

Clay: Useful or Beautiful?

Tempe Center for the Arts

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Introduction

The unit was developed in conjunction with a juried exhibition of student work sponsored by the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) opening in January 2009.

Preview the NCECA Exhibition PowerPoint

Themes

- Theme in Life: We all like and dislike things for different reasons.
- Theme in Art: Ceramic art can be judged both for its usefulness and its visual interest.

Inquiry



What makes one artwork better than another?



How do artists use shapes to add visual interest?

Community Connection

Clay is a kind of soil found all around the world. For thousands of years peoples in the northern Sonoran Desert have made vessels, beads, sculpture and even buildings from local clay. This mini unit explores the work of contemporary clay artists, whose sculptural works have roots in ceramics' utilitarian traditions.

Activities

[Pre-Visit Classroom Activity: Useful, Beautiful or Both? \(pdf\)](#)

[TCA Activity: Exploring the NCECA Exhibition \(pdf\)](#)

[Post-Visit Classroom Activity: Useful and Beautiful Pencil Holder \(pdf\)](#)

[Exploring Clay \(pdf\)](#)

Resources

[Preview the NCECA Exhibition PowerPoint](#)

[Useful, Beautiful or Both? PowerPoint](#)

[Exploring the NCECA exhibition \(pdf\)](#)

[Coil Pencil Holder PowerPoint](#)

[Vocabulary \(pdf\)](#)

Web Resources

[Celebrating Excellence in Ceramics – Secondary ceramics unit](#)
[Pueblo Grande Museum](#)

Credits

Arizona State University Anthropology Museum; Jessica Joganic; Pueblo Grande Museum

Pre-visit Classroom Activity

Objectives

1. Students identify useful and visually interesting features in everyday objects.
2. Students identify useful and visually interesting features in artworks.

Preparation

Preview the Useful, Beautiful or Both presentation. Decide if you will supplement the PowerPoint by bringing in everyday objects of interest to your students, such as plain and decorative mugs, boxes, thermos bottles, pillow, hats, etc.

Activities

As you show the presentation, lead students in a discussion responding to the questions. Ask students to practice identifying and describing the uses and visual qualities of any everyday objects you may have brought to class. You might expand the class to discuss numerous objects in the classroom, such as student and teacher chairs and desks, tables, cabinets, book bags, etc. Ask students to analyze both how they are useful and how they may also be visually interesting.

TCA Activity

Objectives

1. Students compare artworks based on usefulness and visual interest.
2. Students identify uses from which some contemporary ceramics artworks get their basic shapes.

Preparation

Make arrangements for field trip to the TCA. Before your visit, discuss with assigned TCA docent, if possible. Provide the docent with a copy of “Exploring Clay Arts at the Tempe Center for the Arts” worksheet in advance of your trip and discuss the extent to which students might complete any or all of the worksheet at the center or whether any or all of the questions might be addressed during their tour.

Activities

Distribute “Exploring Clay Arts at the Tempe Center for the Arts” worksheets to students and ask them to answer as many questions as they can during their tour. If writing responses on the worksheet is not practical or possible during the tour, use the worksheet to guide students in focused observation as circumstances permit. For example, you might use questions on the worksheet when students assemble or travel to the TCA or when they assemble for or travel back to school.

Take notes on any new information presented by the docent as well as interesting questions, observations or responses made by your students during their tour. If the circumstances of the visit do not allow students to complete their worksheets, explain that later, in class, you will lead a discussion of discoveries they made about how ceramics can be beautiful and sometimes both beautiful and useful.

If a visit to the TCA is not possible, display the Selected Artworks from the “Preview the NCECA Exhibition” PowerPoint to get a sense of the great variety of clay artwork.

Optional Follow-Up Activity

Select two or three artworks from the presentation ranging from not at all functional to very or somewhat functional.

Ask students to compare specific artworks they examined up close at the NCECA exhibition at the TCA with the artworks you selected from the presentation. Ask students to compare features that make the artworks visually interesting. Also ask students to compare the relative usefulness of the artworks.

