



ART HERITAGE PROGRAM

LYLE NICHOLS

1948 TO PRESENT

SCULPTOR

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We would like to thank Lyle Nichols and Dorothy Estes for their assistance in the creation of this lesson.

This art unit meets the following Colorado State Model Content Standards for Visual Art (adopted 12/09):

1. **Observe and Learn to Comprehend** The visual arts are a means for expression, communication and meaning making.
2. **Envision and Critique to Reflect** Visual arts recognize, articulate, and implement critical thinking through the synthesis, evaluation and analysis of visual information.
3. **Invent and Discover to Create** Generate works of art that employ unique ideas, feelings, and values using different media, technologies.
4. **Relate and Connect to Transfer** Recognize, articulate, and validate the value of the visual arts to lifelong learning and the human experience.



LEARNING TARGET:

- I know two important facts about Lyle Nichols.
- I can create a found-art sculpture.

SUMMARY

- When sculptor Lyle Nichols was young, his family lived in several small towns on Colorado's western slope. His father was an independent miner who worked in uranium

mines during the boom of the 1950's. His grandfather was a farmer and a miner as well. **Nichols took the kinds of tools his father and grandfather used and created art – wood, metal, and junk sculptures.**

- Nichols states he uses the materials he finds around him. "You're surrounded by stone and a lot of scrap metal in this area." **When he begins to create a new sculpture, he allows the materials to inspire his creation.** "...I walk down through a trail in my backyard and lay objects on the trail. Sometimes I look at them for five years and then they spark. If I'm doing an animal, I'll lay the pieces out like big pieces of a jigsaw puzzle first and then go with the little pieces. Whatever the eye will accept. I surround myself with all these parts and the idea comes and hopefully it's good." "I make about 5% of my ideas." He often uses Breyer models of horses and other animals as scale models for his life-size sculptures.
- **Lyle Nichols work ranges from coffee table pieces to 8,000 lb. sculptures** Many of his found object sculptures are a lesson in agricultural and implement history. Some pieces are made with objects found on a customer's property or pieces that have special meaning. His skill would bring him much recognition if he lived in New York or California, but he is happy here. He wants people to know that good art can be created anywhere and does not have to be in museums to be enjoyable.
- Although Nichol's work is sold primarily through interior designers; **his marketing technique is as low-key as the man himself.** "I let one of my neighbor kids sell peaches in my yard this year. One couple stopped and bought \$3 worth of peaches and a \$6000 yard sculpture!"

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The Grand Valley was not open to settlement until the last Ute Indians were pushed out by treaty provisions in 1889. One of the first settlers in the valley was Lyle Nichols' great-grandfather who homesteaded a ranch outside Loma. Nichols' grandfather enjoyed drawing cartoons, some of which were accepted by magazines, but he did not want to work for them because he did not want to put up with all the controls and dictates on subject matter. Nichols thinks his sense of humor may have come from his grandfather.

Nichols' father was born in Loma and served in the Navy in World War II. He became a uranium miner and followed the boom as it moved around Utah and western Colorado in the 1950's. Nichols' maternal grandfather was born in Leadville and helped build the Moffat Tunnel and Hardwick Bridge in Glenwood Springs, later moving to Grand Junction and opening a gun shop. Nichols' mother worked in the shop where she met her husband.

Nichols' mother and father had three children. Nichols' sister, who lives in Oregon, is a cartoonist and sign maker. His brother was a heavy equipment operator. Because their father died from complications from his work as a uranium miner, the children worked to help the family. They were one of the first families to receive funds as the result of the Uranium Miners' Compensation Act which helped families of those who had helped build the first atomic bombs.

Nichols worked on his relative's farms in the Paradox Valley and Nucla area when he was growing up. He never took any art classes. He says people noticed the "wild designs" he made finger painting as a child, but otherwise he had little interest in art or drawing. He took a welding class in high school and developed the skills he uses to create "three-dimensional expressions floating around in my head."

Nichols makes most of his sculptures from rocks and found objects. He feels his environment contributes to his choice of medium. "We lived in remote areas where everyone had a junk pile. When something broke down, we just couldn't jump into the car and drive to the hardware store. Instead, you went to the junk pile and found something to make the repair with." He loves the rocks and colors of the Paradox Valley outside Nucla. Many of the rocks he has carved came from this area and from the Uncompahgre Plateau. "My father and most of my relatives were miners so they talked about rocks a lot. That's where I gained a lot of my knowledge and a familiarity with tools and equipment used to work with rock."

