

DAR MUSEUM

Lessons from the American Home
Object Lesson: The Bird's Nest
Suitable for 4th-12th grades

Summary:

Students will “close read” an art piece and try to capture and describe as many of its physical properties as possible. Then they will determine its audience and argument and compare it to other works like it. After trying to reason out this work through observable data alone, they will be given secondary sources that reveal the history and context of the piece. They will then re-evaluate their observations and reflect on the relationship between secondary and primary sources, while evaluating the benefits of material/art history. Can be written or discussed.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will practice observation and descriptive language as applied to visual art
- Students will understand the pros and cons of observable data, and the necessity of relevant secondary sources
- Students will be familiar with issues around historical concepts of grief and crafting

Time: <15 minutes Required Materials: All required materials are included in this packet.

Curriculum Timing Suggestion: This work was created between 1800 and 1950, so it can be placed anytime. However, it’s primary objective concerning sources could be beneficial during any discussion of sources or during Unit 0, or during any unit which may discuss grief or gender (women primarily made this art). This type of mournful craft peaked just after the Civil War.

Skills, Sources, and Concepts	Examples
Compelling and Supporting Questions	What can arts and crafts reveal about past culture? How did our ancestors grieve and understand emotional trauma? What materials do we consider appropriate for art? How did “average” people memorialize loved ones? How do secondary sources help us understand art works?
Sources/Evidence	Historic art, secondary sources, museum databases, poetry
Key Concepts	Art interpretation, American culture, grief and loss
Key Strategies and Skills	Critical reading and thinking, close reading art, evaluating primary and secondary sources, synthesizing information between primary materials and secondary sources
Evidence-Backed Interpretations	Using secondary sources to contextualize art history, using secondary sources to make claims and arguments about historical art, using primary materials to make arguments about secondary sources
Action and Communication	Students will become informed and critical consumers of historical crafts, students will hone strong descriptive language, students will practice analysis and exercise reasoned reflection, students will have a more nuanced construction of historical grieving

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Art Lesson: The Bird's Nest (*Student Copy begins on page 9*)

Close Reading: Look at the art below. Write down words or phrases to describe it completely to someone who has not seen it. Do not just label it. What shape is it? What are the shapes contained within it? What colors does it have and where are they? Describe any images or words you see – what do they depict, what font and color does it use? What materials do you think it is made of? What size is it? What would it feel like if you touched it? What's in the background? How old do you think it is? Try not to stop writing until time timer is up.



Observe:

[Particular note: The different shapes: the bird, the flowers. The different but tonally similar color. What sort of bird do they see? Do they recognize any of the flowers? What material do they suspect this piece is made from? Felt? Yarn? Hemp?]

Reasoning – Audience and Argument: What is this art used for? Who was it created for, and what are they trying to communicate? Do you know or do you think it is used for that purpose? Make sure to distinguish between *assumed knowledge*, *reasoned conclusions*, and *evidenced knowledge*. What specific elements help you determine the audience or the message? Where would this piece have hung?

[Why do people create fake interpretations of nature? What value does a bird statue have over owning an actual bird? Why do people decorate their houses? What sort of person would want to decorate their home with such an art piece? Would someone give this as a gift? Why?]

Reasoning – Comparison: Compare this to other art pieces like it. How is it different? How is it the same? Are they making the same argument or using the same imagery? Were they made for the same audience? What elements would you add or subtract to better communicate its message? Are these original elements, or would you borrow from other examples? Why would a museum value a piece like this?

[How else do people enjoy synthetic nature? Landscape paintings, scented candles, stuffed animals. What service and value does this synthesized nature provide? What is the difference in value and utility of a 3D art piece over a 2D? (Like this bird vs a painting of a bird?)]

Synthesis, Part 1 - Read: Read the secondary source(s) below.

Source 1: DAR Museum Catalogue Record #51.51, “Novelty,” donated on 8/31/51 by Emma B. Turney Danford

Description: A Hair Novelty Birds-nest. Made of human hair. This article was in the making for at least five generations. It was started in 1800, and carried through the years, using only hair from the families, including [sic] Slemmons, Huey, Haney, Lauderback, and Turney.

