

Adopt an Artwork 2025 -2026

Functional Art: What Looks Impossible & What Holds Value

Tea Table, "Big" Tom Burton and Spice Chest attributed to Joel Bailey

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Appoquinimink School District

6th-8th

Visual Art

OVERVIEW

Students will explore how everyday functional objects reveal history, culture, personal values, and ingenuity by examining two works from the Bigg's Art Museum: the Tea Table, an object that looks impossible as a functioning table based on its design and Spice Chest, a highly crafted storage piece that has hidden compartments that were used for valuable spices.

Through guided inquiry and discussion, students will analyze the form, function, material choices and cultural meaning. Students then choose between two creative pathways:

Path A - Create a small-scale functional object that looks impossible but actually works inspired by the engineering of "Big" Tom Burton's Tea Table.

Path B - Create a personalized box with a hidden purpose inspired by Joel Bailey's Spice Chest.

TIME REQUIRED

7 to 8 43 minute class periods

STANDARDS FOR INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

- Standard 1: VA:Cr1.1.6–8 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas by analyzing how artists make decisions with materials and design.
- Standard 2: VA:Re7.2.6–8 Analyze how an artwork's form, function, and context influence meaning.
- Standard 3: VA:Cr2.1.6–8 Demonstrate craftsmanship and problem-solving in creating works that meet a functional or conceptual goal.

STUDENT "I CAN STATEMENTS"

- I can analyze how artists use materials and design to create objects with meaning and purpose.
- I can create a functional object that expresses an idea through structure, illusion, or hidden meaning.
- I can explain how my artistic choices connect to historical examples and to my own values or experiences.

MATERIALS

- Cardboard sheets
- Chipboard or recycled boxes
- Aluminum foil for armatures
- Hot glue guns/glue sticks
- Wood sticks, dowels, or natural sticks
- Craft knives/scissors
- Rulers, cutting mats
- Tempera or acrylic paint
- Brushes & sponges
- Sharpies, colored pencils
- Rubber bands/string
- Small containers or objects for "functional testing"
- Optional: magnets for secret-compartment closures

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Lesson 1. Warm Up - Object Analysis

- Students view images and details of the Tea Table and Spice Chest.
- Students draw a sketch of one of the two objects and write 1 thing they notice and 1 thing they wonder.
- What looks surprising or impossible?
- What do the design choices tell you about the artist/maker?
- What might have been stored, valued, protected, held?

Lesson 2. Guided Discussion and Mini-Lesson

- Teacher leads class to identify organic engineering, material repurposing and problem-solving, cultural history of the spice trade and its value, hidden compartments and symbolism, function versus appearances.

Lesson 3. Choose a Pathway

- Pathway A - the impossible but functional object
 - Objective: Create a functional sculpture inspired by the tea table that looks visually unstable but actually works.

- Sketch 3 design ideas for a table, stool or shelf that looks unbalanced or impossible.
- Build a small model using cardboard and other provided items.
- Reinforce the joints to ensure the piece works.
- Test functionality by placing an object like a cup on it.
- Paint or decorate.
- Pathway B - Hidden Compartment Box
 - Objective: Create a personal box inspired by the Spice Chest that has one or more hidden compartments.
 - Brainstorm objects considered valuable.
 - Sketch design of outer box and hidden area.
 - Build a small model using cardboard and other provided items.
 - Add decorative panels, initials, symbols and/or dates.
 - Hide a meaningful note or mini-object inside of the compartment.

Lesson 4. Reflections & Exit Tickets

- Students create a museum-style label.
 - Title of work
 - What inspired the design
 - How the object expresses meaning, value, or illusion
 - Which Biggs artwork they connected with and why

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

- Formative:
 - Sketches
 - Design plans
 - Participation in warm-ups
 - Class discussion
 - In-progress checks for stability or hidden compartment
- Summative
 - Final project
 - Written artist label explaining meaning and connections
 - Craftsmanship (design, stability, construction)

VOCABULARY

- Form: The visible shape and structure of an object.
- Function: The purpose an object serves.
- Material Culture: Objects that reflect the daily life, history, or values of a society.
- Organic Form: Shapes inspired by nature, often irregular or root-like.
- Illusion: Something designed to look different from how it actually works.
- Compartment: A divided or hidden section for storing objects.
- Craftsmanship: Skill and attention to detail in making something.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

- Biggs Museum of American Art. Adopt-An-Artwork Program Materials, 2025–2026.
- Provided booklet pages for Tea Table and Spice Chest.

