FOUND-OBJECT FABLES:
LIVED EXPERIENCES & TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES

Inspired by Scott Rolfe's assemblage works in the exhibition *I See That Fable Differently: Selections from Creighton University’s Carlson Fable Collection* on view January 27–April 29, 2018 at Joslyn Art Museum

Created by Josh Brown, joshbartletband@gmail.com

Grade Level 4th – 12th grades

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will share traditional or personal narratives through found-object assemblage inside a shadow box. Teachers and students will collect everyday bits and bobs and assemble them into scenes from traditional stories (they could be derived from classical, religious, or folk narratives) or scenes from their own lives in which a first-hand experience resulted in the acquisition of a deeper truth or wisdom.


ANTICIPATORY SET

Everyday of our lives we encounter new ideas, problems, and solutions. Storytelling is the act of sharing these experiences and turning individual knowledge into group wisdom. Scott Rolfe translates traditional fables in three dimensions by taking household objects and creating whimsical tableaux designed to remind the viewer of dramatic moments from these shared stories. Can you think of a key moment in your life where you turned an experience (either positive or negative) into expertise? Is there a story with a lesson you know that you would like to share with your classmates? We will cook these experiences and stories into shareable scenes with paint, wire, and common objects.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will create a shadow box assemblage.
- Students will use hot glue and wire to create a tableau.
- Students will use bushes of various sizes to apply paint to a 3D surface.
- Students will distill complex narratives into visual art.

RESOURCES:

- Website - The Carlson Fable Collection at Creighton University
- Sources of traditional narrative such as folk tales, Aesop’s fables (Library of Congress has a comprehensive, illustrated collection online), religious texts and classical literature.
- Personal and family narratives (this could be a story your grandparent or guardian shared with you)

VOCABULARY:

- Fable
- Narrative
- Shadow box
- Hardware
- Assemblage
- Tableau
- Tone, tint, and shade
MATERIALS:

- **Shadow boxes**: These could be something as simple as a shoe box or take-out boxes. Really any boxey sort of thing in which things can be arranged.
  - For Thursdays for Teachers workshop, I created 12” x 12” shadow boxes from 4’ x 8’ sheets of hardboard, 1” x 2” pine boards or slats and wood glue.
  - More advanced students could assemble these themselves if given enough time to do so.
  - All of the power tool work was done by helpful attendants at a Lowe’s hardware store. You can almost always find an employee with a great deal of experience with building projects that will help you with the particulars of construction.
  - Big box hardware stores generally guarantee their cuts to within ¼”, so if you prepare your shadow boxes from scratch, plan on including wood filler in your supply list to fill in the cracks.

- **Paint**: Acrylic or tempera paint works best for this project because it dries fast. I recommend including the primary colors, white and black paint, plus either metallic paint or mica flakes for glittering details.

- **Hobby wire**

- **Scissors**

- **Paper towels**

- **Hot glue and glue guns**

- **A variety of salvaged hardware.**
  - This could include any of huge variety of metal and plastic bits.
  - In my melange, I included hinges, door stops, nuts, bolts, screws, push pins, small pipes, finishing nails, washers, cutlery, fabric scraps, tissue paper, and a number of things of which I could not identify.
  - Anything small and interesting will do. Things to avoid include any bits which are rusty or greasy as they do not stick to hot glue and are not safe to handle.
  - I found my hardware at salvage shops, but students might find useful materials in their junk drawers and garages or at yard sales and thrift shops.

- **Needle nose pliers with wire cutters**

- **Pencils and scratch paper for preparatory doodling**

- **Optional**: eye-hooks and hanging wire so artworks can be wall mounted
LESSON OUTLINE

Shadow box:

- My recipe for shadow boxes starts with one piece of 12” x 12” hardboard and four ¾” x 2” pine boards cut to 11 ¼”.
- You or your students may choose to assemble them yourselves with wood glue. Lay a fine bead of glue on the bottom of the pine boards and firmly press them into the hardboard one at a time, justifying the bottom corner of the pine board in the bottom right corner of the hardboard.
- Repeat this process until all of the pine boards are in place.
- Wood glue will dry in about ten minutes.

- I like to install eye hooks and picture wire on the back of the shadow boxes, so students can hang them on a wall.
- To do this, use an auger or drill to create a guide hole 2” down and ½” in from the side, ensuring that the eye hook will penetrate both the hardboard and the pine 1” x 2”s.
- Once this has been done, it is possible to screw the eye hooks in by hand.
- Then, cut a length of picture wire about 13” long and run the wire through the eye hooks.
- The wire may then be twisted around the eye hooks to ensure secure hanging.

First coat of paint and discussion:

1. Instruct students to choose a primary color and coat the interior of the hardboard and the exposed portions of the pine board with a thin layer of paint using a wide brush. Before this first coat of paint dries, instruct students to apply metallic swirls of paint or mica flakes using a different brush.

2. Allow ten minutes for the acrylic paint to dry. During this waiting period, lead your students in a brief discussion of personal and traditional narratives giving an example of a time in your life where a lived experience led to a learning experience. Allow the students a few minutes to think about and discuss the story they want to share with their work of art.

Selecting and assembling hardware:

1. Make sure your collection of found objects is laid out in an easy to view array. I prefer to group like types of small things together in cups and scatter the larger, more charismatic objects on a table or cart.

2. Lead students to use their imaginations as they pursue the hardware. Give a few examples of possible applications for different pieces of scrap. For example: "This bolt could be a torso or leg. Perhaps this pipe could be the trunk of a tree. Maybe this piece of fabric or lace could be a dress or a shirt. For younger students, I give a brief demonstration of how to twist hobby wire into a form approximating a figure."
3. After making sure the first layer of paint is dry, give a brief overview of hot glue gun safety. Hot glue typically dries quickly, but to get heavy bits of metal to stay put may require a heap of glue and may take longer than usual to solidify or cure.

4. Allow students to begin assembling their scene with hot glue and wire, helping them with creative combinations as you go. Younger students may need help cutting pieces of wire.

Second coat of paint:

1. Once the students have set their pieces with glue and wire, instruct them to make sure their glue has set.

2. Next they may apply a second layer of paint that covers the hardware assemblages using a small brush.

EXTENSIONS

- Get creative with the found objects collected for this project. Students may want to use old toys, stray legos, or wooden blocks in their assemblage. As a child, I had many “treasure” caches that I didn’t know what to do with as I entered adolescence. These shadow boxes can be a tribute to past time and a suitable resting place for familiar objects that no longer have the quasi-magical status they once did.

- This project can be a good jumping off point to discuss recycling. Many objects we use in contemporary life are created with a short-term purpose, but persist for many human generations. Make connections between objects unearthed by archaeologists and encourage students to imagine what will happen to items in one year, ten years, one hundred years, and one thousand years.

CONTENT STANDARDS

NEBRASKA CONTENT AREA STANDARDS
IOWA CORE STANDARDS