[Later addendum] 1958 - Hair flowers, human, multitude of various type flowers mounted on a card measuring 12” x 8 1/2”. Important item being bird comprised of all human hair in values of brown with blown glass eye.

Source 2: *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America*, Dr. Helen Sheumaker, University of Philadelphia Press, 2007.

For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white, usually middle-class Americans, hairwork was figuratively love entwined. What has been lost since then is the understanding that was self-evident to many Americans at the time: being made of human hair, hairwork was the person whose hair was used; it embodied the sincerity of those individuals... Changes in American culture since the nineteenth century have directly affected our views of decorative hairwork. Twentieth-century American ideas of cleanliness in particular contributed to its decline. Just the idea of working with hair seems unclean to many people today... but wigs and hair pieces have remained popular in the United States... In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hairwork, being made of an individual's hair, was seen as an outward expression of that person's inner sentiments. Material objects such as hairwork were sentimental because they physically represented a past emotional state, and they provoked the necessary reflection upon that experience. For example, the immediate grief a young husband felt upon the death of his wife was immaterial in that no matter how much psychic pain he had experienced, it wasn't “real” physical trauma. But his watch chain made of her hair upon her death physically manifested that grief and provided a constant reminder of the validity of the experience.

Source 2: Epitaph card with hair, no. 86 x 1.16. Downs Manuscript Collection, Winterthur Museum and Estate.

I've received a lock of hair,
Once worn on thy gentle brow
.....
Tender, pure, and much lov'd brother,
Though thy form no more I'll see;
Still, beloved, too, with mother,
With this lock I'll think o thee.

Synthesis, Part 2 – Reflect: How did the secondary source change how you viewed the art? Cite specific examples. Look back at your observations – what did you observe accurately, what did you miss or observe inaccurately? Look at your reasoned argument and audience. Has your concept of the audience or argument changed? What additional ways does this object differ from other examples of its type now that you've read additional sources? How do we memorialize people today? Do we have ways of grieving that would be unfamiliar to people from the nineteenth century? The twentieth? What questions do you still have? Where would you go to find answers to those questions?

[If the students haven't figured out that its hair by now the reveal in the first source could cause some chaos. Make sure they break down some of that information. Why are there five names of people attached to the piece (some of their names changed as they got married). Why would someone want this? What purpose could it serve? How does it operate as a record of the family? Point out that DNA records are very recent (not popularized until the 1990s), this piece is a DNA record of five generations of a family. Hair also carries materials from the body for decades. Hair can be used to examine diet and exposure to toxins among other evidence – there's almost no other way to collect this much human genetic data without exhuming acres of cemetery grounds. When looking at the second source, how does this affect your view of the bird as a mourning piece? Why might this have been a popular memorialization with middle class people as opposed to wealthy people? (They were able to have other forms of memorials such as portraits, photographs, and literal monuments) What about poor people (making hairwork was very time consuming, and often poorer families didn't have that sort of leisure time). What reaction did you have to finding out it was human hair? Why did you feel that way? Is grief physical? How does it affect us? How do people find relief from grieving? What did the poem make you feel? Did it change your reaction to the hairwork? Would you want a hairwork piece of yourself or from someone you loved? Hairwork was also incorporated into wreaths and jewelry like rings, brooches, bracelets, and watch chains.]

Additional Reflection Space:

