

Written Word as Inspiration to Visual Subject  
Matter:  
Discovering the Art of Assemblage  
Sunday, March 4, 2012  
11:00 a.m.

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In this workshop, participants will understand how writing can inspire artwork through the sculptural practice of creating an assemblage. Together will discover how thoughts, feelings, and the written word can convey inspiration through the sculptural form of assemblage art. During the creation of the assemblage, found objects will be thoughtfully juxtaposed and attached in a confined space. From this type of arrangement, the artwork will begin to take form.

As a historic reference to assemblage art, the works of artist, Joseph Cornell, will serve as source of visual inspiration as we explore the artist's creative strategies for manipulating materials already rich with meaning. Through analysis of the principles of unity, balance, and rhythm as utilized in the artist's work, we will synthesize what his work means both in an objective and personal sense. The project will cover a broad range of the sculptural assemblage genre, as well as examine basic elements and principles of art that students will incorporate into a personal, meaningful work.

**Objectives:**

Students will:

- discuss and analyze the sculptural assemblages of artist Joseph Cornell
- develop an artistic vocabulary as it pertains to assemblage
- discover a visual means to represent their writings through found objects by creating an assemblage representative of some aspect of themselves

**Basic Vocabulary List: assemblage, abstract art, balance, form, juxtapose, line, ready made, sculpture, space, shadow box, Surrealism, unity, and any other the elements and principles of art you decide should be emphasized to fit your curriculum needs.**

**Lesson Content:** Works of art come in many forms. Due to this artistic multiplicity, certain questions regarding the nature of art are asked. Can art purely be an expression of a combination of objects while applying the elements and principles in a desired fashion? Can artwork made by assembling a group of manufactured things rather than by carving, molding, casting, or welding raw material truly be considered sculpture? Can thoughts and feelings regarding personal experiences be reflected through found objects? Does a viewer need to identify with or understand a work of art in order for the work to be successful? Answers to these questions are what this presentation is about. With the class, you will discuss the works of assemblage artist Joseph Cornell (or another artist) and examine his models of sculptural innovation resulting from his use of materials and techniques. As students examine the works and discover what kind of meaning they are able to extract from them, they will also consider what they as artists would like to communicate through their creations. Finally, they will be challenged to create a work of art that triggers an aesthetic response within the viewer regardless as to whether or not the viewer 'gets' the meaning or artistic intent behind this surreal work.

After aesthetic discovery based on Cornell's work, the students will begin the creation process for their writings and assemblages. From select found objects, students will choose items they are drawn to or that they may find some personal meaning or connection. After exploring the objects, students will begin writings in which they may tell a story, write a poem, or create a narrative by writing a story, poem, or song lyrics which describes their selected objects for their artwork. The writings will act as a catalyst for their inspiration prior to the creation of their assemblage.

The objects chosen by each individual student, whether they were found in a junk drawer at home or some from objects available to them in the classroom, will most likely be selected because of the personal connection the individual finds within them. This part of the assignment should be considered a treasure hunt of sorts. The completed assemblage will include good use of the elements and principles of art and this should be evident upon its completion. Its viewers should consider how the objects are placed and what message the artist was working to convey.

The final stage of the process involves critical analysis of the student work in which the students will form pairs to critique the individual assemblages without speaking to each other. Each student is then given the other students' assemblage for examination. As the assemblage itself begins to tell its own visual story, each student will write another short story, poem, or

song lyrics describing what the work means to them. Lastly, the students will exchange the writings and reflect on what was perceived from the sculpture they synthesized. Later in this paper are some variations on how or when you may choose to integrate the writing components of this lesson activity.

### **Assemblage Creation Process:**

1. After choosing a theme, students will thoughtfully select objects as well as a box or structure to house the items in to complete the project.
2. Students will consider the environment on both the inside and outside of the box and how it relates to the objects that have been selected for embellishment.
3. Students will start creating the assemblage by considering the two-dimensional aspects of the walls of the box housed in three-dimensional space for the purpose of design. The surface may be embellished through any of the following means: collage, drawing, painting, or any mixed-media components. If you decide the box will be covered with paper, the students may use pre-printed/pre-decorated papers or may draw or paint on plain paper. Show the students how to measure using a ruler measuring the areas of the box inside and out. Then show the students how to measure the paper to draw an even cut line, so it can be used to cover the selected areas.
4. Students will begin placing and rearranging the objects inside and/or outside the box structure. When satisfied with the arrangement, attach them to the structure using glue, staples, nails, tape, twine, etc. and complete the assemblage.

