



Teaching and Learning in Art Education 2nd Ed

Cultivating Students' Potential from Pre-K through High School

© Debrah C. Sickler-Voigt, PhD



LESSON PLAN

Title : I've Got a Secret Assemblage: A Study of Secrets, American Artist Joseph Cornell, and Sepik River Tribe Ceremonial Houses of Papua New Guinea

Name : Kelly Gray Gearheart and Debrah C. Sickler-Voigt

Grade Level : Adaptable for elementary through high school learners

Class Sessions : 4 1-HOUR SESSIONS

Artistic Behavior(s)

- Idea Development
- Observation
- Imagination and Wonderment
- Persistence
- Making Creative Connections

Explain how students are applying the artistic behavior(s) :

Idea development: The students will transform their conceptual ideas into visual symbols that communicate their interpretations of their chosen secret.

Observation: The students will carefully analyze the aesthetic and structural qualities of assemblages, identifying possible construction strategies they can employ to develop their own assemblages.

Imagination and wonderment: The students will apply imaginative thinking to consider how to integrate repurposed materials into their assemblage design to communicate their perspectives about their chosen secret and spark wonderment.

Persistence: The students will demonstrate persistence as they make revisions and refinements to navigate the challenges associated with creating a well-balanced and sturdy assemblage.

Making creative connections: The students will synthesize what they learned about the lesson's inspiration artists and reflect on their previous multimodal art inquiry and creative experiences to construct a purposeful assemblage that communicates their creative and conceptual intentions.

Big Idea : Secrets

Essential Questions :

- What is a secret?
- Why do people keep secrets?
- Why do people sometimes tell secrets?

Materials : cardboard, shoe boxes, old frames, masking tape, paint, paintbrushes, found objects, glue, scissors, various sculpting materials, writing materials

Instructional Resources :

Teacher-made PowerPoint presentation on secrets that includes artworks by Joseph Cornell and Sepik River tribe ceremonial houses.

Vocabulary :

Elements of Art :

line shape color form space value texture

Principles of Design :

balance pattern rhythm repetition emphasis

variety proportion movement unity

Other :

secret, assemblage, collage, composition, Sepik River, Papua New Guinea, tambaran, spirit house, compartments, repurpose, role-playing

Rationale : People keep secrets for various reasons. This lesson identifies secrets' different meanings and the reasons why people keep them. Students will discuss happy, indifferent, necessary, and harmful secrets. They will learn how secrets can be beneficial, like guarding a secret recipe, maintaining secret locations (perhaps for security purposes), and keeping a secret to surprise someone (such as for a surprise party). They will learn that concealing secrets can sometimes cause people harm and/or stress. With teacher guidance, students will learn when it is important to reveal a secret, such as in circumstances of harm or as a means to work through negative habits or feelings. Through class discussions, students will identify positive ways to share concerning secrets and know who and when to tell.

Artists and societies have been known for keeping secrets. Students will learn about self-taught American artist Joseph Cornell who created assemblages in his basement using found objects and collaged materials. A very private person, the art world learned the secrets of his art making inspirations by reading his detailed diaries after his death (Baverstock, 2003). For many generations, initiated males within Sepik River tribes in Papua New Guinea have created secret ceremonial houses called tambaran (spirit houses) filled with spiritual artworks used during initiation ceremonies (Anderson, 2004). Male participants participate in rituals. As part of their rite of passage, uninitiated males visit four different ceremonial houses before the initiated males reveal highly secretive information about their religion to them.

Given class teachings, each student will create an assemblage box using the theme "I've Got a Secret." Like Cornell and Sepik River artists, the students' selection and arrangement of objects will be purposeful and personally driven. Their assemblage boxes will contain compartments, doors, shelves, and/or drawers. Students' secrets might be whimsical, goal-driven, technical, or revealing. They will avoid ones designed to hurt others, such as ones based on gossip and embarrassing or hateful information.

Objectives :

- 1) Using the theme "I've Got a Secret" and artists' inspirations, the student will create and/or repurpose an existing box that measures at least 8" x 8" (20.3 x 20.3 cm). The student's box will have a freestanding form that has an effective composition, balanced proportions, and a unified design. The student will arrange the box with at least 5 handmade and/or found objects that represent the student's selected secret. The box design will contain at least two of the following: compartments, doors, shelves, and/or drawers.
- 2) Based on class research, students will work in pairs to write artists' letters (Sickler-Voigt, 2026). One student will write a one-page letter to an artist to ask about secretive art making processes. The other will role-play the artist and write a one-page response providing possible answers. Students will use complete sentences and integrate art vocabulary words as appropriate.

