

Pre- & Post-visit Materials for Teachers

David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy
October 6, 2011 – January 8, 2012



WHITNEY

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About these Materials

Dear Colleague,

We are excited to present the Pre- and Post-Visit materials for the *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy* exhibition. This is a remarkable exhibition that we think you and your students will enjoy. It also has a lot of wonderful connections to the classroom. Smith's sculptures need to be seen in person in order to be experienced properly!

These materials provide a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offer suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts. These lessons and activities have been written for Elementary, Middle, and High School students. We encourage you to adapt and build upon them in order to meet your teaching objectives and students' needs.

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If you haven't scheduled a tour yet, please visit whitney.org/Education/K12/SchoolPrograms/GuidedVisits. All tours are free for New York City public schools. We welcome schools to visit at times when the Museum is closed to the general public as well as during public hours. For more information about our programs and resources for schools, educators, teens, and families, please visit whitney.org/Education.

We hope to see you at the Museum soon!

Sincerely,
The Whitney School and Educator Programs Team

Cover image:

David Smith (1906-1965), *Lectern Sentinel*, 1961. Stainless steel, 101 3/4 x 33 x 20 1/2 in. (258.5 x 83.8 x 52.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 62.15. © The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

At the Museum

Guided Visits

We invite you and your students to visit the Whitney to see the exhibition *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy*. To schedule a visit, please visit whitney.org/education/k12. Guided visits are hour-long thematic tours that build upon classroom learning. We introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the artist's voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry-based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries.

Guided Visit Themes

School Programs uses a thematic-based approach to teaching in the galleries. We have updated our themes in order to create more thoughtful connections between K-12 classroom learning and the art on view. When you schedule a guided visit, you will be able to choose one of the following themes.

Artist as Observer (K-12)

How do artists represent the world around them? How do they choose to show people and places? This theme can address topics including New York City, community, landscape, and portraiture. This is a great thematic tour for first-time visitors as it incorporates visual literacy skills and introduces students to multiple ways of looking at and talking about art.

Artist as Storyteller (K-12)

How do artists tell a story? What is their point of view? This theme addresses ELA concepts such as narrative, tone, character, and setting and is recommended for literacy and writing classes.

Artist as Experimenter (K-12)

How do artists push boundaries and explore new concepts? This theme examines how artists experiment with materials, processes, and ideas. Younger students may look at how artists use formal elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition, or how they transform everyday objects. Older students may consider more conceptual questions, such as "What makes this art?" and "Why is this in a museum?"

Artist as Critic (6-12)

How do artists respond to the social, political, and cultural climate of their time? What does their work tell us about American life and culture? How can art serve as a catalyst for change? Students examine how artists respond to the topics that shape history, politics, and contemporary culture. This thematic tour can address subjects such as current events, war, gender, race, politics, and activism.

At the Museum (continued)

Working with Museum Educators

If you are scheduled for a guided visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. The more you tell them, the better they can prepare for your visit. Please also let them know if your students have any specific needs. If you are visiting during public hours, you and your students (in chaperoned groups) are welcome to stay after your guided tour.

All educators and students who have a guided tour will receive a pass which offers free admission to the Whitney through the end of the school year.

Self-guided Visits

High School students are welcome to visit the museum during public hours in a self-guided capacity. A maximum of 60 students may arrive at the museum together and must then divide into small groups (no more than 4 students) to visit the galleries. One chaperone must accompany 15 students.

Discuss museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or a sketching assignment. Self-guided visits must be scheduled in advance.

For more information, please visit whitney.org/education/k12.

About the Artist

David Smith, 1906–1965

David Smith was a sculptor, painter, photographer, and draughtsman. During high school, Smith began taking drawing courses by correspondence through the Cleveland Art School. From 1924-25, he studied art at Ohio University. In the summer of 1925 Smith worked at a manufacturing plant and learned the skills of handling metals and machinery as well as welding. He moved to New York in 1926 and studied painting at the Art Students League with the Czech-born painter Jan Matulka, who encouraged his interest in Cubism.

