

## Linking Art and Geography Education: A Museum Model for Elementary and Middle Schools

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### ABSTRACT

A program designed as a model for schools and museums to use in teaching art and geography in concert is described. The role of place in art-making and art interpretation is emphasized. Docents and teachers are trained to discuss geographic information related to materials, styles, and content of art from diverse cultures. Students observe that people everywhere make art, they make it in different ways, and what they make is influenced by where they are and their perspective of that place. Students discover other cultures and viewpoints based on direct observation of specific objects. Art projects incorporated in the program enable students to represent their mental maps of concepts taught, thus providing feedback about the nature of their spatial thinking and organization.

Spatial relationships are common concerns of art and geography educators yet the interfaces of the two disciplines are rarely explored. The Kreeger Museum in Washington, DC has initiated a program that connects art and geography by emphasizing the role of place in art-making and art interpretation. The program consists of a gallery tour and workshop for field trip students and is designed to serve as a model for working with students in many age groups and in a variety of learning environments. Docents and teachers receive an educator's guide, *Art&Geography: School Tour and Workshop* (Keel, 2012), concerning fifteen works in the museum's collections. Students receive a world map indicating sites of origin for those works. The educator's guide includes geographic information revealed in

the artworks, influences of geography on the various artists, and art projects enabling students to provide feedback about the nature of their spatial thinking and organization.

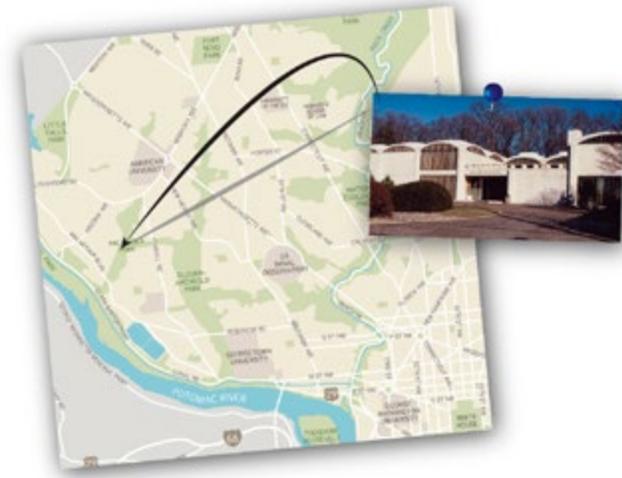


Figure 1. The Kreeger Museum location, Courtesy, The Kreeger Museum, Washington D.C.

Touring the museum, students are introduced to architectural elements, paintings and sculpture from different countries and cultures. They are asked to consider geographic sources of the materials, styles and content of the works. During the workshop segment of the program, students learn to visually represent their mental maps for concepts discussed in the tour. Mental maps are visualizations or internal images that all people form enabling them to plan routes from one place to another, recall aspects of places they've been or plot imagined places (Gould & White, 1986).

Resources that artists are able to find locally or bring from elsewhere establish possibilities and set limits. According to Onians (2008), "they also determine the nature of all activities requiring material expression, including art-making" (p.10). Whether studying art history or learning to produce art, it is logical, even necessary, to learn about the resources that are such powerful influences.

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Concurrently, works of art can convey aspects of spaces and evoke places in ways that aren't easily expressed in words, especially by young children (Tuan, 1977).

The following excerpt from the *Art&Geography* (Keel, 2012) educators' guide accompanies William Christenberry's sculpture, *Dream Building II*, seen on the tour:



Figure 2. Christenberry, W. *Dream Building II*, 1981 Courtesy of William Christenberry / HEMPHILL & The Kreeger Museum, Washington D.C.

William Christenberry lives in Washington, DC but grew up in Hale County, Alabama. Yearly visits to the places of his childhood are constant sources for his work. His recollections, filtered through his imagination and intellect, reveal a brooding preoccupation with discovering the true nature of a place beyond its physical appearance. Hale County is a poor rural area of the Deep South. Christenberry has used soil from Alabama at the base of *Dream Building II*. A deep expanse of chalk, a form of limestone, is below the topsoil layer in Hale County. Because chalk is extremely porous, water drains through very quickly, resulting in drought conditions that cause frequent crop failures.

