



# CRAFT IN AMERICA

## EDUCATION GUIDE

### Thomas Mann: Design Vocabulary



*"Maybe I can actually invent a design system, whereby I make objects that appear to be found. Maybe I could develop, what I call a design vocabulary, that could be infinitely mutate-able..."*

- Thomas Mann

#### LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will view the jewelry and sculptural forms of Thomas Mann. Students will consider how Mann produces his work, and how he goes about transmitting messages in his work. Through a collaborative activity, students will create a design vocabulary upon which all students can draw in order to create a sculptural form that transmits a personal message.

**Grade Level:** 8-12

**Estimated Time:** Five to seven 45-minute class periods

**Craft In America Theme/Episode:** MESSAGES

#### Background Information

Thomas Mann is an artist who works in the medium of jewelry and sculpture. The primary design vocabulary that he employs in the making of jewelry objects combines industrial aesthetics and materials with evocative romantic themes and imagery. He calls this design system Techno Romantic. Though it is not the only design mode in which he works, it is the one for which he and his work is best known.

#### Key Concepts

- Artists can create their own design vocabulary and then manipulate the "vocabulary" to build meaning
- Artists transmit messages
- Used together, multiple symbols affect the meaning of the whole



## Critical Questions

- What is a design vocabulary?
- In what ways do artists transmit messages?
- Must the message received by the viewer of an art object be the message intended by the artist?

## Objectives

Students will:

- View the jewelry and sculptural work of Thomas Mann.
- Create a design vocabulary.
- Utilize this design vocabulary to create a sculptural form with a message.
- Contribute ideas to the group.
- Construct a sculptural form.

## Vocabulary

Symbolism, personal adornment, cold connection

## Interdisciplinary Connections

Language Arts

## National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard:

1. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
2. Using knowledge of structures and functions
3. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
5. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others



## Resources and Materials for Teaching

### Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *MESSAGES*. Also viewable online at [www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/messages](http://www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/messages)
- Craft in America website: [www.craftinamerica.org](http://www.craftinamerica.org)
- Thomas Mann's website, [www.thomasmann.com](http://www.thomasmann.com)
- Codrescu and Herman's *Thomas Mann, Metal Artist*, Madison, WI: Guild Publishing, 2001
- Joanna Gollberg's *Making Metal Jewelry: Projects, Techniques, Inspiration*, Lark Books, 2003
- Susan Lenart Kazmer's *Making Connections: A Handbook of Cold Joins for Jewelers and Mixed Media Artists*, Loveland, CO: Interweave Press; 2nd ed., 2008

### Worksheets

- *Mann Made Hearts*
- *Design Vocabulary*

### Materials for Jewelry Making

- Beading needles
- Thread
- Glass or plastic seed beads
- Embroidery floss and embroidery needles
- glue

## Materials for Studio Embellishment

- Jewelry findings
- Polyester casting resin
- Acrylic medium
- Classroom safe epoxies and strong glues
- Tin snips
- Various pliers, needle nose, etc.
- Various gauge wires
- Heavy duty sewing needles
- Vice, to hold materials in place while working
- Steel wool, sandpaper
- Small found metal, plastic, or other sturdy materials

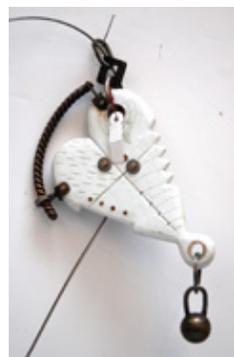


## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

View the 12.5 min. Thomas Mann segment of the Craft in America *MESSAGES* episode on the DVD or online at [www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/thomas-mann-segment](http://www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/thomas-mann-segment)

### After Viewing

- Follow the viewing with a conversation about Mann's work. Allow for students to respond to his work. Ask, what objects does the artist create? How are his various artworks similar? How do they differ?
- Bring up Mann's website for more images to evoke further discussion. How does the artist come up with ideas? What materials does he use?
- Invite students to consider their own personal responses to the artist's work. What do they especially like about the artist's work?
- Finally, direct student attention to the artist's incorporation of the heart. Ask, how does the heart appear throughout the artist's work?
- Remind students that the Craft In America video segment focuses on the theme of messages. What messages might be conveyed by the artist's use of the heart symbol?
- Pass out the *Mann Made Hearts* worksheet. Instruct the students to carefully look at the variety of heart forms and start to consider the following questions:
- What does a heart mean?
- Does the meaning of each heart on the worksheet stay the same or change?
- What messages do you get from these heart forms?
- Are there two hearts that you think transmit the same message?
- Are there two hearts that you think transmit very different messages?
- Try to "read" at least one example that incorporates additional elements along with the heart form.
- What role does the heart play in transmitting the message?



## Creating a Design Vocabulary

Have students consider Mann's approach to the heart symbol. Refer to the quote above in which the artist states, "Maybe I can actually invent a design system, whereby I make objects that appear to be found. Maybe I could develop, what I call a design vocabulary, that could be infinitely mutate-able."

