

LESSON PLAN

MEANING AND MEMORY



DESCRIPTION

In connection with the Holocaust Arts and Writing Contest theme: **Women of the Holocaust: Stories of Loss, Resistance and Survival**, this lesson will explore the work of a female artist whose work is related to World War II and the concept of war in general.

AGE/GRADE LEVEL: Grades six through eight

OBJECTIVE

Upon completing this lesson, students will understand how artists address social, cultural, and political issues in an abstract way. They will demonstrate this understanding through a class discussion and through the creation of their own artwork.

RELATED ARTIST/ARTWORK



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Lee Bontecou

(Providence, Rhode Island, 1931 -)

Untitled, 1966

Painted iron, fiberglass and fabric

41 in. x 29 in. x 8 in. (104.14 cm x 73.66 cm x 20.32 cm)

Collection of the Akron Art Museum

ABOUT THE WORK:

Essay from: Akron Art Museum Art since 1850, An Introduction to the Collection

"Is it a pterodactyl? A Flash Gordon spaceship? An outside artichoke or a monstrous whorl of giant flower corollas?" asked one critic in the mid-1960s of Lee Bontecou's dramatic constructions on exhibit at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Though the show drew a barrage of criticism, Bontecou was quickly lionized by Americans and Europeans alike. By 1964 she was exhibiting in Paris and Germany and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her pioneering direct metal sculpture, incorporating such varied materials as canvas, denim, tarpaulin, epoxy, and fiberglass, has influenced generations of process artists. Rife with associations, her work has engendered a multiplicity of responses.

Bontecou was born in Providence, and shortly afterward her family moved to Westchester County, New York. She began her art education in the mid-1950s, studying at the Art Students League in New York City. By 1959 she had moved to the Lower East Side. Living over a laundry, Bontecou rescued discarded canvas conveyor belts from the garbage and fastened them with pieces of wire to monumental metal frames she had welded together. In so doing she produced her most characteristic work, which, like the assemblage art of the time, incorporates a broad array of materials. These range from garment district racks to washers and bits and pieces of Canal Street to bullets, Nazi helmets, and gas masks.

Bontecou was profoundly affected by World War II and has poignant memories of her mother wiring submarine parts in a factory during the war. These early experiences awakened a lifelong political awareness in Bontecou that fueled the intensity of much of her work.

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I was angry. I used to work with the United Nations program on the short-wave radio in my studio. I used it like background music, and in a way, the anger became part of the process. During World War II we'd been too young. But at that later time [the 1950s and 1960s], all the feelings I'd had back then came to me again . . . Africa was in trouble and we were so negative. Then I remembered the killings, the Holocaust, the political scene.

Bontecou's indignation deepened with the outbreak of the war in Korea. Her persistent angry feelings are expressed clearly in *Prisons*, a series of small rectangular metal works executed in the early 1960s. Many of the images from this series, she maintains, reappear in larger works. Indeed, *Untitled* of 1966 closely resembles these smaller works. Like them, it is rectangular and marked by entrapping geometry, sharp toothy elements, and—most prominently—the striations that recall prison suits. The piece, a characteristic mixture of materials, incorporates garment racks; trapped behind a horizontal grid of bars lurks a figure with a threatening grin.

It is in her formal language, above all, that Bontecou most effectively expresses her social concerns: the grid of entrapment, the sharp edges that appear in most of her work and "mentally scrape the viewer," the ominous black openings and expressive play of light and dark. In *Untitled*, as in her other works, she speaks with an oppositional language that she feels reflects the dualities in society. Here she has achieved a formal elegance through the image's stark rectangular shape and carefully rendered horizontal bands while contrasting these with subtle tonal variations and a careful asymmetrical geometry. Here and elsewhere Bontecou combines the aggressive and the beautiful—in her words, "the balance of what we are up to." Mona Hadler

1. "Lee Bontecou," *Newsweek* 68 (October 24, 1966): 107.

2. Process art, a movement that arose in the late 1960s, stressed the exploration of the intrinsic expressive and physical properties of nontraditional materials ranging from natural substances such as grass and water vapor to industrial materials such as lead, canvas, and cloth.

3. Lee Bontecou, quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 384.

4. Lee Bontecou, interview with the author, Pennsylvania, July 19, 1986. All primary information concerning her work comes from this interview and follow-up discussions unless otherwise noted. See also Hadler, 59.

Hadler, Mona. "Lee Bontecou's 'Warnings.'" *Art Journal* 53 (winter 1994): 56–61.

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DISCUSSION

If visiting the museum, bring students into the gallery and allow them time to experience the work before discussing it. If viewing the artwork via reproductions or digital images, show the students several different images of the work before beginning discussion. Ask students to respond to the artwork by discussing what they see. Expand the discussion by asking the students what ideas/concepts/events they think the work is addressing. Finally, give students the background information about the artist and the work and ask them how their reactions change based on this knowledge. Ask students how the artist communicated her ideas using materials, color, scale, and composition. In order to fully understand Bontecou's approach and style, show students other works by the artist.

STUDIO

Inspired by Bontecou's technique, students will create an artwork based on an idea/concept related to war without using representational images. Students should select their media and materials based on their idea and then construct a two or three dimensional artwork that is abstract but clearly communicates a mood, feeling, or idea associated with war.

STANDARDS

This lesson addresses the following Ohio Department of Education 2012 Visual Arts Standards:

	Perceiving/Knowing	Producing/Performing	Responding/Reflecting
Grade 6	1PE, 5PE	2PR, 5PR	2RE, 3RE
Grade 7	1PE, 6PE	2PR, 6PR	1RE, 3RE, 5RE
Grade 8	1PE, 4PE, 5PE	1PR, 3PR, 4PR	1RE, 4RE

MORE INFORMATION

Akron Art Museum Collection: www.akronartmuseum.org/collection