*Dream Building II* is a solitary structure that evokes the Southern landscape of the artist's childhood. It is not an architectural model but a statement about a place and the passage of time. The simple shape, drab colors, weathered signs, and commonplace materials, including corrugated tin, indicate it is old and from a poor area. The signs convey aspects of the local culture. The absence of windows and doors suggests abandonment, as does the faded and damaged signage. The sharply pointed roof refers to the shape of the pointed hoods worn by Ku Klux Klan members active during the artist's youth. Christenberry insists on the ethical responsibility of artists to reveal aspects of the landscape that may be strange or brutal or ominous as well as those that are beautiful. The repeated use of steeply triangular roof shapes in his work serves as a continuing reminder of Klan activity and the artist's deeply felt concerns about it. (n.p.)

Another passage in *Art&Geography* (Keel, 2012) describes a painting of an urban environment:

Jean Dubuffet traveled from France to Italy, South America and New York but strenuously objected to adopting mainstream "culture" from any source. He rejected the fashionable nonobjective style in art to insist on figurative work conveying ideas and emotions directly and with energy and spontaneity. Dubuffet created the label "Art brut" or "Raw Art" to describe art created outside the boundaries of official culture. He emulated the work of children, the mentally ill, prisoners and graffiti artists. *L'eau dans le gaz* (*Water in Gas*) is a slice of city life revealing a street scene, most likely in Paris, where Dubuffet worked. The title is an idiom signifying "tensions exist" or "trouble is brewing." Other phrases appear as names on storefronts but convey the artist's displeasure with urban society. Among the signs are *manches à gigot* (a very dishonest person), *balances truquées* (fraudulent scales), *Banque la Mariolle* (Buffoonery Bank), *Fripouille père et fils* (Rascal and sons), and *au chèque bidon* (a phony check). Dubuffet represents city life as

full of vitality and pulsing energy but rife with corruption. The jammed surface, bold colors and thickly painted surface convey the artist's vehemence. The wavy contours, schematic figures and crude brush strokes are childlike. The absence of arms on all the figures suggests their powerlessness in the post-World War II urban environment. While the picture plane is crowded, the figures are stiff and isolated from each other, walled off in gray enclosures formed by the artist's brushstrokes. Although Paris is widely regarded as one of the world's most beautiful and civilized cities, Dubuffet has created a generalized city with a very different aspect. (n.p.)<sup>2</sup>

These passages demonstrate the wealth of geographic information contained in brief analyses of works of art. It is standard practice to simply state the country of origin of artists when presenting art to students. But when those students have little or no knowledge of geography, as is often the case, merely identifying nationality is meaningless. And while location on a map is an important starting point, knowledge of geography's significance involves much more. Geography encompasses not just where things are but why they occur in specific places and the power of place in people's lives. Geographers study how our attachment to a place colors our perspective of both the place we live in and our view of other places. The descriptions of work by Christenberry and Dubuffet included here illustrate how profoundly both artists were affected by their individual views of important places in their lives.

Students are immediately interested in the world maps distributed at the start of the Kreeger tour. They are eager to find their own location and that of family members in distant places. Young children often demonstrate remarkable understanding of aerial views (Tuan, 1977). The prevalence of Google Maps has increased students' comfort and facility in reading maps. In addition, we find that maps are

captivating entry points for discussions of art and a way to vary typically used questions, such as: "What do you see?" or "What kinds of colors has the artist used?" Maps are concrete and therefore engage student discussion in a more immediate way than queries about the basic elements and principles of art instruction that tend to refer to abstract ideas such as color theory or perspective.

Docents are trained to ask and invite "Why" questions. These may include: "Why might the artist have chosen to vacation here?" for the landscape *Gaspé* by Milton Avery. For a Mayan sculpture from Campeche, the questioning may include, "Why might the artist have chosen limestone for the material of this sculpture?" and "Why might the surface have acquired its weathered texture?" For a Pissarro painting of summer in Paris' Tuileries gardens, we ask, "Why might the trees have such abundant foliage?" and "Why might the park have been named for clay tiles?" For a mask from Central Africa, questions include, "Why might the artist have given the mouth of this mask a rectangular form?" Photographs of the works mentioned here can be accessed at [www.kreegermuseum.org/about-us/collection](http://www.kreegermuseum.org/about-us/collection) and found in The Kreeger Museum catalogue (Spilsbury, 2009).