Learning Targets :

I can create an assemblage box using the theme "I've Got a Secret."

- I can create and/or repurpose a box that measures at least 8" x 8" (20.3 x 20.3 cm).
- I can create a freestanding box that has an effective composition and balanced proportions.
- I can integrate at least two of the following into my box design: compartments, doors, shelves, and/or drawers.
- I can include at least 5 handmade and/or found objects to represent my secret.
- I can design my box so that all parts are unified.

Using class research, I can work in pairs to participate in a role-playing writing task about an artist's secrets.

- I can write a one-page letter to an artist to learn secrets about the artist's art making processes. (OR)
I can role-play the artist and write a one-page response to the letter that provides possible answers.
- I can integrate art vocabulary words as appropriate.

I can write complete sentences.

PROCEDURES

Set : The teacher will introduce the big idea secrets and prompt students to answer the lesson's essential questions.

Instructional Strategies : The teacher will present a slide presentation on secrets, self-taught artist Joseph Cornell, and the ceremonial houses of the Sepik River tribes of Papua New Guinea. The teacher will facilitate a student discussion on the different types of secrets and their purposes. The teacher will lead a culturally-responsive discussion on when people should share their secrets and whom they should tell (as appropriate), including adult role models. The teacher will ask students to analyze the artworks within the presentation. The teacher will assist students in making connections between what they have learned about secrets, their personal life experiences, and the artists' works. The teacher will introduce and explain the lesson's checklist and rubric. The teacher will demonstrate methods on how to construct an assemblage box with different parts. The teacher will share strategies to integrate handmade and/or found objects about a secret into the box's form and decorating all parts of their box to give it a unified design. The teacher will guide students by offering strategies to apply the artistic behaviors as they plan, develop, and complete their assemblage. Additionally, the teacher will explain the lesson's role-playing letter to an artist assignment and the artist's mock response. Throughout the project, the teacher will provide feedback on how students can make revisions to their in-progress studio art project and letter. The teacher will guide the final critique and display of the student artworks.

Group Learning : The students will brainstorm the different types and meanings of secrets. They will identify when it is important and necessary to tell secrets to help themselves and/or others. They will identify safe people, including adult role models, to share their secrets with as culturally appropriate within their communities. As a class, the students will analyze the artworks presented in the teacher's slide presentation. The class will review the lesson's checklist and rubric and the artistic behaviors before beginning their work. The class will participate in a formative critique to assess their in-progress artworks. They will provide classmates with feedback to make revisions to their in-progress written responses.

Independent Practice : The students will create an individual assemblage box based on the theme "I have a secret" using the lesson's learning targets. The students will write an individual letter to the artist or an artist's response following the lesson criteria.

Accommodations : The teacher will provide students with example boxes to touch and will review the steps and strategies to create the boxes. The teacher will work individually or with small groups of students to assist them in creating their assemblages and writing letters. The teacher will provide extension activities for students who wish to build on the project's targets.

Closure : The students will clean their work areas at the end of each class. When all is clean, the class will participate in oral reviews to identify what they learned that day. Upon completion of this project, the students will display their secret assemblage boxes and participate in a final group critique.

Assessment :

Informal Assessment : The teacher will observe the students to ensure that they understand class-learning activities and are on-task.

Formative Assessment : The class will participate in a formative critique to assess their in-progress artworks and letters. The students will use a checklist to make sure that they are working towards required learning targets.

Formal-Summative Assessment : The students and teacher will use a rubric to assess the studio project, which is worth up to 100 points. The letter to the artist or artist response is worth up to 50 points.

Authentic Rubric Portfolio Test/Quiz Essay Peer/Group
 Self-Assessment Interview Checklist Rating Scale Other - Worksheets

Standards :

National Visual Arts Anchor Standards

- Creating Standard #1 “Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.”
- Creating Standard #3 “Refine and complete artistic work.”
- Presenting Standard #5 “Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.”
- Responding Standard #7 “Perceive and analyze artistic work.”
- Connecting Standard #10 “Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.”

References :

Anderson, R. L. (2004). *Calliope's sisters: A comparative study of philosophies of art* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

Baverstock, A. (2003). *Joseph Cornell: Secrets in a box*. New York, NY: Prestell.

Sickler-Voigt, D. C. (2026). *Teaching and learning in art education: Cultivating students' potential from pre-k through high school* (2nd ed.). Routledge.