



## **GOLD TOWER**

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983)

Milwaukee; 1970s

Paint on chicken and turkey bones; 47 × 6 × 7"

Gift of Lewis B. Greenblatt, 1999.22.1

Photo by John Parnell, New York

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### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT**

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein and his wife, Marie, often struggled financially just to make ends meet. Out of the leftover bones from the couples' chicken or turkey meals, the artist built towers, spires, and chairs, gluing them together into complex and intricate structures and painting them with metallic paints. It is possible that Von Bruenchenhein created these sculptures during times when he did not have the money to purchase art supplies. Whenever he was able to, however, the artist worked in more traditional mediums, such as painting and photography.

### **RELATED LESSONS**

- “Art All Around: Found Objects in Folk Art” (2–3)
- “Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry” (2–3)



## **MINIATURE DRESSING BUREAU**

Attributed to Hanson B. Y[on]gung (c. 1858–1878)

Conesville, New York; 1872–1878

Paint on cigar-box wood, cigar-box cardboard, and mirror; 15 1/8 × 7 3/4 × 4 1/2"

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.88

Photo by Stephen Donelian, New York

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### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT**

This miniature bureau, created in the late nineteenth century, would most likely not have existed were it not for the Revenue Act of 1865, which mandated that cigars be packaged in wooden boxes and that these boxes be used only once. The resulting surplus of wooden boxes soon led to a variety of artistic projects, such as this miniature bureau. By cleverly adapting the individual boxes as drawers, using parts of boxes for the case, and adding an imaginative coat of grainpainting and a small mirror, the artist transformed a discarded item into a useful and original object.

### **RELATED LESSONS**

- “Art All Around: Found Objects in Folk Art” (2–3)
- “Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry” (2–3)

# ART ALL AROUND: FOUND OBJECTS IN FOLK ART

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2-3

**GRADE LEVEL: 2-3**

**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, can be used to create art. Students will view and discuss three folk art objects created from unconventional materials.
- Students will experiment with transforming everyday objects into original works of art.

## **MATERIALS**

- Images of *Gold Tower*, *Miniature Dressing Bureau*, and *Faces of Africa II*
- Found objects (in addition to supplying found objects, ask the students to bring their own found materials; encourage them to collect unique or unusual objects and to think beyond the typical cardboard boxes and plastic containers they may have already used in other school projects)
- Additional art supplies to attach and transform found objects, such as clear packing tape, colored tape, glue, string, wire, paint, and any other materials that are available or desirable

## **LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES**

### **Introduction**

- Artists have worked with found objects—materials not specifically created for art production—throughout history.
- Ask the students to recall times when they have worked with found objects, such as fall leaves, images cut from magazines or newspapers, boxes and containers from home, etc.

### **Discussion**

The students will view and discuss reproductions of *Gold Tower*, *Miniature Dressing Bureau*, and *Faces of Africa II* (see lesson plan “A Tree Can Be . . .”). Allow the students to respond to their interest in the objects, discussing their observations and ideas, before focusing on more directed questions.

- Can you tell, just by looking at it, what found materials were used to create this work of art?
- How did the artist transform, or change, the materials?
- Could these objects have been made from other materials? How would they have been different?
- Does knowing what materials the objects were made from change the way you look at these works or your ideas about them?

- Discuss the idea that artists use found objects for different reasons. Some artists don't always have the money to buy art supplies and therefore look for free materials that may be found in nature or that may have been thrown away by someone and then use their creativity to transform these materials into artworks. Other artists choose to work with found materials even when they can afford to buy art supplies because they are inspired and excited by them.
- Address the idea that reusing found materials in art is beneficial to the environment, as well as to the artist. Why is it good to reuse something rather than throw it in the garbage? How is reuse good for the environment and the Earth?

### **Activity**

- Introduce the activity by sharing images from one of the books recommended for students on the next page. The found objects featured in these illustrations will be easily recognizable to students and may even include some of the materials that will be available for their own art projects.
- The students will have already collected an array of found materials from home. In addition, supplement these materials with found objects gathered from the classroom, local businesses, and/or Materials for the Arts.
- Ask the students to take their time looking through the found objects and brainstorming ideas about how these materials may be turned into art. Remind the students that the possibilities are endless; the students' artmaking may be representational or more abstract. Experiment with different objects and ideas before settling on and beginning work on one idea.
- The students may need to invent ways to change their objects and attach different objects to one another. Prepare the students for the fact that working with found objects can be frustrating, as they often behave differently than conventional art supplies.
- A concluding reflection may consider the students' experiences and feelings about working with found materials. What were the challenges? What were the benefits? Do the students have any new insights into why some artists prefer working with found materials?
- The finished artworks should be shared with the class in presentations or displays.