**Materials:** may include pencils, rulers, scissors, paper, glue, oil pastels, tape, boxes, assorted trinkets, feathers, string, twine, miscellaneous found objects, paint and/ or colored pencils (also available are papers for free reprint from this website <http://www.josephcornellbox.com>).

**Boxes that work:** found boxes such as cigar boxes, found boxes, shadow box frames, hand-made boxes from sturdy paper or cardboard, gift boxes, or anything you find that looks like it will house objects. Also, art catalogs have limited selections of boxes as well. Any of these will work.

## **Alternative Writing Activity Pre-Assemblage:**

I was in a workshop with a unique and enthusiastic writer. During the workshop she discussed many ways to reach students and engage them in writing. In this brief discussion it was mentioned that poetry is often written from the top of the head and then edited. Very often the poem can leave us dull even though the author may be excited about their works. She then directed us through this activity where we were being asked to write in such a way that we were engaging more of our brain through inspiration, spontaneity, and time constraints. This was such an enjoyable activity I tried it with my students, and they enjoyed it too.

As a class, look at a painting, or photograph together for inspiration. Ask the students to call out 8 nouns one at a time and write the list on the board. Next, ask them to call out a list of 12 verbs (which cannot include -ing or -ed on the end of the word).

Once the lists are established, instruct the students to select one noun and one verb, in any random order, and compose a sentence from it. The sentence should come off the top of their head and does not need to make sense. The sentence will include the noun (as subject) and the verb (as action). The sentence will not include: I, me, we, or us because that would become the subject instead. Give the students 10 minutes during this exercise to quietly write their sentences. They will have gone through the entire list and it is okay to re-use any noun or verb in the list.

Next, ask the students to combine sentences that have a repeated noun or verb (only combine two sentences at a time). Give the students 10 more minutes to finish this portion of the activity. Lastly, give the students an editing list from which to complete their poem.

**Suggested Editing List:** the poem has at least ten lines, a title, at least one metaphor (comparison, not using like or as), at least two similes (comparisons using like or as), color (Her strawberry tinted hair was . . .), or weather (The sky was was stormy). Any other edits that will fit within the objectives applied or curricular needs will work as well.

**Alternative Experiential/Narrative Writing Activity:** To get the students started on what they may wish to express, you may use the list below. you may also add or modify as you see fit.

> For **9th - 12th** grade and up

Ask the students to write a narrative based on any of the following topics:

How would you create: 1) an emotion, (2) poverty, (3) war, (4) wealth, (5) celebrity, (6) social issues, (7) schools, (8) friendship, (9) death, (10) urban life, (11) political or current issues, etc.?

> For **5th - 8th** grade students

Ask the student to write a narrative based on the suggested topics; How would it look to be: 1) happy, (2) sad, (3) cold, (4) successful, (5) daydream, (6) young, (7) old, (8) satisfied, in need, (9) helpful, etc.?

### **Alternative or Enrichment Activity**

Have the students listen to a song that does not have clear meaning. Ask the students to form a list of nouns and verbs as above and then create their writings and assemblage. (Basically anything that can give them a reference point for their writing will work).

> Students will write a short story, poem, song lyrics, or letter centered on the theme of the assemblage.

### **Enrichment Activity**

> Students will read an excerpt from a novel, a short story or other literary source, using it as a source of inspiration to create an assemblage from found objects.

> Students will create an imaginary world from the found objects and then create a fantasy story reflective of the assemblage.

## Resources

Jane Ibur, "Books Inside and Out." Saint Louis Art Museum. 1 Fine Arts Drive, Saint Louis, MO. *n.p.*, 21 January, 2012. Guest Lecture.

Joan Sommers and Ascha Drake, *n.p.*, *The Joseph Cornell Box*. <http://www.josephcornellbox.com>, 2006-2012. Web. 26 February, 2012.