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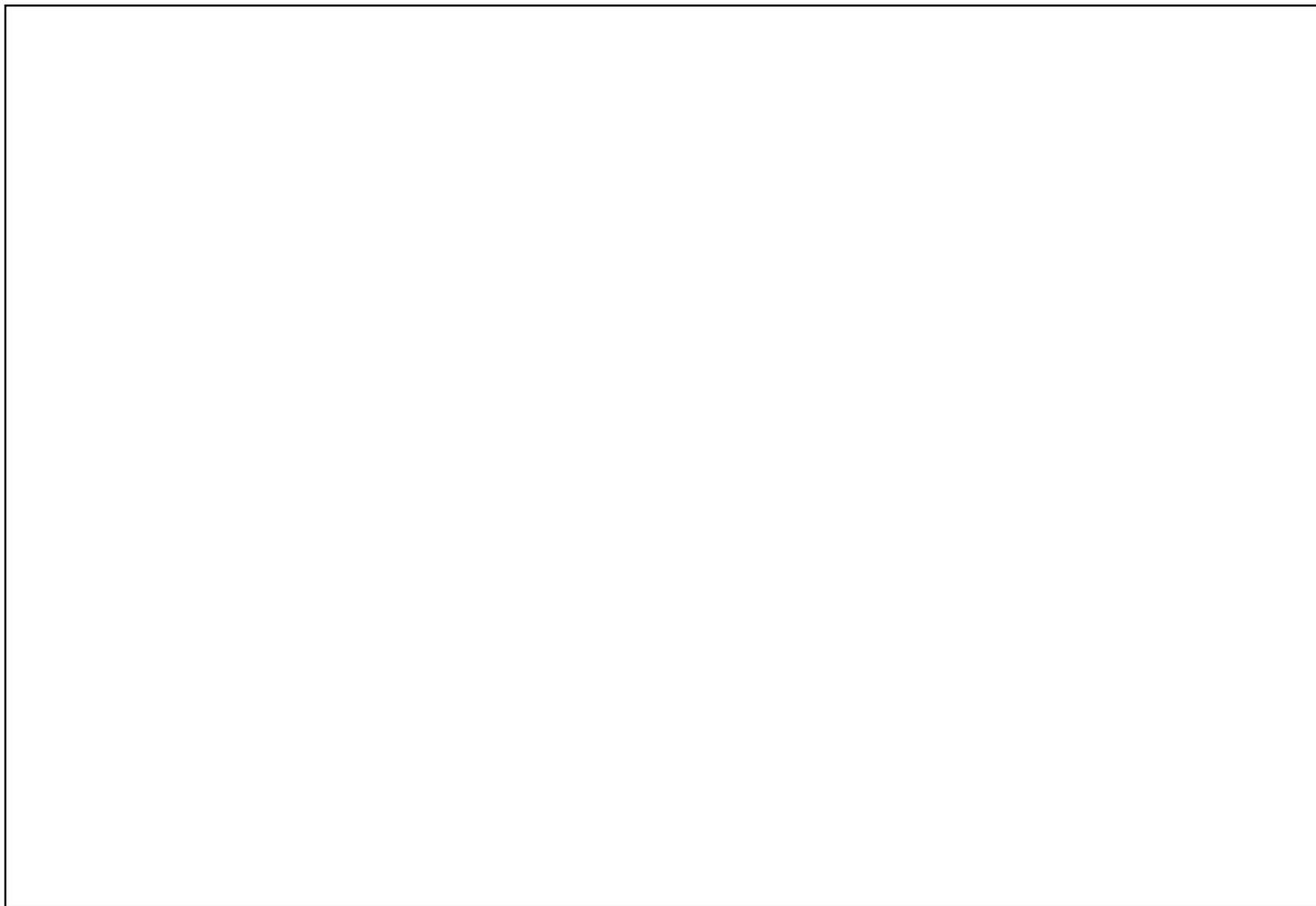
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Observe:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for students to write their observations. The box is positioned centrally on the page below the 'Observe:' label.

Reasoning – Audience and Argument: What is this art used for? Who was it created for, and what are they trying to communicate? Do you know or do you think it is used for that purpose? Make sure to distinguish between *assumed knowledge*, *reasoned conclusions*, and *evidenced knowledge*. What specific elements help you determine the audience or the message? Where would this piece have hung?

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Reasoning – Comparison: Compare this to other art pieces like it. How is it different? How is it the same? Are they making the same argument or using the same imagery? Were they made for the same audience? What elements would you add or subtract to better communicate its message? Are these original elements, or would you borrow from other examples? Why would a museum value a piece like this?

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