Smith was the earliest American sculptor to experiment with welded metal. Inspired by the steel sculpture of Spanish artists Pablo Picasso and Julio Gonzalez, Smith began to weld discarded scraps of iron and steel into sculptures in 1933. The following year, he set up a studio at Terminal Iron Works on Brooklyn's waterfront. During World War II, Smith worked as a welder at the American Locomotive Company in Schenectady, New York. His use of American industrial techniques, combined with the aesthetics of European modernism, opened up new possibilities for sculpture in post-war America. In 1929, Smith purchased an old farm in Bolton Landing, in upstate New York. He lived there from 1941 until his death in an automobile accident in 1965.

Working Methods and Materials

Smith ran his Bolton Landing studio like a factory. He stocked it with an abundance of raw material. He began his large sculptures on the floor, placing steel on a flat white background. He then tack-welded the pieces and hauled them up so that they could be worked on in the round. Even though he used industrial materials and processes, he manipulated surfaces by hand. A single work often contains several different materials. Smith's notebooks show that he was inspired by sources as diverse as *Life* magazine photographs, pin-up magazine illustrations, fossilized fish, and objects from Egyptian tombs. He experimented with collage and also produced thousands of drawings.

In 1946 Smith turned to the landscape as inspiration for his steel sculptures. During the late 1950s, Smith returned to painting and to painting his sculptures, which became larger in scale and more geometric. Smith's late series of outdoor sculptures called *Cubi* were composed of stainless steel cubes that reflected the sunlight. He would install his sculpture in the rolling foothills of the Adirondacks, and observe the way it changed in relation to land and light. He also took photographs of these sculptures at different times of the day and during different seasons. In a sense, Smith's were among the first environmental sculptures—open and responsive to their surroundings.

About the Exhibition

A fresh look at the work of the great American sculptor David Smith (1906–1965), *Cubes and Anarchy* offers new insights into the artist’s career-long involvement with geometric forms. Traditionally, the simplified geometry of Smith’s monumental *Cubi* and *Zig* sculptures of the 1960s has been seen as a departure from the Surrealist and Expressionistic tendencies of his earlier work. *Cubes and Anarchy* reveals the artist’s iconic late masterpieces to be continuations of his long-standing explanation of geometric abstraction. The show includes over sixty sculptures, drawings, and paintings, as well as rarely-seen sketchbooks and photographs.

Pre-visit Activities

Before visiting the Whitney, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and concepts in the *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy* exhibition. You may want to introduce students to at least one work of art that they will see at the Museum (see the Artist section of this guide for examples of works that may have particular relevance to the classroom).

Objectives:

- Introduce students to the work of David Smith
- Prepare students to thoughtfully analyze and discuss works of art
- Ask students to consider Smith’s materials, working processes, and sources of inspiration

1. What is Sculpture?

In a 1952 radio interview, David Smith said, “There is only one way to understand a work of art. That one way is simply to look at it.”¹

Explain to students that sculpture is art that you can often walk around. It has three dimensions—it is tall, wide, and long. Ask students to think about sculptures they have seen before. What do they remember about these sculptures? Traditional sculptures were made from materials such as marble or bronze and stood on a base. They typically had figurative or religious subject matter.

Now show students *Lectern Sentinel*, 1961 (refer to p.12). Ask them what they notice. What shapes do they see? Does the sculpture seem small or large? Heavy or light? David Smith used many different kinds of materials in his three-dimensional artwork, including wood, parts of machines, bronze, aluminum, steel, and marble. *Lectern Sentinel* is made of stainless steel. Ask students to compare this sculpture to other sculptures they have seen.

2. Become a Sculpture

Project the image of *Zig IV*, 1961 (refer to p.13), and ask students to work in small groups, using their bodies to “become” the sculpture. They should each choose to become one element or shape and consider how to combine their parts to become a whole. How do they fit together? Balance each other?