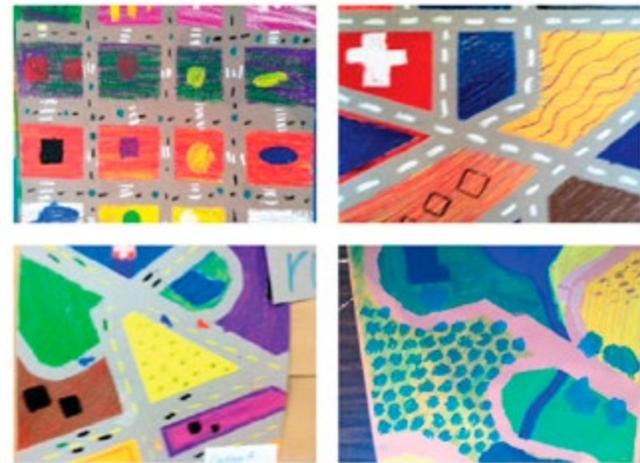


Figure 3. Elementary school student work, Courtesy, The Kreeger Museum, Washington D.C.

2 A photograph for the above passage may be accessed at [https://www.kreegermuseum.org/about-us/collection/painting/Jean-Dubuffet\\_Water-in-Gas-Leau-dans-le-gaz](https://www.kreegermuseum.org/about-us/collection/painting/Jean-Dubuffet_Water-in-Gas-Leau-dans-le-gaz)

The artist-led workshop section of the program provides tools for students to register and compare visual responses to the presented material by depicting urban or rural environments in the form of aerial view maps. Students convene around tables of art supplies in the museum. Having seen landscapes in the Kreeger collections, elementary school students compare and contrast landscapes from rural and urban places, listing characteristics of each space. After discussing differences between profile and aerial views, they choose masking or artist's tapes of varied widths to layout their designs for urban grids or rural pathways. Each student represents her or his own ideas on separate sheets of paper. Water-soluble crayons are used to fill the negative spaces between the taped roads with colors and textures symbolic of different areas within the chosen environments. Student drawn or stenciled symbols are added to indicate landmarks and topography. Next, removal of the tape is always a dramatic moment, after which many students choose to add road lines, bridges, train tracks and other details.

Projects for older children may include using contour lines to make topographic map interpretations of profile view landscapes seen in the museum. All ages enjoy drawing strip maps. These are linear routes from start to end points that include pictorial landmarks on both sides of the route (MacEachren, 1986; Southworth, 1982). The combination of discussion and graphic methods can facilitate a clearer expression of the organization of spatially structured elements (Lehman-Frisch, 2012).

A similar approach to The Kreeger Museum's program is in use by art and geography teachers at The National Cathedral School in Washington, DC. One unit develops content and skills in three disciplines – Geography, Visual Arts, and Language Arts (Schell, Roth, & Mohan, 2013). Students explore the geographic concept of a sense of place and the ways that people use the arts (visual and literary) to express their connection to a particular place. Two different landscapes with low annual precipitation are explored – the Arctic and the Southwest United States. The Arctic focus compares the

paintings of Norwegian artist Ingrid Jangaard Ousland, whose Arctic landscapes speak volumes of her passion for this bewitching place, with the diary entries of Knud Rasmussen, famous Arctic explorer. The paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe and prose of Willa Cather comprise the exploration of place in the Southwest. Following the development of a sense of place for these two dry but very different spaces on the globe, students express their own connection to a special place of their choosing in both visual and written forms.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 4. Middle school student work in progress. Courtesy, The Kreeger Museum, Washington D.C.

3 Profound connections between art and geography were explored in the exhibit "Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa" at the National Museum of African Art. The curriculum resource unit accompanying the exhibition provided lesson plans around five themes: *Material Earth*, *Power of the Earth*, *Imagining the Underground*, *Strategies of the Surface*, and *Environmental Action* (The Smithsonian Institution, 2013). Like the Kreeger's program, the unit emphasized both teaching for content and encouraging self-expression.

Traditionally, art teachers direct students to consider spatial relationships within a work of art. The Kreeger approach broadens consideration of space beyond the frame of a painting or setting of a sculpture. It provides each work its “fit,” or place, in a global perspective and helps the student develop an expanded mental map of different places and cultures. While the Kreeger program is specific to its collections, the same approach is easily applied to different works of art in other museums. Wherever presented, the method of combining art and geography teaches that people everywhere make art, they make it in different ways, and what they make is strongly influenced by where they are and their perspective of that place. These simple statements underlie understanding and appreciation of spaces and places around the world. Students in the greater metropolitan area of Washington, DC, so many of them immigrants or children of immigrants, have responded to an emphasis on place in discussions of paintings, sculpture and masks from many regions of the world by making comparisons with places in their own experience. The Kreeger Museum’s *Art&Geography: School Tour and Workshop* is a multicultural program based on direct observation and discussion of specific artworks rather than oversimplified generalizations or hearsay stereotypes.

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