

Repurposed Objects Project

Grade levels: 9-12 and college

“I took the pieces you threw away
And put them together by night and day
Washed by rain, dried by sun
A million pieces all in one”
-Rev. Howard Finster

Howard Finster could make art out of almost anything. He sometimes made art from “other people’s junk” – art from the detritus and cast-offs of life. This is a special form of recycling or “upcycling” that gives new life and meaning to what has been seen by someone else as worthless. Part of the Reverend Finster’s deep religious faith was the belief that anyone could be used for the betterment of the world, regardless of background or education. This belief is alive in his artwork as well. Artists like Howard are able to use materials that many would not consider as the stuff of art to make something very special. He repurposed shoes, paint cans, telephones, bicycles, and even a trash barrel into meaningful art.

What things do we throw away that you might repurpose for something else?

This project focuses on repurposing found or discarded objects and using them as the raw materials for making art. Some materials might carry forward a bit of their past use- shoes may carry associations with a journey or travel, or a telephone might make people think of communication, or staying in touch with loved ones from a distance. It’s okay to use the history of the object as a part of your work, and it's also okay to treat it as a blank canvas, just a support for the new meaning that you create.

1. Homework: Locate found or discarded objects to be used. Students should locate 2 or 3 objects that are interesting to them. The objects should not be things easily found in a bookbag or classroom, but something from home or the outside world. It could be something beautiful that you would like to celebrate, or something ugly that you would like to transform, or neither. They may be chosen for their interesting shape, color, texture, history, etc. Students should avoid objects that are dangerous or smelly or objects that would violate school rules.
2. Have the students talk about the objects that they bring in and discuss them with the class. Why were they chosen? What were they used for? What are they made of? Where were they found? Why are they interesting?
3. Have the students design their repurposed object by drawing it on paper, with a few variations. They can brainstorm and explore their ideas and further associations with the newly repurposed objects. They may use one or more of the objects they have selected and brought in, individually or together. In the end, the student should select the design that they like the best and might like to pursue further.

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4. Students should discuss their designs and think about what other materials could be used to bring their ideas into reality. The project could be complete at this point, as an exercise in repurposing objects and experimental design. Or given enough time and the necessary materials, the project could continue on to step five- The creation of the repurposed object based on their designs.
5. Have the students use their designs to transform their found objects into something new. For this step, additional materials will vary depending on the students and their ideas. Paint, wire, glue, beads, dried beans, and almost any collected additional objects may be used to bring about the transformation. At this point staying true to the design on paper is less important than the physical creation of the repurposed object. Students may find that they can stay true to their design and execute it to satisfaction, but they may also find that through the process of working with their chosen materials something new emerges that is more interesting than the original plan on paper. The idea and the object are two separate things, and room for exploration should be allowed and encouraged.

Additionally: Howard Finster was also a collector. Sections of Paradise Garden are devoted to his collections of various things that he found interesting. Sometimes his artwork doubles as a display of collected objects, attached to or embedded into the surface of a work. They often bring their own history and layers of meaning to the artwork of which they are a part. Do your students collect things? This may be something worth exploring as they move toward bringing their ideas into three dimensional reality.

Examples from Howard Finster:

[Paint Can](#)

[Waste Can](#)

[Don't Fuss On This Phone](#)

[Bicycle](#)

[Shoes](#)

Howard Finster is certainly not alone in his repurposing of found objects in the context of art. For other artwork that relies on the use of found or collected objects, look at the work of Athens, Georgia artist [Mary Engel](#), or the work of Brazilian photographer and sculptor [Vik Muniz](#). What similarities does their work have to that of Howard's? How is their work different?

This project relates to the following Georgia Department of Education Fine Arts Performance Standards for Visual Arts:

- VAHSDRMC.2** Finds and solves problems through open-ended inquiry, the consideration of multiple options, weighing consequences, and assessing results.
- a. Uses sketchbook journal to research, explore, and invent artistic conventions to connect and express visual ideas.
 - b. Generates multiple solutions to a single artistic problem and assesses merits of each.
 - c. Analyzes, in both written and oral form, the implications of artistic decisions.
 - d. Solves artistic problems through discussion and interaction with peers.
 - e. Supports peers though informal, ongoing critique of idea, development, and work in progress.
 - f. Recognizes and develops art making as a risk-taking process that incorporates existing knowledge, brainstorming, planning, discovery of unexpected connections, and recognition of serendipity.

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VAHSSCMC.2 Finds and solves problems through open-ended inquiry, the consideration of multiple options, weighing consequences, and assessing results.

- a. Uses a sketchbook journal to research, explore, and invent artistic conventions to connect and express visual ideas.
- b. Generates multiple solutions to a single artistic problem and assesses merits of each.
- c. Analyzes, in both written and oral form, the implications of artistic decisions by the artist and personal reactions to sculpture.
- d. Solves artistic problems through discussion and interaction with peers.
- e. Supports peers through informal, on-going critique of idea development and work in progress.
- f. Recognizes art making as a risk-taking process that incorporates existing knowledge, brainstorming, planning, discovery of unexpected connections and recognition of serendipity, and develops personal skills in these areas.

VAHSSCPR.2 Engages in an array of sculpture processes, techniques, and aesthetic stances.

- b. Creates sculpture to serve a specific function, such as expressive, utilitarian, and social.
- d. Creates sculpture from various traditional and contemporary media (e.g., clay, metal, stone, plaster, glass, fiber, video).
- f. Incorporates a variety of techniques in surface quality and texture derived from a variety of sources (e.g., drawing techniques, nature, tool marks, inclusions).
- g. Selects sculpture media, techniques and surfaces to evoke specific effect, mood, or concept.