¹ Smith, David. WNYC. New York City, 30 Dec. 1952. Radio. Transcript.

² Shirey, David L, "Man of Iron." *Newsweek*, 31 Mar. 1969, 78.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Audio guide for *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy*. Whitney Museum of American Art. New York, 2011.

Pre-visit Activities (continued)

Even though *Zig IV* is from 1961, its title refers to the past. *Zig* is an abbreviation of “ziggurat,” the name of ancient Mesopotamian pyramids. Ask students to consider the similarities and differences between Smith’s sculpture and the ancient pyramids. Next, ask students to consider the scale of the work. This work measures 95 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 84 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 76 inches, which is bigger than a Smart Car!

3. Create Your Own

Ask students to bring in some “sculptural” found objects, such as toilet paper rolls, small boxes, or styrofoam packing materials. Have them work in pairs to create their own sculpture out of these shapes, using glue, tape, or string. Ask them to make sure their sculpture can stand up! Older students can work independently and should consider shape, form, color, balance, scale, and composition as they create their own work.

4. Setting the Scene

Before visiting the Museum, visit the website of the David Smith Estate. Show students images of Smith at work and of his sculptures in situ, and ask them to share their observations.

<http://www.davidsmithestate.org/Candida%20Fields%20Photos/Candida%20Smith%20Fields.html>

Post-Visit Activities

Objectives

- Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas and themes from the exhibition.
- Ask students to further investigate Smith’s working processes and inspiration through discussion, art-making, and writing activities.

1. Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What do they remember most? What did they learn about David Smith—his ideas, materials, and processes? What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

Show students part of this video interview with Smith at

<http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/david-smith-cubes-and-anarchy-0>.

How does seeing Smith talk about his work inform their ideas about the artist and his processes?

2. Artist as Experimenter

David Smith held many different jobs during his lifetime. He worked at the Studebaker automobile factory, at a sporting goods store, as a seaman on an oil tanker, and at the American Locomotive Company, where he assembled M-7 tanks and locomotives. He learned how to weld, work a lathe, and solder, all skills he later used in his artwork. He rented a work space on the Brooklyn waterfront in *Terminal Iron Works, Boiler-Tube Makers and Ship-Deck*, a commercial blacksmith and iron foundry. Smith said, “my method of shaping material or arriving at form has been as functional as making a car or a locomotive. I’ve put in years at machines dreaming esthetic ends.”²

Smith used nontraditional art materials such as I-beams and sheets of steel from industrial catalogues. He also visited junk yards to find materials like brackets, bolts, nuts, and screws. Sometimes he painted his sculptures with as many as fifteen coats of epoxy primer, a few coats of zinc, several coats of white paint, and then more coats of auto enamel. He said the work had, “altogether about 30 times the paint coat on a Ford.”³

² Shirey, David L, "Man of Iron." *Newsweek*, 31 Mar. 1969, 78.

³ *Ibid.*

Post-Visit Activities (continued)

Using these materials, Smith welded, forged, cut, painted, and assembled in order to create his work. Ask students to discuss the ways in which he experimented with materials and form. How did he push the boundaries of what sculpture can be?

Have students bring in some found objects that they would like to transform in some way. Have them use limited materials to transform the object into something new.

3. Moving Shapes

Show students the image of *Untitled*, 1963 (refer to p. 14). This work is a study for a sculpture. Smith made this by placing objects onto a piece of paper and then spray painting over them. Peter Stevens, Director of the David Smith Estate says, “When he removed the objects, the original objects, a kind of ghost-like image would remain. That image is really the absence of all the objects that he had removed. So the drawings become a kind of poetic reference to sculpture, but really what you're seeing is the space around what would be a sculpture if you were seeing it as a kind of pictorial image.”⁴

Ask students if this information affects how they see the work. Discuss the ways in which Smith has used positive and negative space and how he has arranged his shapes.

Then ask students to cut geometric shapes (or provide pre-cut shapes) out of colored paper. Have them work in pairs to rearrange their shapes in as many ways in possible, and to consider balance and composition. When they have a design they like, they can glue it down and share it with their classmates.