Post-visit Classroom Activity

Objectives

1. Students use coil building techniques.
2. Students use shapes to add visual interest.

Supplies

- Self-hardening clay or air-drying clay. A variety of craft stores such as Michaels, Joann's or your local art supply stores carry this type of clay. Model Magic by Crayola also works well.
- Newspaper or canvas to cover desks
- Popsicle sticks
- Small plastic cups
- *Optional-Tempera or Acrylic paint and Acrylic sealer

Activities for Kindergarten or Primary Students

Ask students to lay a piece of newspaper on their desks. Give each student an amount of clay the size of an orange. Ask students to take $\frac{1}{4}$ of the clay and flatten it with the palms of their hands on the newspaper. Use the rim of a small plastic cup to press into the flattened clay and cut out a circle. Students will use the circle as the bottom of their coil pencil holders.

Ask students to roll small amounts of clay between the palms of their hands and then on top of the newspaper into "snakes" or coils. Students should roll five or six coils that are thicker than a thick pencil. Ask students to curl one or two of the coils into "snails" or spiral shapes. Make the sides of the cylinder with two coils approximately three inches apart and fill in with coils and spiral shapes. Use ovals and circles to fill in any open spaces on the cylinder wall. Ask students to gently scrape the coils together with the Popsicle stick to connect the coils. Students may wonder where the coils, spirals, circles and ovals went. They will be saved on the other side.

Ask students to carefully flip over the connected coils and bend the side of the cylinder around the circle bottom they cut earlier. Use the Popsicle stick to gently push the coils into the bottom circle and then push together the ends to complete the cylinder. Let air dry for approximately 24 hours.

Post-visit Classroom Activity

Activities for Intermediate or Older Students

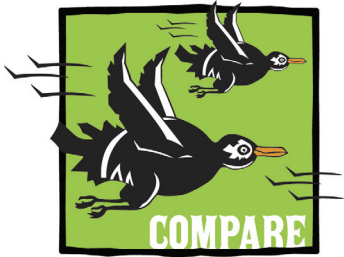
Ask students to lay a piece of newspaper on their desks. Give each student an amount of clay the size of an orange. Ask students to take $\frac{1}{4}$ of the clay and flatten it with the palms of their hands on the newspaper. Use the rim of a small plastic cup to press into the flattened clay and cut out a circle. Students will use the circle as the bottom of their coil pencil holders.

Ask students to roll small amounts of clay between the palms of their hands and then on top of the newspaper into “snakes” or coils. Students should roll 10 or 12 coils that are as thick as a pencil. Ask students to curl a few of the coils into “snails” or spiral shapes. Make the sides of the cylinder with two coils approximately five inches apart and fill in with coils and spiral shapes. Students are welcome to break their coils into smaller coils to add to the cylinder. Use ovals or circles to fill in any open spaces on the cylinder wall. Ask students to gently scrape the coils together with the Popsicle stick to connect the coils. Students may wonder where the coils, spirals, circles and ovals went. They will be saved on the other side. Ask students to carefully flip over the connected coils and bend the side of the cylinder around the circle bottom they cut earlier. Use the Popsicle stick to gently push the coils into the bottom circle and then push together the ends to complete the cylinder. Let air dry for approximately 24 hours.

Optional Extension

You may want your students to paint their coil pencil holders with tempera or acrylic paint. If you decide to paint the pencil holders, be sure to seal with an acrylic sealer to secure the paint to the self-hardening clay.

Part A: Why is it good?



Compare several artworks in the exhibition. Choose one that you believe is really good.

