TEACHING GUIDE – CURRICULUM for HARRY BERTOIA ART

This curriculum is intended as an outline for teachers and museum educators to teach students about the life and art of Harry Bertoia (ber-TOY-a) in conjunction with a Bertoia exhibition. If there is no exhibition near you, contact us at the HarryBertoia foundation (http://harrybertoia.org/) for a possible loan of limited edition sculpture replicas.

This guide is designed to be a one-day workshop, but can be modified to whatever suits your schedule and needs. As the teacher who knows her students, it is up to you to choose the activities that will work for and draw out your pupils. It contains suggested areas of discussion, questions to raise and points to touch upon. The topics and questions are for all levels of instruction and can be adjusted as you see fit. It should not be viewed as a script, but rather a starting point for spontaneity that stimulates learning, directed partly by the students' questions and discoveries.

Pre-Viewing Discussion

Discuss Bertoia's life (see website biography for further details) to provide context for Bertoia's work, the Midcentury era, and sculpture. Highlight connections with your students' current course of study, past or current exhibitions, architectural commissions nearby, or places similar to where Bertoia lived and worked.

Discussion Points:

- Young Arieto ("Little Harry" in Italian) was born March 10, 1915 in San Lorenzo, Friuli, Italy. His young life in northern Italy consisted of playing, doing chores and harvesting grapes. Whenever he could, he would draw. He went up to grade 5 and for four months, took art classes with a local artist.
- When Harry was 15 years old, he emigrated to Detroit, Michigan to live with his older brother, Oreste. Across the Atlantic in a new environment, Harry had to learn many new things such as – how to speak English, how to catch a bus, and what is a hamburger? He also took more art classes.
- Through his talent and hard work, he earned a scholarship to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, MI (http://www.cranbrook.edu/). At Cranbrook, Harry flourished in a community of artists and designers. It was here that he also met his future wife, Brigitta Valentiner.
- Brigitta's father, Wilhelm (William) Valentiner, was the Director at the Detroit Institute of Arts (http://www.dia.org/), the large important museum in Detroit. Valentiner introduced Impressionist and Modern artists to Michigan, and also to Harry. Artists who became famous later, such as Paul Klee, Auguste Renoir, Diego Rivera, and Joan Miro had a powerful influence on Harry and his art.
- Harry worked with other artists and designers at Cranbrook, who came to know him as a man of integrity who possessed a solid work ethic. Eero Saarinen later used Harry for architectural commissions, Charles Eames (http://www.eamesoffice.com/) later hired him to help design

furniture and Florence Knoll invited him to work for Knoll in Pennsylvania. Walter Gropius headed up the Bauhaus in Chicago. What is Bauhaus? (http://bauhaus-online.de/en)

- Eames invited him to work with him in California. Harry designed furniture, worked for the war cause, made engineering manuals, sold a few drawings on the side, and struggled along. The first two children were born. At one point, Brigitta had to sell some jewels to buy diapers!
- Florence Knoll (http://www.knoll.com/designer/Florence-Knoll) invited him to Pennsylvania to design chairs. They left the ocean and moved to Barto, near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Harry designed the famous Diamond chair and several others which began selling in 1952 and are still in production today. Before the Diamond chair, furniture was formed out of hard, wooden, straight shapes. The Bertoia chairs were a dramatic paradigm shift to curves, wire, and comfort.
- Saarinen hired him to make a monumental sculpture for the General Motors building in Michigan. Saarinen had seen Harry's 3 feet (one meter) screen sculpture at a furniture display, and asked Harry if he could make one 12 feet (4 meters) high. Harry said, sure! This was his first commissioned monumental project. This inaugurated his career of creating huge sculptures for important buildings. He always made smaller sculptures on the side.
- One of his greatest influences was nature and her organic shapes. He lived in the country with 200 acres of forest and farmland and a pond. He took walks often. He made a floating "turtle" (a pancake of two slabs of metal with an air space in the middle to make it float) for his children.
- He discovered that metal rods, when touched, made wonderful sounds. He invented Sonambient and placed 100 sounding sculptures in his remodeled barn.
- He only gave one lecture per year because he would rather work and weld.
- He liked to light his pipe with the welding torch.
- He was very strong and could lift a 300 pound anvil easily.
- From the toxic fumes of welding, he contracted lung cancer and died at age 63.