Nichols worked for a Ford dealership, a construction company and helped run a casting furnace at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons plant. The furnace was part of the process of making plutonium trigger devices. Nichols says with a twinkle in his eye, "It is hard to believe that I once had top secret government clearance." He still receives regular government medical exams to see if his work with radioactive materials at Rocky Flats has affected his health.

Technical training received from on-the-job experiences translates into many of the skills he employs in creating his sculptures. He taught himself how to read blueprints when he started making things for other people's homes. Although he has no formal training in geology or engineering, he has an instinctive skill for making large, intricate sculptures. Nichols knows the names of all the rocks he has collected, where they have come from and how they were formed. He knows the history of many of the "found" objects he works into his metal sculptures. Nichols' desire to be an artist was fired by the success and satisfaction he had doing woodworking while in the Denver area. He says he made the decision to become a serious artist in 1976.

Nichols became a full-time artist in 1982 when he moved back to Grand Junction. He works from his home, a converted barn surrounded by an assortment of glass, steel and stone lawn sculptures on East Orchard Mesa near Palisade, CO. Besides doing what he desires, Nichols

has also taken commissions for wrought iron and stone work for wealthy homeowners in western Colorado. Nichols says what's fun is "when what you have the desire to make is also something that people want to buy."

"I enjoy the pioneer spirit I feel in making things out of stone and metal which are heavy and hard to work with." He experiments with techniques to hold things together and carve them out. "I am developing the skills and tools I need to make what I envision," says Nichols. He is happy in the small niche of monumental sculptors. He had to figure out ways to move his sculptures which can weigh several tons. He has a winch on his truck that allows him to move most of his work by himself. Because he is willing to work in a medium few others dare try, attention has been attracted to his work. Nichols feels it is because it is unusual, and large, and different.

He learns by doing. When he first starts working with a piece of stone, he will carve a spoon from it. That gives him a feel of the rock's hardness and malleability. He comments he has sold every spoon he has ever carved. A collection of his spoons was featured once in the magazine, *Architectural Digest*. He often goes to the library and reads everything he can find about something before he makes or draws a model. He notes it is much cheaper to make a mistake with a pencil and paper than it is with a 40 ton boulder.

Nichols haunts yard sales, junk yards, and the banks of the Colorado River. He collects anything that looks interesting, from river-polished rocks to boxes of aluminum drains. He figures he has enough junk in his yard to make projects for the next five years without buying something new. Some things he makes into sculptures right away. Others, he will put in a spot where he can see them as he walks between his house and studio every day, or as he puts it, "contemplate them on my way to work every morning," until that day comes when the "object speaks to him." Nichols isn't sure if having more education than a high school diploma would be a help or would have hurt him creatively. "I am an example of a 'homemade artist,'" says Nichols. "Any average Joe has the ability to become an artist like I have. Maybe the difference is I follow my ideas through to a final product."

"You can't worry about what other people think of your art work," comments Nichols. "You would never finish anything otherwise." While he notes you have to create what you want to create, some people are perfectionists and won't allow themselves to make anything unless it's perfect. He notes he is far from perfect.

He points to a rock sculpture of a wheel as an example. "I started off wanting to carve figures on the wheel that would look animated when it was turned, but I could not figure out the spacing. It became a rock with a different message instead." He loves to experiment and wrestle with a problem until he solves it. He has fun trying different ways to carve, cut, and polish rock. He enjoys working with new materials, glues, and techniques. For example, he

first used a pop rivet gun when he made his fish of license plates. “Now, after fastening on over 1,000 pieces of plate, I’m an expert with a pop rivet gun.”

One of the pieces he is contemplating will be made out of a large, translucent arc produced by Reynolds Polymer in Grand Junction. The arc was a “second” left over from a project where the company was casing tunnels for people to walk through that would be surrounded by an aquarium. He’s pretty sure he wants to make something of it that will glow at night, but the details are not there yet. Nichols says some people feel his work is not art. He thinks they need to get out of New York City and find all the “fine art” that’s being produced in the hinterlands. He loves people’s reaction to his art. “It’s like music. People are sparked different ways by what they see.”

Nichols loves to collect old photographs, signs, hay hooks and cattle hobbles (also called “cow kickers”). He doesn’t know the people in the pictures or who made the items he has found, but they make him inquisitive. He says it is fun to imagine what someone was like that forged a hay hook. “The fascination in the hooks is each one is different, made according to the whim and skill of the farmer; it tells you something about the person’s character.”

