

Convertible “Canned” Sculpture

A lesson in composition influenced by the dimensional works of Frank Stella

One of the most influential abstract painters of the 20th century, Frank Stella (born 1936) gained recognition with his minimalist geometric and striped paintings. For the first decades of his art career, Stella strove to make works that were completely non-representational, focusing only on line, shape, and color on a flat plane.

As his style developed, it slowly became more sculptural and Stella began to create paintings that jutted out of the wall and into the viewer's space. He used assembled parts of painted metals, wood, wire and other materials, often in the shape of large French curves, to make what he considered sculptures that consisted of paintings. Eventually, he transitioned from painting to free-standing sculpture.

Composition — the way the elements of a piece of art are arranged and relate to each other — can be difficult to grasp as students move from 2-D to 3-D. This lesson plan presents an easy, forgiving way to see and define unity, balance, movement, and emphasis. The sculpture is created by first painting the components, then assembling them with magnets on a base (a metal can) so the sculpture can be taken apart and rearranged over and over again. By “converting” their sculptures, students can actually see how the composition is affected — what works and what doesn't.

GRADES 3-12 Note: instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Prepare an introduction for students to Frank Stella, including images from his works in the 1980s and 1990s.
2. Collect metal cans to recycle into sculpture “hubs” or bases. In order for the magnets to stick, use steel or ferrous metal cans (pet food, soup, and vegetables are usually in steel cans). Soda cans will not work. Also, the wider the can's opening, the better access the student will have when making the sculpture. Remove any sharp edges prior to use.
3. Cut matboard into 8" x 10" pieces, need one per student.

Process

1. With a pencil, trace the outline of French curves, or design free-form shapes on a sheet of tag board.
2. Fill the shapes with paint and patterns. Allow the paint to dry.
3. Cut out the shapes, turn them over and paint the back side. The front and back of the shapes do not need to match.
4. Using a glue gun, glue the can to the center of a piece of matboard or foamboard.



Materials

Steel or ferrous metal cans

[Pacon® Storybook 2-Ply Tag Board](#), White, 18" x 24", package of 100 sheets (13111-1009); need one sheet per student

[C-Thru® French Curves](#), set of 8 (55452-1009); share three sets across class

[Westcott® Student Scissors with Microban® Protection](#), 6" soft handle (57607-1006); need one per student

[Surebonder® Cool Shot® Super Low Temperature Mini Glue Gun](#) (23631-1000); share across class

[Blick® Essentials Tempera](#), pints, assorted colors (00057-); share 5-6 across class

[Royal Langnickel® Scholastic Choice Brushes](#), natural hair combo, set of 72 (06074-5072); share one across set class

[ProMAG® Magnetic Buttons](#), 50-pack, 1/2" Dia (61413-1006); share 3-4 packages across class

[Crescent® Decorative Matboard](#), Raven Black, size 20" x 32" (13007-2453); share one sheet among eight students



Process, continued

- When the shapes are dry, they become sculpture components. Consider which end of the component will likely attach to the base, and glue a magnet or two (depending on the width) to the bottom of the tag board shape.
- Assemble the sculpture, attaching shapes to the outside and inside of the can. The sculpture may be designed horizontally or vertically, to stand or to hang on the wall. Shapes may be curved, curled, or bent to enhance movement. Check the composition for balance and unity.
- Disassemble and develop a new composition. Assess the change and describe what has been affected.



Step 1: Trace the outline of French curves or create free-form shapes on tag board, then paint with tempera on both sides.



Step 2: Glue a metal can to the matboard and the magnets to the bottoms of the sculpture components.



Step 3: Assemble the sculpture, attaching shapes to the inside and outside of the can. Arrange and rearrange to discover the effects of composition.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #2 — Using knowledge of structures and functions

K-4 • Students describe how different expressive features and organizational principles cause different responses

5-8 • Students employ organizational structures and analyze what makes them effective or not effective in the communication of ideas

9-12 • Students evaluate the effectiveness of artworks in terms of organizational structures and functions

Content Standard #5 — Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

K-4 • Students understand there are different responses to specific artworks

5-8 • Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry

9-12 • Students reflect analytically on various interpretations as a means for understanding and evaluating works of visual art