Discuss how the 1960's were a time of innovation and that Bertoia was first to combine music with sculpture. Compare sculpture of previous times; Egyptian, Renaissance, Rodin, Moore, Calder and how different Bertoia's works were. Point out that Harry would invent new metal-smithing techniques to achieve his goal if there was no existing method to achieve the vision he had in mind. His spill cast, shot fusion, bush style sculptures, and dandelions were all technically challenging. His intimate knowledge of metals, their qualities, and chemical patinas was astounding.

Viewing

During the viewing at a museum you can focus more detailed discussion about technique. See further details on the Harry Bertoia foundation website (https://harrybertoia.org/). Have the students (or the docent or museum personnel) touch the sounding sculptures to hear the tones. Follow the progress of drawing to maquette to full size sculpture. Bertoia invented the concept of sounding sculptures, and many followed.

Discussion questions:

How are the chairs different from straight-back wooden chairs?

Why do you think he made the chairs with wires and curves?

Does the sculptural work convey a mood or feeling?

What is the essence, or spirit, of the work?

What does it remind you of?

How long do you think it took to make it?

What animal would it be, if it could be one?

If it was going to move or travel, what kind of motion would happen?

What is the name of the sculpture, or if there is no name, what would you name it?

Have each student pick their favorite sculpture and study it for a while, noting details of construction and color. Have them jot down their thoughts, emotions, and associations. Perhaps they want to draw it. Then each student can share with the others about the sculpture they picked. Why did they pick that one?

Writing

If writing is desired, have the students write about their favorite piece, or the whole show in general. Explain the show to a friend who wasn't here. What did they really like or really dislike? What might Bertoia the artist have said about this piece? Is there an overall theme in Bertoia's work? Any of the above questions are appropriate. Asking students to describe the "essence" or "spirit" of an art work can elicit some great ideas.

Studio I

Materials:

- Clay or play dough
- Wires from 6" to 2' long, in thicknesses ranging from a millimeter to 1/8"
- String
- Glue and tape
- Cardboard from boxes
- Paper
- Scissors
- Stones, shells, seeds, objects from nature

The hands-on part of the workshop is a trial and error experiment for them to create. Have them make their own sculptures. Wire stuck in clay, or into cardboard. Shaping forms out of clay, or folding the cardboard or paper.

Choose different sized wires, tie them to string and clang them together. How does size, length, and thickness (diameter) affect the sound? Is it music? What is the mood or feeling of the sound? What makes each student's sculpture unique? What is the essence or spirit of their piece?

Studio II

If doing both Studio I and Studio II, the students can use this exercise to draw a plan of what their future sculpture might look like, similar to Bertoia's use of monotypes to suggest his later larger works.

Materials:

- Paper and pencil

OPTIONS, one or all:

- Students sketch a still-life or landscape using one continuous line.
- Students, without looking down at the paper, draw a picture of their favorite sculpture.
- Students pair off and, without looking down at the paper, draw a picture of their partner.

Afterwards, show and discuss each masterpiece. Does it look exactly like the object or person? Does it have a similar feeling to the object or person? Does it have the character of the drawer or the drawee or both? What is art? What is "modern" art? What is Midcentury Modern? Post-war art?

Ideally, the students will get a sense of Bertoia's work, of sculpture and design in general, and of their own talents. Let us know of your success stories, or what might work better. Thank you and have fun!

Harry Bertoia Foundation
435 673-2355
info@HarryBertoia.org
HarryBertoia.org