



Portrait of Place

Lesson Plan

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Fall 2015



samples from lesson plan activity



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Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered, Mark Dion



Mark Dion is interested in examining ways in which perceptions of dominant thought and public institutions, like museums, shape our understanding of history, science, and the natural world. His artistic practice focuses largely on using scientific and archeological methods of collecting, ordering, and exhibiting objects to create works of art that question the systems and institutions in which we learn. “The job of the artist,” Dion says, “is to go against the grain of dominant culture, to challenge perception and convention,” Dion’s work playfully combines unlikely combinations of objects and specimens into cabinets of curiosity, questioning the distinctions between “objective” scientific influences and “subjective” personal ones, and the authoritative role of the scientific voice in contemporary society.

In *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered*, 2008 Dion examines the history and culture of 18th century American botanist, naturalist and explorer, William Bartram. On his four-year journey beginning in 1773 through eight southern colonies, Bartram documented the flora and fauna and his interactions with Indigenous cultures through drawings and notes resulting in the book, *Travels*. Using Bartram’s travel journals, drawings, and maps, Mark Dion retraced the journey of William Bartram, specifically in Northern Florida, where Dion collected and examined hundreds of samples both natural and unnatural, including water and seed samples and small plastic

treasures; and documented the journey with detailed journals, drawings, painted postcards, maps, photographs, and videos. After the travels were complete, Dion installed and displayed the specimens and objects in cabinets built especially to house the collections documenting a contemporary artistic practice of a historic naturalist.

Mark Dion, American (b. 1961)
Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered 2008
Seeds, fungi, invertebrates, wood
Purchased with funds from the Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment for Modern and Contemporary Art
UMFA 1996.022.001

Portrait of Place

Annie Burbidge Ream

Objectives

Using *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered* as inspiration, students will:

1. Observe the landscape and identify materials at a particular site.
2. Investigate why those materials are found at that site.
3. Investigate *Mark Dion's Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered, 2008*.
4. Interpret what a portrait is and apply it to landscape.
5. Curate a selection of materials to display together.

Intended Audiences/Grade Levels K-12 (this lesson specifically targets 6-12 grade)

State Core Links (see State Core Links at the end of this lesson plan)

Materials

1. Image of *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered* by Mark Dion UMFA2011.8.1
2. collecting vials (4 per student is preferred)
3. wood mount / sculpture: 8' wood 2"x4" cut into 3 1/2" x 3 1/2" squares (one 8' makes approximately 25 sculptures), and drilled with 4 (3/4") holes drilled partially into wood (1 per student), or wooden box or some way to display vials
4. small plastic bags
5. pencil
6. sketchbook or paper

Duration 2-4 hours

Vocabulary/Key Terms

Portrait	a detailed description of something or someone
Landscape	an area of land that has a particular quality of appearance or activity
Curate	used with objects; to organize, pull together, and select for presentation
Specimen	a sample, substance, or material for examination or study
Sample	a part taken to illustrate the quality, style, or nature of the whole

Activity

Part One: Introduction

- Why do people collect things?
- What are some objects or items that you collect? Why do you collect them?
- People collect objects for many reasons. Some collect objects that remind them of a trip they went on, their favorite place, a memory, or to study and learn about something in the natural world, a specific time or place (ie. Rock collections, bugs, etc.).
- What do objects people collect tell us about them? What stories can we take from them? For example, if someone collects bugs, what might they be like?

An object or a collection of objects can tell interesting stories not only about the place or memory they came from, but also tell a story about the people themselves.

- What do the things you collect tell people about you?
- Who can describe what a portrait is?
- Objects can also act as a kind of portrait. They can illustrate and illuminate a time period, an important moment in history, a specific site, etc.
- Throughout this lesson we will explore how collections of objects and specimens can act as a portrait and discover how we can curate our own collections to tell interesting stories.

Part Two: Looking and Discussing

Discuss Mark Dion's *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered, 2007-2008*. Begin by asking questions like:

- How would you describe this work of art?
- What do you see? What is this work of art made out of?
- Does this work remind you of anything? Does it look like a work of art or something else?
- Why do you think Dion chose to make art in this way? What is he trying to tell us?

After looking closely at the work of art, discuss Mark Dion's artistic practice and ideas.

- Why do you think this work is titled what it is?
- Who is William Bartram? Why is he being reconsidered?
- Depending on class time, either have students collaborate to do research on William Bartram or give the class some context about Bartram. Ask them to write down or sketch some of the most interesting ideas they discovered.
- Next, compare and contrast Bartram and Dion. How was Dion's project similar and different from Bartram's? What do you think Dion found on his travels that Bartram didn't?