Nichols’ works are a lesson in multiple and creative problem solving. The things he seems to know innately about engineering, balance, and fitting things together encompass the disciplines of physics, math, chemistry, geology, and engineering. Even those with the best scientific training might lack the spontaneity, sense of humor, and creativity that Nichols displays. He has an “aw shucks” attitude about this talents. He loves to make people smile and have the fun he has with his art work. “I have a great imagination and a huge pile of junk in my yard,” Nichols replies when asked what makes him such a fine artist. He inspires himself with a sculpture of a tiny hen perched on a giant granite egg. He encourages everyone to at least try and give shape or voice to their ideas.

Websites to check out:

- **Lyle Nichols’ website:** www.lylenichols.com
- **Imagination Factory:** <http://www.kid-at-art.com/index.php> **The purpose of the site is to teach reuse and recycling concepts through art activities using solid waste as a source of free materials.**
 - While most people think that collecting solid waste is recycling, it’s only the first step in the process. Using solid waste to make art teaches kids that recycling results in the manufacture of a new product.
 - Recycling to make art encourages the collection of solid waste at home, and it can help change attitudes and perceptions about the quality of recycled products, in general.
 - Using solid waste as art materials saves landfill space and the energy and natural resources needed to produce virgin materials-in this case, art supplies.
 - Making art from solid waste saves money. This is especially important for schoolteachers and others working with limited resources. In addition, some of the materials which go to landfills are more interesting and are of better quality than those one can buy.
 - Finally, reusing and recycling to make art or crafts encourages creative thinking and problem solving. Kids are challenged when they’re presented with solid waste as art materials, and making something from nothing is fun!

- <http://www.eco-artware.com/eco-news/resource-guide.php#wrapart> Stop! Before pitching an old treasure, or even an old pair of sneakers, into the waste stream, check to see where it can be reused or recycled by somebody else. Here's a growing guide to internet and community resources to help you get started.
- **International Folk Art Museum:**
<http://www.internationalfolkart.org/exhibitions/past/recycledreseen/rrindex.html>

POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

Observe and Learn to Comprehend & Envision and Critique to Transfer (VA 1 & 2)

1. **Photo:** When sculptor Lyle Nichols was young, his family lived in several small towns on Colorado's western slope. His father was an independent miner who worked in uranium mines during the boom of the 1950's. His grandfather was a farmer and a miner as well. Nichols took the kinds of tools his father and grandfather used and created art – wood, metal, and junk sculptures. He says, "I enjoy the pioneer spirit I feel in making things out of stone and metal which are heavy and hard to work with." He experiments with ways to hold things together and carve them out. He lives on East Orchard Mesa and his sculptures are found throughout Mesa County and in many other places across the country.
2. **Architectural Digest cover:** The items featured on the table are an example of Nichols' early pieces. He learns by doing. When he first starts working with a piece of stone, he will often carve a spoon from it. That gives him a feel for how he can work with the rock. He may go to the library and read everything he can find about something before he makes or draws a model. He notes it is much cheaper to make a mistake with a pencil and paper than it is with a 40-ton boulder. Nichols' work ranges from small to huge sculptures.
3. **Magpie's Treasure.** What do you think this is made out of? (nails) Nichols enjoys yard sales, junk yards and exploring the banks of the Colorado River. He collects anything that looks interesting, from river-polished rocks to boxes of aluminum drains. He figures he has enough junk in his yard to make projects for years to come. Some things he makes into sculptures right away, others he will put in a spot where he can see them as he walks between his house and studio...until the day comes when the "object speaks to me".

4. **Paradox** (and newspaper article from 1984). It took Nichols a year to create this massive sculpture that presently stands in his front yard. It weighs 14 tons. Each sphere has 60 carved sandstone slabs weighing 18-30 pounds each. The rocks are bolted from the inside to a welded steel frame. Nichols began the project with a Styrofoam model, then a cutout cardboard model. He says that constructing each sphere was like “working under a car.” He had a homemade scaffold that allowed him to get to the inside of the spheres to bolt on the rocks. The sculpture is inventive because it can be taken apart quite easily, like a giant erector set. He named the sculpture after the Paradox Valley outside Montrose where he spent much of his childhood.

