

CALLING ALL STARS

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nancy Holt, born in 1938, is an American artist known for her Public Art, Installation Art, and Earth Works. Married to the equally renowned artist Robert Smithson, with whom she frequently collaborated, her most widely known work is her permanent site-specific sculptural piece *Sun Tunnels*, which was built from 1973-76 in the Great Basin Desert outside of the abandoned town of Lucin, Utah.



Stone Enclosure: *Rock Rings*, made of Brown Mountain Stone, 1977-78 © Nancy Holt/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York. Photo credit: Art on File, Seattle.

VOCABULARY

- Line
- Color
- Shape
- Texture
- Orientation

WASHINGTON STATE EALRS

- 1.1—Understands arts concepts and vocabulary
- 3.1—Uses the arts to express and present ideas and feelings
- 3.3—Develops personal aesthetic criteria to communicate artistic choices
- 4.2—Demonstrates and analyzes the connections between the arts and other content areas

VIEWING/DISCUSSING QUESTIONS

Many of the elements of design are evident in the sculpture *Rock Rings*. The following questions can be used to analyze the artwork.

COLOR

Nancy Holt observed: “*Rock Rings* came into my mind when I first saw the site—it seemed to be a natural outgrowth of the Northwestern terrain with its colorful mountain rocks and misty green hills.” The artist used Brown Mountain stone to complete the sculpture because of the abundance of colors present in the rock; indeed, the artist noted that there were six colors that comprise the stone. Describe the colors that you see in the rocks and see if you can name the six colors noted by the artist (brown, orange, purple, brown, grey, and blue).

The artist also noticed that in the rain “the iron oxide bleeds quickly into the dark grey mortar joints, making the mortar the same color as the stone.” Determine if the weather (sunny, cloudy, foggy, misty, or snowy) affects how the colors appear on the specific day that you visit.

SHAPE

Rock Rings employs many shapes. Describe the shapes that make up the entire sculpture. Next, describe the shapes that can be seen when looking through the openings.

TEXTURE

Have students run their fingers along the stone and describe the texture by using adjectives such as: bumpy, rough, hard, etc.

STUDIO PRODUCTION

The artist stated that: "The four arches of *Rock Rings* run North and South—directions calculated from the North Star, Polaris, in a way similar to that used by Northwest Coast navigators in plotting the courses of their ships. The holes in the sculpture are aligned NE, E, SE, NW, W, and SW."

Students will collaborate to make group sculptures that are oriented towards a direction, a celestial body such as a comet, or a specific star/constellation. The following steps will facilitate the making of a collaborative sculpture.

1. First, present students with an array of images of constellations, celestial bodies, and star formations. Next, divide students into groups of 3-4. Their first task is to decide the direction, celestial body, or star constellation towards which their sculpture will be directed.
2. Next, students can brainstorm a shape for the sculpture and determine how the sculpture will relate to the direction or star constellation. Remind students that Holt chose a circle as the shape for her sculpture, but many shapes such as the diamond, triangle, square, rectangle, trapezoid, etc. could be used.
3. Next, each student sketches a simple design for their sculpture. Students then chose which design they will use for their sculpture. Remind students that small details can be hard to make out of the sculptural material.

MAKING THE SCULPTURE

Two processes can be used to make the sculpture. The first involves making stone shapes out of the *Model Magic* that will be used to make the sculpture after they are hardened. In this process, students use the *Model Magic* to fashion shapes similar to stones. Many "stones" are needed for each sculpture, so encourage students to make at least 40 pieces. Store the "stones" in the shoe boxes until dry. After the stone shapes have dried for 24 hours, the students will assemble the stones into a structure using moist *Model Magic* as the "mortar." Remind students that openings can be interesting components of the sculpture.

The second technique requires the students to create stone shapes out of the *Model Magic* and assemble the sculpture before the material hardens. After the sculptures are made, they likewise require 24 hours to dry.

For the final step, the students can paint the sculptures with tempera paint or watercolors. Remind students of the many colors that Holt described in the stones used in *Rock Rings* and have them discuss the colors that they will use before painting.

MATERIALS

- Model Magic (buckets can be purchased to aid with cost)
- Tempera and Watercolor Paint
- Brushes, Newspaper, Water Containers, and other Painting supplies
- Cardboard or tag board surface for sculpture
- Images of constellations, celestial bodies, and important stars



ASSESSMENT/REFLECTION

Students will fill out the following questionnaire as a group and share their responses with the class.

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

1. What colors or hues were used? Why were these colors selected?
2. Are the colors bright or pale?
3. What overall shape is in the work? Why did you use this shape for the overall sculpture?
4. What shapes make up the openings in the sculpture? Why were these selected?
5. What are the textures of the surfaces? Do they seem smooth, rough, hard, dry, bumpy, sharp, etc.? Tell why you chose this texture.

DIRECTION OF SCULPTURE

1. What was the body towards which your sculpture is directed? Why did you choose this direction/star/constellation/celestial body?
2. If you were to construct another sculpture, what direction would you use? Are there changes to this sculpture that you would make if you were to redo it?

ART EXTENSIONS

Many of Nancy Holt's sculptures use a circle as the main shape. Looking at the above pictures of her past works, tell why you think that circles are important to her work. Research more of her works. Choose one of her sculptures and redo the art work using a different shape. Discuss how the meaning is changed.

INTEGRATION

1. Study the use of the circular shape in the construction of historical structures such as: Stonehenge, the Amphitheatre of the Roman Empire, the forts of early Christian Ireland, and the medicine wheels of the Plains Indians. Discuss the use of the circle, why it is important to many ancient structures, and what circles might imply or mean within civilizations.
2. The Native Americans of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico aligned some of their domestic buildings with the North Star. Study their reasoning for such endeavors and why they felt that it was important that their constructions be aligned with the North Star. Why weren't other stars as important to use for direction?
3. Compare Rock Rings to the castle construction below. How is Holt's sculpture different or similar to the castle? Are both constructions art? Why or why not?



RESOURCES

- Books for children about constellations: "Comets, Stars, the Moon, and Mars: Space Poems and Paintings" by Douglas Florian, 2007; "There once was a Sky Full of Stars," by Bob Crelin, 2007, and "Stars and Constellations" and "Comets, Asteroids, and Meteors," both by Raman K. Pinja, 2007.
- For more information on Nancy Holt: ArtCyclopedia.com
- For more information about: Skymound: the Green Museum <https://web.archive.org/web/20170709025950/http://greenmuseum.org>
- For films and videos on Nancy Holt: Electronic Arts Intermix, New York