- What do the objects in Dion’s collection tell us about the places he traveled?
- Why do you think he chose to display them as he did?

Ask students, in their sketchbook, to pick a place (their room, hometown, favorite place, somewhere they visit often, etc.) and curate four objects that create a portrait of that place. Talk about not only picking objects that have stories connected to that site, but also objects that are visually interesting, have a diversity of shapes, materials, color and texture; objects that create visual interest and entice a viewer to learn more.

Ask students to sketch or write down a description of their objects and share their responses with the class.

Part Three: Exploration

Like Mark Dion, pick an outdoor site to go on a journey and explore. This site can be around the school, a neighborhood, a specific ecosystem you might be studying, a garden, any landscape, or around a work of Land art. *The UMFA uses this curriculum specifically to discover and explore the landscape around Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 1970 in Great Salt Lake.

Give each student four vials in a small plastic bag, a sketchbook, and a pencil. Tell them that they are going to create a “Portrait of Place” by gathering specimens, samples, and objects in the collection vials. Students will walk throughout the landscape (you can set both time and geographic parameters of where they can go, or simply let them explore on their own), make observations of what they see around them, and collect items that tell a story, or create a portrait, not only about their experiences in the landscape, but also about the site itself. Give the students some ideas of what they can collect: rock and water samples, plants, dirt, plastic objects, feathers, leaves, garbage, dead bugs, unknown objects, etc. Tell the students to think about selecting specimens and objects that look interesting together and create a portrait of the site. As they collect for their vials they should think about the color, texture, materials, and shapes inside each vial and how they interact with one another when displayed together.

Documenting students’ experiences is an important part of the process. Prompt the students to begin their exploration by sitting for a moment and looking at the landscape. In their sketchbook, ask students to draw a picture of the site or write a description or a poem about it. Have them document different natural and human-made landforms they see, geographic features, and any sounds they hear, aromas they smell, the way the air feels on their cheek. As the students begin collecting samples, ask them to note where they found the specimen, draw a sketch of it in the landscape, and any interesting details and/or field notes.

After students have filled their vials, give them the wood sculpture, or some other way of displaying the vials together. Have them display their samples. Have students talk about their experience and how their sculpture acts as a portrait of the place they explored. Ask students to describe their experience in three words.

Method(s) for Assessment

Assessments should be made based on participation both in classroom discussions and in exploring the landscape. The sketchbook activities and prompts will show a record of student learning, while the sculpture and vials can be assessed based on discussions around portraits and composition.

State Core Links

Visual Arts

Making: Standard 1 - Students will assemble and create works of art by experiencing a variety of art media and by learning the art elements and principles.

Perceiving: Standard 2 - Students will find meaning by analyzing, criticizing, and evaluating works of art.

Expressing: Standard 3 - Students will create meaning in art.

Contextualizing: Standard 4 - Students will find meaning in works of art through settings and other modes of learning.

Science (8th grade)

Standard 1: Students will understand the nature of changes in matter.

Objective 1 Describe the chemical and physical properties of various substances.

Objective 2 Observe and evaluate evidence of chemical and physical change.

Standard 3: Students will understand the processes of rock and fossil formation.

Objective 1 Compare rocks and minerals and describe how they are related.

Objective 2 Describe the nature of the changes that rocks undergo over long periods of time.

Reading for literacy in science (grades 6-12)

Standard 2 - Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a text; provide an accurate summary of the text distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Standard 3 - Follow precisely a multistep procedure when carrying out experiments, taking measurements, or performing technical tasks.

Social Studies – Utah Studies (secondary education)

Standard 1 - Students will understand the interaction between Utah's geography and its inhabitants.

Standard 5 - Students will understand the diverse nature of Utah's peoples and cultures.

Standard 6 - Students will understand the impact of major contemporary events that concern the land and people of Utah.

Additional Resources

- Fogarty, Lori ed. *The Marvelous Museum- Orphans, Curiosities and Treasures: A Mark Dion Project at the Oakland Museum of California*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010. Print.
- “Mark Dion.” Tanya Bonakdar Gallery. Web. Retrieved from <http://www.tanyabonakdar-gallery.com/artists/mark-dion/series>
- *Ecology: Art: 21*. Mark Dion. Interview and Videos on PBS – 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/mark-dion>
- Bartram, William. *Travels of William Bartram*. University of Georgia Press, 1958. Print.