



FACES OF AFRICA II

Bessie Harvey (1929–1994)

Alcoa, Tennessee; 1994

Paint on wood with wood putty, glitter, found objects, marbles, and beads; 31 × 34 × 12"

Gift from the Mendelsohn Collection, 2002.20.1

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

Throughout her career, Bessie Harvey worked predominantly with found wood—tree limbs, stumps, driftwood, branches, and roots. She created her sculptures by joining tree branches or embellishing single pieces of wood with paint, glitter, fabric, beads, and wood putty. Rather than beginning with an idea and then realizing it with the help of found wood, Harvey said, the tree limbs themselves, by their size, shape, and particular features, often suggested the subject matter of the sculpture. In *Faces of Africa II*, Harvey added wood putty to enhance the facial features evoked by the tree's natural shape and glass beads to define the eyes.

Although Harvey was not wealthy and at points in her life struggled financially, she did not choose to work with found wood for economic reasons alone. She explained that she had always found comfort and inspiration in nature: As a child, she considered the trees to be her friends; she talked to them and loved playing among them. As an adult artist, Harvey said, she felt that there were spirits and souls within the trees, and that she worked to free them.

"I was always finding ways of making something out of nothing when I was little," the artist stated. When she was a child, Harvey built many of her own toys from things she found or things others had thrown away. She said that the ability to be creative and to make things with her own hands made her childhood and life happier.*

RELATED LESSONS

- "A Tree Can Be ..." (pre-K–1)
- "Art All Around: Found Objects in Folk Art" (2–3)
- "Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry" (2–3)

* The Bessie Harvey Homepage (www.sunsite.utk.edu/bessie/).

A TREE CAN BE...

PRE-K-1

GRADE LEVEL: PRE-K-1

NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS: THE ARTS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

ESTIMATED TIME: ONE 60-MINUTE PERIOD

OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider that alternative and unusual materials, including found objects from nature, can be used to create art.
- Students will experiment with transforming tree branches into original works of art.

MATERIALS

- Images of *Faces of Africa II*
- A copy of *The Perfect Purple Feather* by Hanoch Piven
- Tree branches (students may collect their own branches, or the teacher may provide branches of a variety of sizes, shapes, and weights)
- Additional art supplies to embellish and transform branches, such as cardboard or pulp trays for platforms, glue, string, beads, fabric, wire, feathers, glitter, paint, or any other materials that are available or desirable

LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES

Introduction

- Do a read-aloud of Hanoch Piven's *The Perfect Purple Feather*.
- Discuss the many things that the feather could become with the illustrator's imagination and the help of some additional supplies.
- Share the feather enclosed at the end of the book with the students and encourage them to brainstorm other ideas that the feather might inspire.

Discussion

Look at a reproduction of *Faces of Africa II*. Note that it is a photograph of the sculpture, not a picture or painting the artist made. If your class is visiting the museum, show them the actual artwork. Allow the students to consider the object and guess at the materials used before sharing the background information.

- What is this sculpture made from?
- How did the artist turn the tree branch into a sculpture, into a face?
- Why use tree branches as materials to make art?
- Why might the artist have turned the tree branch into a person?
- Encourage the students to describe their feelings about *Faces of Africa II*. Is it happy, scary, magical, etc.?

- Share some of the background information on Bessie Harvey and her work. You may wish to look at additional works of Harvey’s with the students. Images of her sculptures can be found at the Bessie Harvey Homepage (www.sunsite.utk.edu/bessie/).

Activity

- Allow the students to choose a tree branch.
- Remind the students of all of the different things that one feather could become in the book *The Perfect Purple Feather*.
- Before handing out additional materials, encourage the students to spend a few minutes looking at their branches, turning them around in their hands, and imagining what they could become; it need not be a person or have a face.
- Have the students share their initial ideas with a partner or as a group.
- Introduce some of the additional materials that can be used to transform the branches. Brainstorm how these materials could be utilized.
- Distribute the materials and assist the children as they create their work. While the students’ works may depart from their initial ideas as they progress, remind the students that their branches should remain an important part of their artwork.
- Have the students write or dictate a title or a sentence explaining their objects.

PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- Look at artworks focusing on trees from a variety of cultures and time periods as an inspiration or conclusion to creating paintings of trees.
- Create artworks using both natural and man-made found objects. Encourage the students beforehand to observe the objects and classify them as man-made or natural.
- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.
- Further explore folk art sculptures by teaching the “Imagining Animals” lesson in conjunction with this lesson.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS

- Students were able to discuss a sculpture made from found objects, offering their thoughts about the materials, subject matter, and feeling of the artwork.
- Students were able to brainstorm ideas answering the question, What else could this tree branch have become?
- Students produced an original finished work of art employing tree branches. Students used problem-solving skills and imagination to discover or invent new ways of using various materials.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Recommended Books for Students

Collins, Pat Lowery. *I Am an Artist*. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press, 1992.

An artist's description of finding natural beauty and seeing the world in a creative way.

Ehlert, Lois. *Leaf Man*. San Diego, Calif./New York: Harcourt, 2005.

Featuring illustrations of the "leaf man" and of chickens, geese, and hills composed of fall leaves.

Piven, Hanoach. *The Perfect Purple Feather*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2002.

Shows how a single purple feather is transformed into a whisker for a cat, a quill for a porcupine, and many more imaginative ideas with the addition of art supplies and various other objects.

Shindler, Ramon, and Wojciech Graniczewski. *Found Alphabet*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

An alphabet book illustrated with collages made from leaves, twigs, matchboxes, buttons, and other found materials, accompanied by poems that highlight the objects used in each picture.

Udry, Janice May. *A Tree Is Nice*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1956.

A classic and quiet picture book that gives many reasons for which a tree can be nice.

Recommended Books for Teachers

Arnett, Paul, and William Arnett (eds.). *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Atlanta, Ga.: Tinwood Books, 1999.

The definitive book on African American folk artists of the South. Volume 1 explores artists working in the years following World War II; Volume 2 focuses on artists working in the 1980s and '90s, including Bessie Harvey.

Beardsley, John. *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1995. Twenty-five "visionary environments" from around the world and their creators, explored in depth in photo graphs and text and viewed from both folk art and environmental perspectives.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001. An exploration of American folk art from the colonial period through the present as seen through highlights from the American Folk Art Museum's collection. Another version of Bessie Harvey's *Faces of Africa—Faces of Africa I*—is illustrated and discussed on pages 281 and 401–402.

Recommended Website

The Bessie Harvey Homepage:

www.sunsite.utk.edu/bessie/

A comprehensive online resource about Bessie Harvey and her work.