on them, both front and back. Ask them to run their fingers across those images. Describe this quality. Are they completely flat and two dimensional? While examining the relief surfaces of their coins, ask them what images are shown on the nickel, quarter, or one dollar coin. What are these images supposed to remind people of as they use them? For instance, the moose on the 25¢ coin is used to represent a feature of Canada, as a symbol. Create a list of other types of symbols that students experience in their lives (e.g. alphabet letters, numbers, traffic signs, computer or cell phone icons, logos, sports teams, etc.). Remind students about the boxwood prayer beads by inquiring about how these images were created in relief. Look at interior scenes; have students identify sections of low relief (nearly flat), middle relief (mass with shadows), and high relief (almost 3D). This is also an opportunity to review spatial design conventions of foreground, middle ground, and background.

To better comprehend relief, direct students to choose several related or unrelated symbols to combine into a design; this can be as uncomplicated as using block letterforms or fonts (i.e. scramble the letters of their given name) and/or numbers. Their design arrangement should be random, but demonstrate unity through careful placement, overlapping, and size changes. Their final symbol design can be transferred to a sculpting medium such as earthenware clay, air-dry modelling material, or plasticine. They should be able to carve or model various depths of relief, with closer symbols projecting forward and distant ones flattened against the background surface. Depending on the medium, final decoration with paint can enhance these relief plaques.

## **SETTING THE SCENE: DESIGNING A THREE-DIMENSIONAL VISUAL NARRATIVE**

As an art making response that consolidates the narrative and design ideas related to the boxwood sculptures, have students create a three-dimensional visual narrative using layered cut paper and cardboard. This could take the form of a diorama, a peep show or a tunnel book, built inside almost any type of container or designed like a stage setting, using overlapping flat panels and cut-outs. Review paper sculpture skills (e.g. scoring, folding, weaving, creating tabs and slots, etc.) and safety protocols for using scissors and other cutting tools. Their subject matter can be any episode or scene from an existing story (e.g. novel, poem, TV show or film, myth, legend, or folktale); their planned scene can capture a single moment or present multiple time periods happening simultaneously. Visual-spatial reasoning will need to be considered (e.g. foreground, middle ground, background, overlapping, diminishing size, recession, colour changes, aerial perspective, transparency, vertical placement, etc.) in order to create sensations

of depth and dimension. Have students re-examine the boxwood carved reliefs to reinforce their understandings about spatial representation in confined, flattened spaces. Also locate and show examples of paper works created by contemporary artists: Su Blackwell, Beatrice Coron, Heather Moore, Ed Pien, Andrew Scott Ross, Rob Ryan, Kako Ueda, Emma Van Leest, Kara Walker, etc. Image details can be added with marker, coloured pencil or paint; even printed digital images and textures can be incorporated. Final presentation of these visual narratives could be accompanied by an audio recording of a portion of the illustrated text.

# Additional Resources

**Annenberg Learner: The Middle Ages**

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

Cunningham, Katie Egan. 2015. **Story: Still the Heart of Literacy Learning**. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishing.

Dunne, Carey. 2016. "19th-Century Peepshows Offer 3D Glimpse of the Past" on **Hyperallergic**.

[<http://hyperallergic.com/314440/19th-century-peepshows-offer-3d-glimpses-of-the-past/>]

Heyenga, Laura. 2011. **Paper Cutting: Contemporary Artists, Timeless Craft**. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

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

Mackey, Maureen. 2010. **Experience Clay 2e**. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications.

McFadden, David Revere. 2009. **Slash: Paper Under the Knife**. New York, NY: Five Continents Editions.

Ontario Ministry of Education. 2014. **Paying Attention to Spatial Reasoning K-12**. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

[<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/LNSPayingAttention.pdf>]

Roukes, Nicholas. 1993. **Sculpture in Paper**. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications.

Williams, Arthur. 2004. **Beginning Sculpture**. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications.

Museum of Arts and Design. 2011. "Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities," **Teacher Resource Packet**. New York.

[[http://madmuseum.org/sites/default/files/static/ed/otherworldly\\_TRP\\_final\\_sm\\_0.pdf](http://madmuseum.org/sites/default/files/static/ed/otherworldly_TRP_final_sm_0.pdf)]



# 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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## Related Images



Prayer Bead: The Last Judgement and the Coronation of the Virgin (1500–1530), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29365)

<http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/last-judgement-coronation-virgin>



Prayer Bead: The Last Judgement and the Coronation of the Virgin (1500–1530), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29365)

<http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/last-judgement-coronation-virgin>



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>



Monumentino: Sculpture, Tools, and Eyeglasses of Ottaviano Jannella; Portrait of Jannella (1654–60; portrait 1819), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29339)

<http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/monumentino-sculpture-tools-and-eyeglasses-ottaviano-jannella-portrait-jannella>





Monumentino: Sculpture, Tools, and Eyeglasses of Ottoviano Jannella; Portrait of Jannella (1654–60; portrait 1819), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#29339)

<http://boxwood.ago.ca/object/monumentino-sculpture-tools-and-eyeglasses-ottaviano-jannella-portrait-jannella>



Roundel from Triptych: The Carrying of the Cross (1500–1525), Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (#107464)

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