

Figures in Motion

Inspired by the movement-filled painting and sculpture of Edgar Degas

Throughout his career as an artist, Edgar Degas concentrated his efforts on expressing the movement of the human figure. He is considered one of the founders of Impressionism, but he preferred to call himself a realist. He rarely painted beyond his favorite subjects — ballet dancers, women bathing, cabaret performers, and horses — in order to achieve his goals of perfection in his art. Degas said, “They call me a painter of dancers without understanding that for me the dancer has been the pretext for painting beautiful fabrics and rendering movement.”

Well known for his paintings, etchings, and pastels, Degas kept most of his sculpture tucked privately away from the public eye. When he showed his sculpture “The Little 14-Year Old Dancer” at an exhibit in Paris in 1880, it received such criticism that it may have influenced his decision to not place more of his sculptures on public display. After the artist’s death in 1917, approximately 150 wax sculptures of figures were discovered in his studio. In order to keep them from deteriorating, 75 of them were cast in bronze editions.

As a means of studying the proportions and describing the movement of the human figure, this lesson allows students the opportunity to create sculpture with a flat, paper doll-type cardboard form that can be manipulated when wet and is sturdy when dry. The figure is then painted or decorated as a mixed media collage.

GRADES 5-12 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Cut tape into 3" sections, or cut 3 ft sections and have students cut smaller pieces.
2. Using a paper trimmer, cut 14-ply chipboard into minimum 11" x 14" or larger pieces and 30-ply chipboard into 4" x 4-1/2" pieces to make bases for the figures to stand on. Larger-scale figures will require more chipboard and larger bases.



Materials (required)

All-Purpose Chipboard, 14-ply, 22" x 28" (13115-2222); share one sheet among four students

All-Purpose Chipboard, 30-ply, 22" x 28" (13115-2232); share one sheet among 24 students

Kraft Paper Tape, 2" x 600 ft roll (24118-1002); share one roll across class

Jazz Gloss Tempera, 16 oz (00014-); share assorted colors across class

Blickrylic Gesso, quart (00711-1017); share across class

Maped Ultimate Scissors (58470-1005); need one pair per student

Oval Poly Sponge 5" x 3" x 2" (32902-1000); share among two or three students

Optional Materials

Roylco Poseable People Stencil, 13-1/2" (55765-1350)

Blick Hardwood Manikin, 12" (21601-1112)

Craft Sticks, bag of 150 (60401-1500)

Delta Sobo Craft and Fabric Glue, 2 oz (23820-1002)



Step 1: Draw a figure outline on chipboard and cut out.



Step 2: Position the feet on the base and begin wrapping with strips of packing tape.



Step 3: Continue wrapping until the figure is covered.

Preparation, continued

3. Preceding this project, arrange for students to view and sketch other students as they dance, run, jump, and play. Create figure sketches.

Process

1. Draw a paper doll-style outline of a figure on an 11" x 14" piece of chipboard. For accurate proportions, use an art manikin or stencil. Simulate a pose on the flat surface. Cut the figure out with heavy scissors.
2. Begin by positioning the feet on the chipboard base. Use small strips of packing tape, moistened with a sponge, to cover and attach the feet and lower legs to the base. Hints:

- It is helpful to cut the tape section diagonally into two triangles to wrap around tight curves and angles.

- Attach the pieces as tightly as possible, cutting small slits with scissors to encourage a tight wrap.

- Prop up the upper portion of the figure with jars or cans until the legs dry and the tape stiffens.

- If the figure will be posed on one foot, or if extra stability is needed, tape a craft stick or portion of a craft stick onto the ankle area to provide strength.

- The dampened chipboard can be "kneaded" — worked by rolling or bending — to achieve many angles and positions. If it accidentally tears, simply repair it with packing tape. As the chipboard is moistened, it will become more flexible, but also more fragile.

4. If possible, allow the legs to dry until moving on to the rest of the sculpture. Continue to wrap the rest of the body until it is covered in at least two layers of tape. Make sure the figure is posed in the exact position desired before setting it aside to dry because the pose cannot be adjusted once the tape is fully set.
5. Paint and collage the figure. Brush white paint or gesso over the tape first to provide a smoother surface and make the colors more vibrant. Jazz Tempera is recommended because it provides a brilliant, glossy finish. Acrylic paint and markers can also provide color, and collage materials can be attached with glue.

Options

- For extra support and balance, hot-glue the base of the sculpture to a heavy material, such as a block of wood, a panel, or tile.



Step 4: When dry, paint and collage as desired.

National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1:

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

— Achieved through preliminary sketches and figure studies.

Anchor Standard 2:

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

— Achieved through planning the concept of the figure as a sculpture and choosing an approach for the pose.

Anchor Standard 3:

Refine and complete artistic work.

— Achieved through building the sculpture as described in the process and making choices for materials.

Presenting

Anchor Standard 4:

Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

— Achieved through comparing Degas' figure studies in wax and the bronze castings that were made to preserve them after his death.

Anchor Standard 5:

Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

— Achieved through preparing the sculpture to stand on display and formulating narratives for the viewer.

Anchor Standard 6:

Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

— Achieved through contrasting the social, cultural, and political experiences Degas faced with his "Little Dancer" sculpture with student's experiences in creating and displaying their sculptures.

Responding

Anchor Standard 7:

Perceive and analyze artistic work.

— Achieved by responding to the expression of the figure sculptures and their influences.

Anchor Standard 8:

Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

— Achieved through exploration of the artist's choices of structure, subject matter, media choices, and mood conveyed.

Anchor Standard 9:

Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

— Achieved through established classroom criteria.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10:

Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

— Achieved by creating a figure sculpture that reflects a personal interest or observation.

Anchor Standard 11:

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

— Achieved by comparison of Degas' surroundings and influences with contemporary environments.



National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #1 — Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.

5-8 Students select media, techniques, and processes; analyze what makes them effective or not effective in communicating ideas; and reflect upon the effectiveness of their choices.

9-12 Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use.

Content Standard #3 — Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.

5-8 Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks.

9-12 Students differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art.