

Story Objects

Ages: 12+ (Grades 7–12)

Duration: Open-ended

Materials Needed: Found objects, scrap paper, pencil.

Inspiration: Melvin Edwards. (American, 1937). *Tambo*, 1993. Welded steel. Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1994.55. On view in *African American Art in the 20th Century*.



Introduction

Artworks can be a direct representation of something in the real world—like a landscape painting or a sculpture. Artworks can also be abstract in their appearance, which means that they do not try to represent how something actually appears in the real world. Artists who work in abstraction think carefully about how the materials, forms, shapes, colors, and/or marks—and how they are put together—will get the ideas, emotions, and/or message of the work of art across to a viewer. Melvin Edwards is an abstract sculptor who works with steel. He has been making sculptures since the 1960s, and his work is focused on African American life, history, struggle, and resilience. Let's explore his work *Tambo* in more detail to think about how abstract sculpture can tell a story.

Look

- What's going on in this painting?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Think

- How do you feel when you view this work? Why do you feel that way?
- Imagine using other senses to observe this object. How might it smell? How might it feel?
- What objects in this assemblage, or grouping of items, are familiar to you? What comes to mind as you observe them?
- Are any objects unfamiliar?
- Who might use these objects and in what setting?
- What do you notice about how the objects are arranged? Does their placement change your understanding of their function?

Connect

Melvin Edwards uses numerous items to create his sculptures, but first he starts with an idea. *Tambo* is named for Oliver Tambo, a South African politician who worked with Nelson Mandela to organize South African's Black population against apartheid laws. These laws were a system of segregation and discrimination based on race. For this work, Edwards chose to include beams and wrenches, which represent Tambo's work to repair society, as well as a shovel, which represents Tambo's family of peasant farmers. Edwards does not have every object in mind when he starts his process of building a sculpture. Instead, he adds them one by one, and each object might remind him of something else related to the

subject he is exploring, or bring up a memory or emotion that he wants to share. The finished work does not look like Oliver Tambo the person, but it represents who he was and commemorates his life and work.

Do

1. Think of a person you respect, admire, love, or want to honor.
2. Write down some observations about this person: what about their character and actions do you admire? Why? What facts do you know about their life and/or experiences?
3. Without any plan in mind (remember, Edwards does not work from drawings or sketches!) close your eyes and visualize the person you want to represent. Imagine they are in the room with you.
4. Next, open your eyes and spend as much time as you like gathering several objects that remind you of the person in your mind. Perhaps there is an object that is their favorite color. Perhaps an object's texture—for example, soft or prickly—makes you think of that person. Experiment and observe how this process evolves.
5. Once you have a collection of items to work into your sculpture, find a flat surface that will be large enough to work from.
6. Without using anything except the objects themselves, assemble them into a single form. Take your time. Experiment with width, height, and balance. When you feel that your piece is finished, take a photo with a smartphone or tablet to memorialize your work. You can leave your commemoration up for as long as you like or are able.

Reflect

What was the process like when you gathered objects for your commemoration? Did your choices influence each other? Did any choices surprise you? Why did you decide to arrange the objects in the way that you did? Does each object speak for itself, or do the objects tell a story together? Is there an object that you wish you had available to add to your work? Why would the addition of this object change what you have created here?

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