1. List the artist's name and the title of the work.

Artist:

Title:

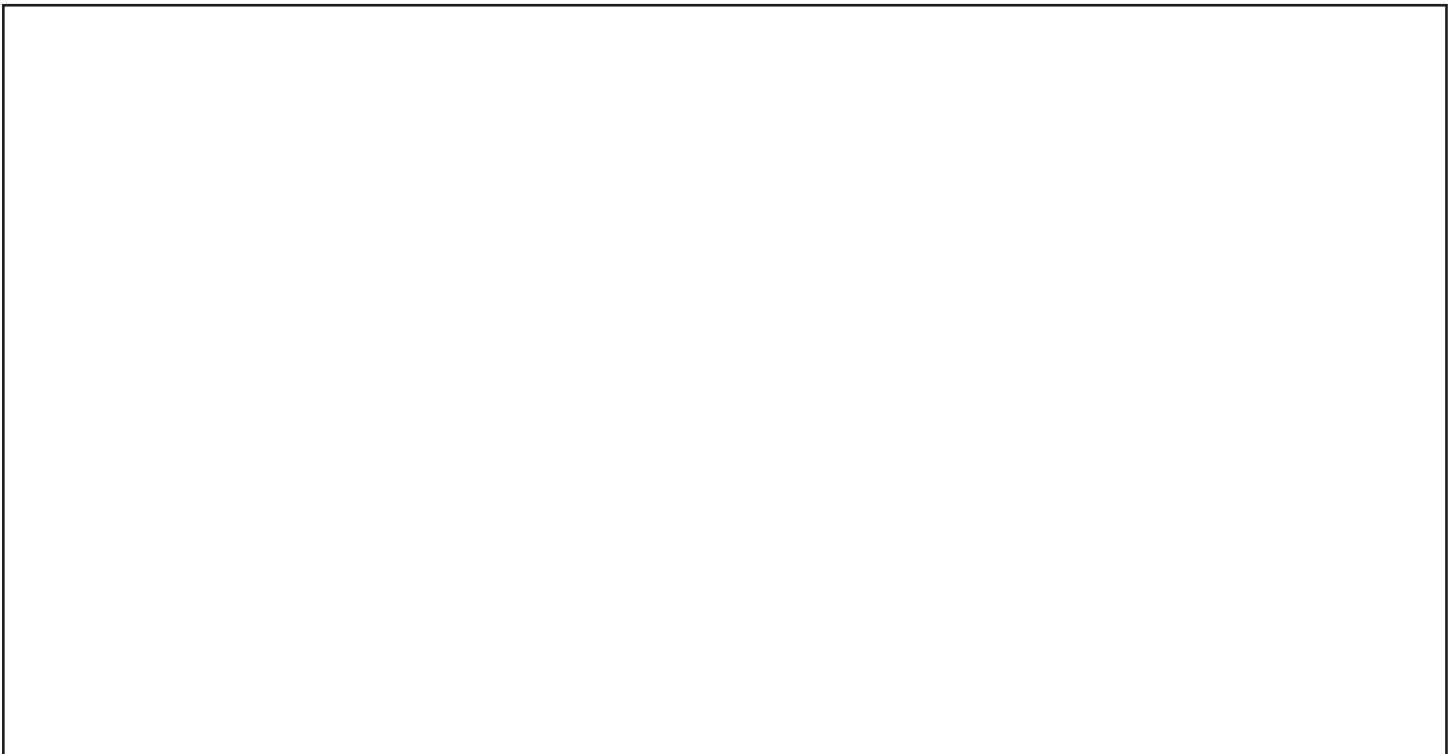
2. Circle the answer that best explains why you think the artwork is good? Then explain.

a. I think it is good because it is useful.

b. I think it is good because it is interesting to look at.

c. I think it is both visually interesting and useful.

3. Draw the artwork.



Part B: Useful Shape

Compare more artworks in the exhibition. Choose one artwork that you believe is based on the shape of something useful but is really not useful at all.

1. List the artist's name and the title of the work.

Artist:

Title:

2. What useful shape does it look like? (Example: a vase, teapot, plate, cup or bowl.)

3. Why is it NOT useful?

4. What shapes, colors, or textures make it interesting to see?

5. Draw the artwork.