4. Inspiration

Smith was the first American artist to make welded steel sculptures. He saw images of sculptures by the European artists Pablo Picasso and Julio Gonzalez, Joan Miro, and Alberto Giacometti. He was also inspired by the painters Vassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian and by sources such as *Life* magazine photographs, fossilized fish, and objects from Egyptian tombs.

Ask students to select one of these artists and compare one of their works with Smith's work. Then have them consider who inspires their own writing, music, art, or fashion, and to write a few paragraphs explaining their influences.

⁴ Audio guide for *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy*. Whitney Museum of American Art. New York, 2011.

Post-Visit Activities (continued)

5. Site Specific

David Smith had a studio in Bolton Landing, about two hundred miles north of New York City, near Lake George, where he made many of his large sculptures. He moved his sculptures onto the hillside outside his studio. Photographer, Dan Budnik recalled, "Putting pieces together, he suddenly saw their relation to one another like pieces in the shop. He got flipped out of his mind excited."⁵ After Smith saw his sculptures outside, he decided they needed to stay together as a group. He even took photographs himself to document his work in different seasons.

Show students images from the David Smith Estate's website:

<http://www.davidsmithestate.org/Candida%20Fields%20Photos/Candida%20Smith%20Fields.html>. How do the sculptures look in different locations? How do they seem different in the Museum versus outside?

Ask students to situate their sculptures from Pre-visit activity 3 in a special location. This can be inside or outside of school. Have them consider how the location complements or adds to their work of art. What relationship does their sculpture have to the sky, ground, light, or the built environment? Have them photograph their site-specific installation and present it to the class.

⁵ Brenson, Michael. "The Fields." in *David Smith: A Centennial*. (exhibition catalogue) (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006), 113.

Images



David Smith (1906-1965)

Lectern Sentinel, 1961

Stainless steel, 101 3/4 x 33 x 20 1/2 in. (258.5 x 83.8 x 52.1 cm)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 62.15

© The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Images (continued)



David Smith (1906-1965), *Zig IV*, 1961. Painted steel. 95 3/8 x 84 1/4 x 76 in. (242.3 x 214 x 193 cm). Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc., New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Lipman. © The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo courtesy of the Estate of David Smith, photo by David Heald

Images (continued)



David Smith (1906-1965), *Untitled*, 1963. Spray enamel on paper. 14 x 19 in. (35.6 x 48.3 cm). Jon and Mary Shirley. © The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo courtesy of the Estate of David

Learning Standards and Feedback

The projects and activities in these curriculum materials address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

Links to National Learning Standards.

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area.

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State Learning Standards.

<http://www.nysatl.nysed.gov/standards.html>

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, grades K-12.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

Feedback

Please let us know what you think of these materials. How did you use them? What worked or didn't work? Email us at schoolprograms@whitney.org.

Bibliography & Links

<http://www.davidsmithestate.org/>

David Smith Estate

<http://www.davidsmithestate.org/bio.html>

David Smith Timeline

<http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/david-smith-cubes-and-anarchy-0>

Interview with David Smith

Audio guide for *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy*. Whitney Museum of American Art. New York, 2011.

Brenson, Michael. "The Fields." In *David Smith: A Centennial*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006: 39-68.

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Credits

This Educator Guide was prepared by Heather Maxson and Ai Wee Seow. Dina Helal, Desi Gonzalez, and Jamie Rosenfeld assisted in the preparation.

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Major support for the Whitney's presentation is provided by the National Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Selz Foundation, Norman and Melissa Selby, and The Lipman Family Foundation.

The Whitney Museum of American Art's School and Educator Programs are made possible by an endowment from the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Fund.

Additional support is provided by The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council, the Citi Foundation, Con Edison, Newman's Own Foundation, and by members of the Whitney's Education Committee.

Free guided visits for New York City Public Schools endowed by The Allen and Kelli Questrom Foundation.