### **PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS**

- Research and report on New York's waste-disposal system. Where does our garbage go? What are some of the problems created by garbage—for people, for animals, and for the environment? What are some of the ways in which the city, organizations, and individuals try to reduce the amount of garbage produced in New York?
- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.

- The “Coming Together: Creating a Community Quilt” lesson plan may be adapted for use in conjunction with this lesson. Many patchwork quilts are a form of reuse, as cloth scraps or bits of old clothing are employed to make new quilts.

## **ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS**

- Students analyzed and discussed the artworks, engaging with the ideas and with the materials and processes used to create the objects.
- In discussion, students considered the creative, environmental, and economic impetuses for working with found objects in folk art.
- Students produced an original finished work of art employing found objects. Students used problem-solving skills and imagination to discover or invent new ways of using materials.

## **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

### **Recommended Books for Students**

Esterman, M.M. *A Fish That's a Box: Folk Art from the National Museum of American Art*. Arlington, Va.: Great Ocean Publishers, 1990.

A children's introduction to folk art, featuring objects from the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., including works made from found materials. Encourages students to create their own works of art.

Konigsburg, E.L. *The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2004. The story of a 12-year-old's struggle to save her uncles' creations, three towers constructed from broken glass and watch mechanisms, from demolition.

Piven, Hanoch. *What Presidents Are Made Of*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2004. A funny collection of portraits and biographical sketches of the presidents of the United States, made from found objects and everyday items.

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.

Slaymaker, Melissa Eskridge. *Bottle Houses: The Creative World of Grandma Prisbrey*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004.

The true story of a house built from thousands of bottles scavenged from the city dump and the woman who became an unlikely folk artist and environmentalist. “I guess there are different kinds of art,” said Grandma Prisbrey.

### **Recommended Books for Teachers**

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 photographs and text and viewed from both folk art and environmental perspectives.

Cerny, Charlene, and Suzanne Seriff, eds. *Recycled, Re-Seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap*. New York: Harry N. Abrams with Museum of International Folk Art, 1996.

The role of recycling in the folk art of Mexico, Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, India, Senegal, and several cultures and communities in the United States, including Texan-Mexican culture.

*Eugene Von Bruenchenhein: Obsessive Visionary*. Sheboygan, Wis.: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1988.

Catalog of works by self-taught visionary artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein in the permanent collection of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Documents Von Bruenchenhein’s life and work, which includes not only chicken-bone sculptures such as *Gold Tower* but hundreds of oil paintings, pinup-style photographs of his wife, Marie, as well as a variety of other objects. The book also presents a selection of poetry and theoretical writings by the artist.

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Catalog of this once private collection of American folk art, comprising hundreds of pieces of furniture, signs, ceramics, textiles, weathervanes, walking sticks, and other objects. *Miniature Dressing Bureau* is illustrated and discussed on pages 117 and 426–427.

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. *Gold Tower* and another bone construction by the artist are illustrated and discussed on pages 254 and 392–393.

Manley, Roger, and Mark Sloan. *Self-Made Worlds: Visionary Folk Art Environments*. New York: Aperture, 1997.

An international tour of folk art environments constructed with an endless variety of materials and methods.

### **Recommended Websites**

The Bessie Harvey Homepage:

[www.sunsite.utk.edu/bessie/](http://www.sunsite.utk.edu/bessie/)

A comprehensive online resource about Bessie Harvey and her work.

Grandma Prisbrey’s *Bottle Village*:

[www.bottlevillage.com](http://www.bottlevillage.com)

Photographs, history, and news about Grandma Prisbrey’s *Bottle Village* in Simi Valley, Calif.

*Grandma's Bottle Village: The Art of Tressa Prisbrey*, a 1982 documentary film by Allie Light and Irving Saraf, downloadable for free at:

[www.folkstreams.net/film,102](http://www.folkstreams.net/film,102)

A 28-minute documentary of a tour conducted by Grandma Prisbrey of her remarkable *Bottle Village*, including a trip to the town dump to scavenge for inspiration.

Public Broadcasting Service online:

“Off the Map: A Look into Backyard Paradises Created by Visionary Artists Around the World”

[www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/)

An interactive site for teachers (and students) to explore the visionary environments of folk artists such as Grandma Prisbrey and American Folk Art Museum exhibition subjects Nek Chand and Howard Finster. Includes video, photographs, lesson plans and resources, and online activities for students.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency:

Educational Resources

[www.epa.gov/epaoswer/education/students.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/education/students.htm)

Offers grade-specific facts, lesson plans, worksheets, and resources introducing and explaining the issues, processes, and reasons for waste reduction, reuse, and recycling. Links are provided to state agencies and additional resources.