

SEEING THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Pictured is *Manus*, a bronze and beeswax sculpture designed by Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz. The sculpture is 15 feet high and was created in 1994. Abakanowicz was born in Warsaw in 1930 and has created monumental sculptures in bronze, stone, wood, and iron. She is also known for revolutionizing the world of weaving by creating unique, poignant series of fiber-based sculptures.



Manus, © Magdalena Abakanowicz, Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, NY. Photo Credit: Art on File, Seattle.

VOCABULARY

Disintegrating—the act of falling apart, decaying, or separating into parts

Resembles—to be the same as or similar to something else

Texture—the surface “feel” of an object, i.e. bumpy, slippery, soft

Diorama—a 3-dimensional miniature scene with modeled figures

Perish—to cease existence

Synthetic—man-made material or substance

WASHINGTON STATE EALRS

2.1—The student applies a creative process in the arts.

3.1—The student uses the arts to express and present ideas and feelings.

4.2—The students demonstrates and analyzes the connections between the arts and other content areas.

VIEWING/DISCUSSING QUESTIONS

Abakanowicz noted that “the idea of Hand-like Tree sculpture explores the similarity between different creations of nature.” The artist added: “I see muscles and veins in the body of a tree, a spine, sometimes only visible while looking into a disintegrating or perished trunk. Its bark-wrinkled skin—each square inch differs from the other—the mystery of the organic world on our planet.”

Sometimes when people view works of art, they are reminded of other things that they have seen. When you look at *Manus*, does the sculpture remind you of something else? If so, what objects does the artwork remind you of?

Some people think that the sculpture resembles a large hand or a tree. Look at the pictures of trees below and discuss the following:

1. How is the sculpture similar to the pictures of trees? Consider:

- the materials in the two objects
- the colors, lines, and textures
- how the two objects were created. (Abakanowicz observed that: “Nature does not pretend to make art, we do.”)

2. How is the sculpture different from the images of trees on the next page?

STUDIO PRODUCTION

To prepare for the lesson, lead the following imaginary excursion: Close your eyes and think of a place that makes you feel healthy and happy. Is the place a warm beach, the coolness of the mountains, the hot desert, a humid tropical island, the icy Antarctic or somewhere else? Imagine the colors, the smells, the temperature, and all of the objects in the place. Are there interesting birds, insects, or fish that live in your place? What kind of weather do you feel? Is it cold, wet, or warm?

Now open your eyes and on the paper provided, sketch the scene that you imagined. Pay attention to the details that you saw in your make-believe journey.

STEPS

1. Discuss how places can make people feel happy, contented, and protected. Abakanowicz often uses trees in her art as the image of the forest reminds her of the times that she played in the woods as a child. She felt that using trees in her artwork renewed her and reinvigorated her artistic energy.
2. After sketching the scene the students imagined, have them choose one object such as a large rock, a cactus, or a palm tree. Share the imagined objects and environments they picture with the entire class. This object will be used as the subject of their art works.
3. After passing out a piece of tag board, students use modeling clay to sculpt their object.
4. Next, students cover the clay object with foil.
5. Paint sculptures with brown and grey tempera paint to resemble the texture and color of bronze.
6. Next, discuss how the setting for a sculpture affects how a work is viewed. Abakanowicz was very aware of the setting into which *Manus* was to be situated. She was interested in the content of the sculpture and debated between the creation of a sculpture in stone versus one created in bronze. The artist also considered how the image of a bronze tree would interact with biological trees, and how the site, such as additional buildings, would be altered in the future. For the second portion of the lesson, students will create a diorama in which the sculptures will be placed. To introduce the concept of setting as created in a diorama, the following questions can be considered:
 - Should the site be full of objects or more open?
 - What colors would best to enhance the sculpture?
 - What materials for the background objects would best suit the sculpture?
 - Should the background objects in the diorama be made of natural or synthetic materials?
7. After showing an example of a diorama with sculpture, students will be given a shoebox and modeling clay to construct the setting for the sculpture.
8. Share the dioramas with the class. Have students tell why they chose the object that they did and how they decided upon the setting.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Share accompanying Haiku poems with the class

Materials:

- Sketch paper
- Pencils
- Tag board
- Modeling Clay; foil
- Tempera paints and painting materials, i.e. brushes, water containers, smocks, newspaper, and palettes
- Shoe boxes or the open corners of large boxes
- Construction materials for diorama, i.e. colored paper, glue, sticks, natural materials.
- Sample of completed diorama

