

Making Community Columns

Level: High School

Lesson Overview:

Through close-looking and discussion, students will compare Puryear's *A Column for Sally Hemings* and the columns of San Marco and Column of San Teodoro, Piazza San Marco (Venice, Italy). Students will explore how artists use symbols in public sculpture to express societies shared values. Using wooden architectural and air-dry clay, each student will create a column with a sculptural element to represent a share community ideal.

Essential Questions:

How as an artist or society do we articulate the values we stand for?

How can I use symbols to express shared or individual values?

What significance do columns have in expressing values in my culture?

How does looking at the use of columns help me understand how they are used to support buildings?

How does looking at the columns used as support for sculptures help my understanding of their use in art?

Students will...

- understand that artist use symbolism in artwork
- create a personal or community symbol that expresses a value
- understand that a design team for public sculptures must take into consideration many factors when placing their work in an environment
- understand how a sculpture is often made of numerous parts

Materials:

Crayola Model Magic or air-dry clay, architectural wood pieces, tacky or hot glue, sketch paper, pencils

Reference Images

Martin Puryear, *A Column for Sally Hemings*, 2019 (Cast iron, painted tulip poplar-sculpture)

Columns of San Marco and Column of San Teodoro, Piazza San Marco, Venice, Italy

Sessions:



Session 1:

Session 1 - Step 1: Close-looking and Engagement

The teacher will begin the session by having the class look at the Columns of San Marco and Column of San Teodoro located in the Piazza San Marco (Venice, Italy). The teacher will tell the students that these two columns are positioned at the entry point of Venice and form the social, religious and political center of the city. After providing the students with several minutes to look at the details of the columns and their positions, the teacher will then ask the class, “Why would these columns be placed here? Do they serve a purpose? What is perched on top of the columns? Are there presumptions that we can make about their importance?” The teacher will lead the class in discovering the symbolism of the two columns and the history of Piazza San Marco (Saint Mark’s Square). The teacher will then provide background information about the two columns, their placement and the figures (The Column of San Marco depicts a winged lion, the symbol of St. Mark, the city’s patron saint since 862 AD. The Column of San Todaro is surmounted by the first protector of Venice, St. Theodore).

The teacher will then display an image of Puryear’s *A Column for Sally Hemings* and ask, “How does this sculpture relate to architecture? (It is the shape of a column and fluted on the base.) What are the materials that Puryear chose for this piece? Why is material choice important? Does the work have (or look like it has) a function?” Tell students the title of the work and ask for them to share what they know about Sally Hemings and slavery. Then return to the work and ask, “Now that you know the title of the work, how does the meaning of the work change for you?” The teacher will when then provide background information about the work and its placement in the United State Pavilion.

Background information: At the United State Pavilion, two of Martin Puryear's sculptures are directly inspired by elements of the building itself. One is *A Column for Sally Hemings*, where a rusted shackle is piercing a fluted column, giving prominence to the shackle and the history of slavery that it's associated with. The United State Pavilion was constructed in 1930 and its style is derived from the Renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio, who worked extensively in Venice. The pavilion was inspired by the architecture of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and Sally Hemings was Jefferson's slave (turned mistress). Reference article: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/a-first-look-at-liberty-martin-puryears-exhibition-for-the-us-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale-1538956>

The teacher will then follow-up with by asking the class, "Now that you are aware of the background information, what values do you think Puryear is expressing though this piece and its placement in the United State Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale, Venice? Do you have any further observations about the work?"

The teacher will then ask the class to discuss the relationship between the columns in Saint Mark's Square and Puryear's *A Column for Sally Hemings* by asking, "Why would an artist put a sculpture on monument on top of a column? How does that kind of platform change our relationship to the artwork?"

Session 1 - Step 2: Art-making

The teacher will then ask the class, "Think about an important community value and visualize ways of showing it symbolically in sculpture." The teacher will then ask the class to sketch a column and place a symbol of value on top of their choice (5 mins).

The teacher will then demonstrate stacking the wooden architectural blocks. The teacher will ask the students to experiment creating their own columns using the blocks. Students should be encouraged to explore different combinations, while emphasizing the importance of a balanced structure and how artist's ideas evolve.

Session 1 - Step 3: Reflection

The teacher will ask a few selected students to discuss and reflect on their choices of symbolism and the structure of their column.

Session 2:

Session 2 - Step 1: Close-Looking and Engagement

The teacher will tell the students that they will be making their own columns that support a sculpture which expresses ideas and values that are important to our community and ask, "How can a sculpture celebrate a community?" Show students logos and icons that use symbolism to express community values, and discuss. The teacher will then ask, "What images and symbols do you want to develop and incorporate in your artwork? Consider a vision of a community value." Review your sketch(es) from the previous lesson and make any revisions based on our discussion.

Session 2 - Step 2: Art-making

The teacher will then ask the students to complete the construction of their column by gluing the architectural elements together. Demonstrate gluing and holding, masking tape when necessary. The teacher will ask students to consider the order of the columns elements as they construct - create a plan, construct the foundation, and start building on and around it to help the structure become as stable as possible. “We are going to make the columns for our sculpture with our unique designs on a base for stability and being sure they are balanced, so they don’t topple over. How can we combine shapes to make a balanced and stable sculpture?” The teacher will add, “As you building your column, keep in the back of your mind: Where might you want it to be placed? Do you have a certain audience in mind?” Students will receive materials and begin building and gluing their sculpture bases arranging before they settle on a final symbol for the top of their column.

Introduce Crayola Model Magic (or air-dry clay) and show how to form basic shapes then add details. Show students how the model magic/air-dry clay can be used to sculpt shapes, including the different techniques of pinching, pulling, rolling, flattening, etc. Remind students that their sculptures can be figurative or symbolic/abstract. When the symbols are complete, students will attach the work to the top of the column with a dot of tacky or hot glue in the center, securing the modeling putty sculpture to the wood by carefully holding it in place.

Note: Everyone should get some common wood components and have some choices by arrangement. Students should only be provided a golf ball size amount of Model Magic or air-dry clay.



Session 2 - Step 3: Reflection

The teacher will engage the class in a gallery walk and a discussion of their final work. “Imagine you are asking your local community to build this column. How would you pitch it? Why is it important? Why should it be built? What values are being expressed and

through which details?” Students should be encouraged to make specific reference to the different elements of their columns and choices.

The teacher will then ask the class, “Look at the columns that your peers built—do you notice similar ideas and values being expressed? Are there any columns that express ideas that you hadn’t considered before?”

Vocabulary:

Symbol, column, values, environment, culture, community, audience, monument, architectural, platform/base, pavilion



(examples by elementary-aged students)