

To See Is to Think

Housing History

Overview: After completing this activity, students will be familiar with a more complex visual vocabulary used to communicate both personal and national histories.

Age Group/Grade Level: 11-13 years, grades 6-8

Subject Area: History, Visual Arts, Math

Duration: approximately 60 min.

Background

When David Beck was commissioned to create *MVSEVM*, he decided to make an artwork that celebrated the Smithsonian's history, the Smithsonian American Art Museum's building, and museums' role in collecting objects from all over the world. He also wanted to honor artists whose work has inspired people to see the world in new ways. This was a big task, especially for an artist who works on a very small scale.

"I've always been interested in learning. . . . There is just so much to see and such a short time available to us."

—David Beck

Discussion

Share the video about David Beck's *MVSEVM* with students (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Loer27MWTY>). Open discussion by posing the following questions:

- David Beck says that he likes the idea of public and private spaces. How did he incorporate that idea into *MVSEVM*?
- The building that houses the Smithsonian American Art Museum today used to be the Patent Office Building. How did Beck incorporate the building's history into his artwork?
- Beck worked 18-hour days for almost three years in order to complete *MVSEVM*. Based on what you saw in the video, why might that be?

Explain that in order to create this work, Beck had to learn a lot about the history of museums, about the Smithsonian Institution, and about the Smithsonian American Art Museum's building and history. He incorporated many themes into his artwork, including:

1. Before public museums existed, people assembled specimens from the natural world in private collections called cabinets of curiosity.

For a full-size image of David Beck's *MVSEVM*, visit:
http://americanart.si.edu/images/2006/2006.8_1a.jpg



David Beck, *MVSEVM*, 2006, mixed-media construction, work: approximately 32 x 55 x 50 in., base: 37 x 59 x 55 in., Gift of Thelma and Melvin Lenkin, 2006.8. © 2006, David Beck

2. Sometimes a great accomplishment comes out of an idea later seen as silly. For example, many of the items Beck references in his work were gathered by the US Exploring Expedition of 1838-42. Although the expedition was a huge success, it was funded due to public interest in an idea that people today might find laughable: the Hollow Earth Theory.
3. Today, the former Patent Office Building is the home of two Smithsonian museums. It was originally built to be a "temple of invention" for the display of US patent models.

Have students consider everything that David Beck was trying to do with *MVSEVM*.

- How did Beck incorporate those themes into his work?
- Did his choice of media and scale help or hinder his accomplishment of these goals? What makes you say that?

Activity

Have students 1) identify a building in your city that interests them, 2) explain why they find it interesting and what role that building plays in their lives, and 3) research this building to discover its history, prior uses, and design.

Have students imagine how they might transform this building into a museum that displays its own history. Have them sketch a model of their creation, incorporating measures of scale.

Guide their sketching with these questions:

- How might you capture your personal connection to this building as well as the product of your research in a single artwork?
- What medium or scale would be most appropriate?