"I sculpted this palm tree because I feel wonderful in Hawaii. The trees and sun make me feel refreshed and healthy. I would go there every year if my Mom would take me." Comments of Artist



ART EXTENSIONS

1. Study the work of Andy Goldsworthy whose environmental art is similar to Abakanowicz in that the artist's philosophical approach is likewise respectful of nature and metaphorical in his use of materials. Compare and contrast the work of the two artists and create a work based on that of Goldsworthy.
2. Explore other sculptures in the Western Sculpture Collection that resemble natural objects. Compare *Untitled (Steam Work for Bellingham)* by Robert Morris to natural geysers; *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* by Nancy Holt to images of castles; and *Log Ramps* by Lloyd Hamrol to playground equipment that uses logs to create the structure.

ASSESSMENT/REFLECTION

Use the following reflection to evaluate the students' sculpture experience. When working with younger students, the reflection can be done as a group discussion.

- From this lesson, I learned that _____
- If I created a second sculpture from another object in nature, I would choose a _____ because _____
- I think that my sculpture was done well because _____
- I made the setting the way that I did because _____
- I learned that Magdalena Abakanowicz is interested in _____
- My Haiku poem represents my sculpture because _____

INTEGRATION

INTEGRATION #1: Haiku Poetry

Haiku poetry celebrates the wonder and beauty of nature. Therefore, nature is often the theme used by poets who specialize in this form of expression. Haiku poetry is usually 17 syllables divided into 3 lines. The first line is usually 5 syllables, the second line is 7 syllables, and the third line is 5 syllables.

Examples of contemporary haiku written by children that focus on nature include the following:

Butterflies are flying
Their orange wings touch the sun
They perch on fresh leaves

Frogs jumping around
Frogs hopping away from snakes
Frogs doing cool tricks

When studying the work of prominent Japanese poets who specialized in Haiku poetry, however, there is great variation of form. Examples of prominent Japanese poets and their works about nature include:

Buson Yosa (1716-1783)
Short summer night.
A dewdrop
On the back of a hairy caterpillar.

Shiki Masaoka (1867-1902)
How cool it is!
A small crab, in the rain,
Climbs on a pine.

Read several poems created by past and present poets in order to write a poem that represents the completed sculpture and sculptural environment. The poems can use either the standard numerical format, or one that was used by the past poets. Use the poems as readings to accompany the exhibition and discussion of the sculptures.

INTEGRATION #2: "The Giving Tree"

Read the "The Giving Tree," written by Shel Silverstein. Discuss how the artist Abakanowicz "gives" to the community through her artwork. Ask the following questions:

- Is *Manus* a sculpture that is pleasing to your eye?
- Do you think that the sculpture is beautiful?
- Is *Manus* a sculpture that you would like to have in your own backyard? In your schoolyard?
- If you could design a sculpture that would "give" pleasure and enjoyment to you classmates, what would it look like?

Sketch the sculpture that you would design. Construct the sculpture out of sculptural materials and share with your class.

INTEGRATION #3: Study of trees on WWU campus

Take a tour of campus, paying attention to the many types of trees that are planted. Consult the WWU Campus Tree Tour website treetour.wwu.edu for information on the types of trees located on campus.

ADVANCED STUDY

Create *life-size* sculptures similar to Abakanowicz's work, but with materials that are easily collected and manipulated, such as wood, string, rocks, and shrubbery. Students can work individually or collaboratively in order to create an outdoor sculpture. The work of Deborah Butterfield can serve as inspiration and technical exemplar for large, outdoor sculpture.

A second concept for the advance study of Abakanowicz's work is to research her series *Bronze Crowd*. Students can collaborate on large scale constructions created from cheese cloth, fiber and glue to respond to Abakanowicz's quote:

"A crowd of people or birds, insects or leaves, is a mysterious assemblage of variants...A riddle of nature's abhorrence of exact repetition or inability to produce it. Just as a human hand cannot repeat its own gesture. I invite this disturbing law, switching my own immobile herd into that rhythm."

RESOURCES

For more information, visit Magdalena Abakanowicz's website (abakanowicz.art.pl) and read the text: Magdalena Abakanowicz written by Barbara Rose, Harry Abrams, 1994