

Assemblage Art: Transforming Trash into Treasure

By Marie Max

For students grade levels 9-12

"When you put together things that other people have thrown out, you're really bringing them to life – a spiritual life that surpasses the life for which they were originally created."

Louise Nevelson



Louise Nevelson, *Royal Tide I*, 1960, painted wood, 86 x 40 x 8 inches. Collection of Peter and Beverly Lipman. © Estate of Louise Nevelson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Sheldan C. Collins.

the function of discarded materials. Assemblage art is a term for using random or discarded objects to create sculptures that are socially, culturally, and personally indicative of one's environment. Students have the freedom to create abstractly by means of incorporating pre-existing and familiar objects that have some sort of previous significance. In a three-dimensional format, random items such as broken toys, used boxes, or old containers can be used to express a variety of statements that instill a curiosity for investigating an explanation. Due to its intent and obscurity, assemblage artists such as Louise Nevelson, Isaiah Zagar, and Phoebe Washburn create works that seem to speak for itself as a narrative piece.

History of Assemblage Art

Artisans have been using relics such as broken toys, pieces of jewelry, hardware, etc. to make personal art pieces or statements for many years. We are familiar with 'combine art' of the Abstract Expressionists art movement during the 1950s. During this time-period, artists such as Louise Nevelson collectively assembled discarded items and painted them in monochromatic colors that, in effect, unified the collaged items. She was compelled to assemble sculptures with a variety of objects that were considered trash. Nevelson titled some of these sculptures as self-portraits by assembling objects that represented her life

Assemblage Art in the Classroom

Art teachers with limited budgets can produce a lesson plan that is engaging and filled with learning strategies and creativity, through re-inventing

or interests. *'Self-Portrait: Silent Music IV'*, which was sculpted in 1964, is constructed from formed wood pieces and painted black.



Louise Nevelson, *Self-Portrait: Silent Music IV*, 1964, wood painted black, 90 x 65 ½ x 18 in. (229 x 166.5 x 46 cm). Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan. © Estate of Louise Nevelson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This style has, since that time, been powerful and popular, but limited in its application in the art room until the more recent years. Nevelson did not focus on gender and culture but rather on recycling objects into art pieces of interest. It is believed that, perhaps, this may be a reason for the lack of interest in this style of assemblage art between the 1980s and 1990s (Smyth, 2009).

In the 1980s, Philadelphia artist Isaiah Zagar, began his noted career as a muralist



Isaiah Zagar, *Sanctuary Sculpture*. Philadelphia Magic Gardens

by assembling mosaic structures. By maintaining the idea of recycling discarded material, he creatively applied broken pieces

of ceramics, mirrors, and other items to the facades of run-down buildings in his neighborhood. These facades became perceived as works of art and were aesthetically appreciated and revered by the local community.



The PMG workshop is a community-based organization that educates students and teachers on cultural and historical influences in the mosaic assemblage art form and the creation of "green" spaces through the reuse of materials.

He heads the Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (PMG), a mosaic sculpture garden created with recycled materials. It is a now preserved section in the South Street region of the city. PMG has a civic outreach program involving a community-oriented revitalization, and art education programs (Zagar, 2009).

Assemblage art is also constructed with other forms of recycled materials, such as cardboard, junk mail, and newspapers.



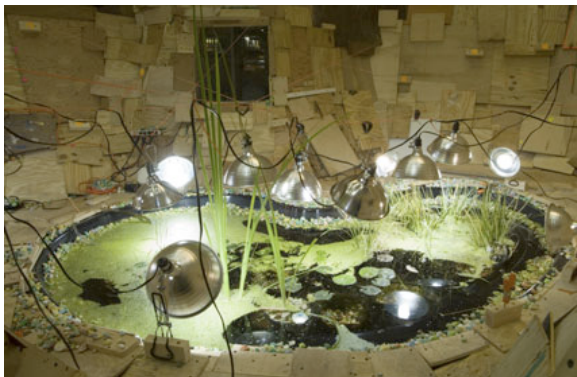
Phoebe Washburn, *"Manning Stay Station"* 2005,

Installation view, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY. Image courtesy of Zach Feuer Gallery



Phoebe Washburn, *It Makes for My Billionaire Status*, 2005 (installation view, Kantor/Feuer Gallery, Los Angeles, 2005).

Phoebe Washburn is a contemporary artist who is best known for creating architectural ecosystems from recyclable trash (Greben, 2009). She recycles discarded cardboard, plastic, wood, and more. Assembled and displayed in large areas, Washburn's enormous installations usually intertwine plant life with the mass amounts of discarded items to create a complex environmental eco-system.



Ramp Project: Phoebe Washburn
Vacational Trappings and Wildlife Worries
April 20 - August 5, 2007. ICA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania

Her preference is to collect materials from dumpsters, loading docks, and as well as organic life (Greben, 2009). Washburn's enormous structures are usually temporary due to the fact that she recycles her old installations into new ones. According to Greben (2009), she is inspired to create an environment that has "consumed its by-products" (p. 102). Washburn manipulates the existence of products that have had a previous function and re-invents their use so they tell their own story.

Goals

Students will create narrative sculptures from discarded materials.

Essential Questions

- How can the term 'trash' be reinvented to become 'treasure' when it is recycled into an art piece?
- Can assemblage art successfully be an aesthetic narrative of society, personality, or culture?
- How?

Studio Application

Students are to express their ideas by creating an art piece by means of re-designing the use of the shapes and re-inventing them collectively into one independent structure. They will explore the positive effects of utilizing discarded objects that reflect their personality, culture, or environment. Ask them to think about what is important to them and what they treasure. Help them to consider the objects' previous function, pre-existing characteristics, and possible spatial interplay. Discuss ways to transform objects that were discarded into a new function as with multiple topics.

Transforming Trash in to Treasure

Objectives

Students will:

- a. Select recycled items to produce a theme or narration.

- b. Design a layout plan of the sculpture and support.
- c. Construct and assemble sculptures.
- d. Create a narrative assemblage sculpture.

Procedure

1. Gather discarded objects, such as old articles of clothing, broken toys, and utensils.
2. Discuss their origin and the intention or function: What might they have been used for? What were the objects symbolic of?
3. Help students design a layout and base support. Encourage them to think about layers, horizontal and vertical, or relief surfaces, such as a mosaic or bas-relief.
4. Assemble selected objects together with glue, found wire (plastic or metal, such as twist-ties), etc. Or, if available, non-bake clay and plaster-of-Paris provide for a sturdy and secure attachment process.
5. Attach sculpture to base.

Evaluation

- 1) Students and teacher will engage in a group critique of completed assemblage sculptures, discussing the elements of art and design and aesthetic intent.
- 2) The students will fill out a self-evaluation sheet asking the following questions:
 - What was the benefit of using discarded and recycled materials?

- How did the objects change or transform from their pre-existing function into their new one?
- How do the individual objects function together as a united whole in their reinvention?
- What Art Elements were incorporated into the art pieces?
- Were the objects successfully transformed from 'trash' into 'treasure'?
- How?

Suggested Materials and Resources:

- ✓ Grocery stores: boxes, unused styro-foam food packing trays
- ✓ Beverage outlets: crates, boxes
- ✓ Hardware stores: miscellaneous hardware scraps
- ✓ Framing centers: mat board end cuts, old frames
- ✓ Home improvement centers: discarded paint cans, old wallpaper books, wood scraps
- ✓ Craft, mirror, and plexi-glass suppliers and warehouses: broken, scratched, or miscellaneous pieces

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