(#5 through #10) illustrate how Nichols created a horse sculpture:

5. Nichols’ yard is his studio and what many people see as scrap metal junk, he sees as raw material for art. It takes a creative genius to do what Lyle Nichols does, and I think you’ll agree that he has a truly unique talent.
6. The City of Cheyenne, Wyoming hired Nichols to create a horse sculpture for public display in their city. The project began in the Spring of 2009. Nichols holds a model of a horse that he used as a guide to create a horse sculpture that ended up being 10 times the size of the model. Scrap metal parts are laid out in preparation for building the sculpture.
7. A wire frame is used as a base to weld metal pieces. Each piece is a rusted tool or metal part that is fitted to begin construction of the sculpture. Part of the rear and one leg is nearing completion. A close up shows interesting pieces such as a Wyoming license plate, burro’s shoe, a bull nose, leather punch, Coors can opener, Fuller crescent wrench, wheel bearing and large horse shoe. You couldn’t go shopping for the materials that are used in this sculpture. Many of the pieces are historical artifacts that have been accumulated over years of collection. You could spend hours looking at all the different things that are going into this horse.
8. Work continues on the horse sculpture. Lyle now has 3 legs on the horse. Once the major limbs, body and head have the desired shape; small screws, washers and pins will be used to fill in holes. The tail will be made out of nails and attached to the horse as one of the last stages of completion. All the sharp pieces will then be ground down to prevent anyone from cutting oneself. You can see more and different pieces that have gone into the sculpture. Each foot has a full size horseshoe. There are pieces on this horse that young and old people will recognize. When asked how the sculpture is coming along, Lyle’s answer was - *"If it don't look like a horse, I'm in real trouble!"*

The horse is nearing completion. There are now 4 legs on the horse, and the head is complete with ears and eyeballs. The front right leg required intricate work with all of the angles necessary with each of the horse’s joints. The degree of difficulty was in getting the horses muscles just right, showing the horse in a full gallop. All that remain are the mane, tail and overall minor tuning. Lyle says, *"This horse shows the character of motion more so than any other horse that I've made."*

9. The mane is now welded on to the horse's neck. The mane is made from heavy soft wire. Each wire is then bent into a particular shape to create the actual mane of a horse in full gallop with the mane blowing in the wind.
10. The horse has taken several months of work and is finally finished. It will be delivered sometime soon to its final destination in Cheyenne, Wyoming and will be located at the Railroad Museum and can be closely viewed and enjoyed by everyone.
11. **Organized Chaos** (located at Hole N' Rock—near Moab, UT)

12. Mike the Headless Chicken (2000, Fruita, CO) This sculpture tells the tale of Lloyd Olsen and his chicken -- it survived 18 months without a head. In 1945, Lloyd Olsen chopped a chicken's head off but missed its brain stem. Rather than getting fried, the bird, dubbed "Mike the Headless Chicken," lived for another 18 months, with Olsen feeding it with an eyedropper.

13. Busby's Walleye (Bemidji, Minn.) This fish sculpture was donated by the Busby family to their town in Minnesota where it was displayed on the main street. As a joke, someone stole it and left it beside a lake near town. Nowadays, it is kept inside and more closely watched!

14. Rusty's Dream (Palisade National Bank, Palisade, CO) Sculpture of rock and welded metal. Nichols made the dog out of large screws he welded together. He used a cardboard cutout for a model after watching his own dogs to see how they were shaped. The fire hydrants were purchased in Vail when they remodeled the village. The rock is white granite from the Uncompahgre. Some people think the better title for this would be Rusty's Nightmare, what do you think?

15. Dolly (Schoenburg Farms, Westminster, CO) Lyle recently completed a sculpture called "Dolly" the cow. It was a commissioned work for the City of Westminster in Colorado. It is 5 feet tall and 8 feet long; it weighs 800 lbs.; there are almost 500 pieces in this cow and includes farm tools and other metal scraps; the cowbell is a real cowbell; and the tail is made from drill bits. Many of Lyle's sculptures are recycling at its best.

16. Metamorphic Solar (2009) a solar powered, oversized "night light." The elegant form consists of twenty-eight layers of 2.5" slabs of Kansas Cream Limestone, which, in this form, looks as rich and smooth as it sounds. The stone was cut into half circles and fastened with over 50 steel pins – all hidden from sight inside and out. It stands 71" tall and is 21" at its widest part. It was designed to offer two different experiences – one in the day and one at night.

17. Nichols with Henny Penny's Dad (photo by D. B. Cooper) 1997, 8 ½ feet tall, welded metal scraps. This 1,200 pound statue was inspired by a small, Rhode Island Red hen that Nichols used to have named Henny Penny. She was a family pet and would come into the house in the mornings to warm up by the stove. Nichols says she was such an unusual chicken that he figured her father must have really been something! The frame was made from bent ¼" aluminum tubing and the welded pieces include ax heads, car jacks, wheels, a pitchfork with a wooden handle, and many other interesting shapes. It is located at Plum Creek Winery in Palisade, CO.

