

Contemporary Craft Works

Exploring Form and Function

Overview: After completing this activity, students will be better able to incorporate artistic and functional design considerations into their artwork.

Age Group/Grade Level: 8-10 years, grades 3-5

Subject Area: Sociology, Visual Arts

Duration: approximately 50 min.

Background

Craft evolved from the practices of ancient workshops and medieval trade guilds. During the Industrial Revolution, the very industries associated with contemporary craft arose. Today, studio craft artists often give a nod to the historical function of an object, while also discarding utility as a concern.

The term “teapot” calls to mind a functional object with a spout, handle, and lid; however, some contemporary craft artists have created teapots that were never intended to brew tea. Instead, they’re meant to be enjoyed as a purely visual and tactile experience. When creating the teapot as a craft object, many artists are concerned with the physical construction that lends the piece functionality, while also incorporating inspirations from nature, memory, and sometimes other artistic traditions.

Discussion

Display Ragnar Naess’s *Teapot with Lid*. Encourage discussion by asking the following questions:

- What physical features did the artist need to incorporate to make the teapot useful?
- What other factors did the artist need to keep in mind to make sure the teapot is easy and safe to use?
- What features has the artist added that aren’t necessary for this to function as a teapot? Why might he have added them?

Display *Teapot with Lid* alongside Ralph Bacerra’s *Teapot*. Encourage discussion by asking the following questions:

- What are the similarities between this and the teapot we just looked at? What are the differences?
- Does it look like this teapot would be easy and safe to use? Why or why not?
- When might you use this teapot? When might you use the other teapot? Why?
- Bacerra’s *Teapot* was inspired by nature. Where has he incorporated natural elements?



Ragnar Naess, *Teapot with Lid*, 1974, stoneware with stain and glaze, 6 1/4 x 9 7/8 x 7 1/8 in., Museum purchase, 1975.127a-b.



Ralph Bacerra, *Teapot*, 1989, earthenware with lusters, overall: 16 1/4 x 12 3/8 x 9 5/8 in., Gift of the James Renwick Alliance and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1990.78a-c.

Activity I

Have students begin by sketching a basic, functional teapot of their own design. Challenge them to include features that ensure the teapot is functional. For example, which feature(s) would allow the handle to stay cool while the tea stays hot?

Next, have students add to or edit their sketch, incorporating elements from nature that inspire them. Again, challenge them to ensure the teapot is functional.

For a full-size image of Ragnar Naess’s *Teapot with Lid*, visit: http://americanart.si.edu/images/1975/1975.127A-B_1a.jpg

For a full-size image of Ralph Bacerra’s *Teapot*, visit: http://americanart.si.edu/images/1990/1990.78A-C_1a.jpg

Activity II

Share Joan Takayama-Ogawa's *Tropical Island Teapot* with students. Encourage discussion by asking the following questions:

- What features make this artwork recognizable as a teapot?
- Does it look like this teapot would be easy and safe to use? Why or why not?
- Takayama-Ogawa's *Tropical Island Teapot* was inspired by the artist's experience snorkeling in Hawaii. What do you see that reminds you of a tropical island?

Have students sketch a new teapot, one inspired by a place they have been. Challenge them to create a recognizable teapot, but this time, it doesn't need to be functional.

- Reflect: How is designing an artwork in the *shape* of a teapot different from designing an artwork that has to function as a teapot?



Joan Takayama-Ogawa, [Tropical Island Teapot](#), 1996, multiglazed earthenware and china paint, 6 x 12 x 18 in., Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak, 2000.33a-d.