18. Additional sculptures... These are sculptures that were made by students in classrooms last year.

Lyle Nichols' Sculpture Tour: Please give each student a copy of the map to take them home and share with their family.

FEATURED ART PROJECT

Invent and Discover to Create (VA Standard #3)

The secret of creating a great sculpture is starting with a good "junk" pile. Clean out drawers full of screws that don't fit anything. Raid your button box. Haunt a few yard sales or junk yards and see if you can make a deal on some pieces of things, springs, old tools, pans, etc. Get polished rocks and river stones. Have you got any wood scraps?

Individual Found Art Project, using small household items, "recycled" bits and pieces, cardboard, plastic, small metal pieces, etc. Glue together with hot glue to create a piece that is either abstract or representative. Use ideas that are "Lyle-like" in that they have humor, perhaps visual puns or silliness.

Alternative Lessons:

- Do a group project that can be on display at your school, at least until the end of the year! Use larger pieces, attach with hot glue or wire. Again, try for humor, unusual use of supplies, visual puns.
- Have students take apart small appliance or toys and "rethink" or reassemble with hot glue to create a new object.
- Use a "theme" like Animals, Robots, Transportation, and have students create their own interpretation of it, using recycled pieces and gluing with hot glue.
- Provide each student with the same starting object, such as a plastic bottle, or a tin can or several used CDs, and let them create their own sculpture from that.
- Combine junk (found objects) to make a geometrically shaped sculpture, an abstract one or a representative shape. What are the challenges of fitting everything together?

See safety sheet for more information.

Your school's art supplies include glue guns and glue sticks. Use safety in working with the glue, the metal tips get very hot.



What Can a Can Be Besides a Can? By Marilyn Brackney

<http://www.kid-at-art.com/htdoc/lesson11.html>

Working with found objects to make art is a very old and widespread practice. Folk artists, people with little or no formal art training, enjoy expressing themselves this way by making art with whatever materials they can find. Creating art from found materials is fun and a great way to help save landfill space, energy, and natural resources.



You may find some interesting materials with which to work just by walking down the road or street near your house. Some people apparently have never heard of recycling. Instead, they choose to litter our roads and waste resources by tossing empty aluminum beverage cans out their car windows. An interesting thing happens to cans discarded this way, however. They are crushed and contorted by passing cars into a variety of unusual shapes.

Aluminum is one of the easiest materials to recycle, and it can be made into many new products. The best thing to do with empty cans you collect is take them to a recycling center or drop-off site, but with a little imagination, you can use smashed cans for art materials.

You will need:

- Soda cans
- Hammer
- Metal file
- Scrap paper
- Pencil
- Acrylic paints
- Paint brushes
- Small pans



How to: After collecting smashed soft drink cans, choose one which you think has an interesting shape. Carefully rinse and dry it. Hammer down areas which are still sticking up, and use the file to take off any sharp edges.

Lay the can on a piece of paper and trace its shape with a pencil. Look at the resulting outline from all directions. What does the shape suggest? Could it be a person, animal, car, or some other object? Use your imagination to make a cartoon by exaggerating the features and sketching the details on the paper.

When you are pleased with your drawing, you are ready to begin painting. Squeeze white acrylic paint into a pan, and thin it slightly with water. Prime the can with one coat of paint, and let the base coat dry. Lightly sketch the details from your drawing onto the can. Paint the lightest colors first, and continue painting till the can is finished.

Tips and Tricks: Acrylic paint in a tube may work better for the white base coat, because it is sticky and will adhere better than liquid acrylics. After you prime the can, however, you may use either one to paint the details.

Other items, such as cardboard, yarn or buttons may be recycled to make your work more interesting. If you made a person, perhaps you could add yarn hair or glasses made of telephone wire.

You may need to use a hot glue gun to attach items, so ask an adult to do the gluing for you. Only one can is needed for this project, so take the rest of your cans to the recycling center!

Learn more about beverage and food cans and how they're recycled at the [Can Manufacturers Institute](#).

When working with telephone wire, please take the following safety precautions:

- Wear disposable gloves
- Never put the material in your mouth.
- Don't leave the wire in direct sunlight.

Art Heritage Program

student reflection paper



We learned about Lyle Nichols in Art Heritage. Nichols is a local artist who creates sculptures out of metal and rock.



How to Spot a Nichols sculpture:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Student Name _____ **Date** _____