Guide students to understand that the artist is suggesting that his heart symbol can be changed in what he calls an "infinite" number of ways. Ask students to consider Mann's talk of a design "vocabulary." How do we usually think of a vocabulary? Help students see the connection between our typical use of the term "vocabulary" and the way in which the artist is using the term. As we arrange words in an "infinite" number of ways to create meaning, so, too, might the artist arrange and rearrange his symbols to create meaning. Thomas Mann has decided that within his design vocabulary the heart is "full of life" and he likes to express that through his many iterations of the heart form. Ask students to think of images/symbols that have widely accepted meaning. For example, a book most often means knowledge, or the pursuit of knowledge; a circle with a diagonal line dissecting it means that something is not allowed. Allow time for brainstorming and record ideas on a whiteboard or chart paper.

Empower the students with the idea that, like Thomas Mann and other artists, they can assign meaning to forms. Instruct the class that each student will choose a form, natural or human made, and make a simple drawing. Encourage students to choose forms that resonate with them, or suggest a story with which they can identify. Have each student contribute an idea using the *Design Vocabulary* worksheet. Each individual student will create his/her own symbol with its associated meaning. These will be combined so that, in essence, the class will be constructing its own design vocabulary. The completed design vocabulary worksheets can be hung together in the classroom so that students will have easy access to the entire vocabulary.

## Building Messages

Now that the students are equipped with a shared design vocabulary, present the idea of creating a three-dimensional form composed from this new vocabulary. In sketchbooks, the students should play with these images to begin to build personal messages. For instance, if the students have decided that a star will denote "getting attention," then students need to use that meaning, but can create their own star, or find an already existing star, such as on a bottle cap. Scale and placement of the images can further illustrate the message. A large star will read differently from a small star. A star inside of a heart will read differently from a star inside a fist, etc.

The goal is to combine selected symbols in a way that a message is conveyed. Basically, the students are to carefully compose a "sentence" or two with visual images.

Re-visit examples of Thomas Mann's work for further inspiration. His collage box pieces found on pages 74 through 79 in *Thomas Mann, Metal Artist* (book listed in resources list) may be particularly helpful at this stage.

This lesson is approached as a jewelry lesson, but is easily translated into any sculptural medium with which the teacher is comfortable. In order for some messages to be effective they may need to be larger in scale than a typical piece of jewelry.

The teacher can choose to have the class create a variation of a single kind of personal adornment such as a bracelet or a pendant. Alternatively, the teacher might open the project to allow each student to choose the jewelry form that best transmits his/her message.

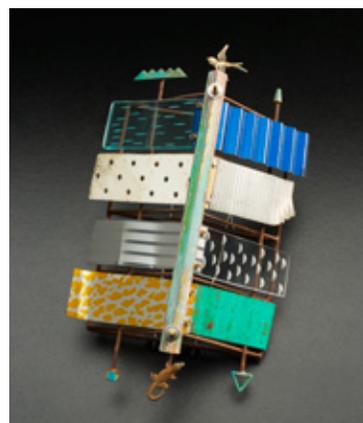
Teach students about cold-connection techniques. Cold metal work involves the connecting of metal fragments without the use of heat. Students can connect found metal objects and metal hardware items by wrapping them with wire, joining, tying, riveting, etc. Gather materials found under Teaching Materials for Studio Production. For more detailed information on coldconnecting techniques, see Joanna Gollberg's *Making Metal Jewelry: Projects, Techniques, Inspiration*, Lark Books, 2003 or Susan Lenart Kazmer's *Making Connections: A Handbook of Cold Joins for Jewelers and Mixed Media Artists*, Loveland, CO: Interweave Press; 2nd ed., 2008.

### **Embellishment:**

After planning, students will spend studio time creating their pieces. Beading techniques, embroidery, and other needlework may be demonstrated. Beads can be glued to a surface; they can also be strung on long pieces of thread and wrapped around an object, gluing to hold in place. Gluing and fastening methods suitable for various materials can be demonstrated.

Students may choose to create a sculpted figure or object by stuffing socks with fiberfill or rags. Such a stuffed tube can then be sculpted: a head may be formed by tying string tightly around the "neck," a needle with a long, sturdy thread can be stitched through the sock and pulled to create dimples, creases and indentations for sculptural effect. Soft surfaces, including pieces of fabric, pillows, or the stuffed sock sculptures, may be covered with beads in the following manner

- For beading, thread needle, bring thread ends together and knot at ends of lengths (thus doubling the strand).
- Passing the thread over an old wax candle can prevent the thread from tangling during stitching.
- Knot the thread on the back of the fabric or bury it within the stuffed sculpture by pulling tightly so the knot pops into the stuffing, then bring the needle out to the surface.
- Thread several beads- from one to seven works well- and take a stitch the total length of the stacked, threaded beads.
- Pull the thread gently snug to create one section of sewn beads.
- Continue stitching, placing lines of beads close together to create a dense, full surface of beads.
- Fasten off thread and add new thread as needed. Embroidery floss for embroidered stitches may be handled in the same manner as the beading thread.
- Separate the floss into two or three-strand sections for use, or use all six of the plies together for a thick thread.
- Knot at one end, or bring ends together and knot if thread is to be used doubled. Outline stitch looks like small dashes and is used to outlinedesigns. Other easy stitches include satin stitch, backstitch and chain stitch. These stitches are found in any embroidery or sewing book, as well as on line. As students work, encourage in process critiques to help focus the work.



## CLOSING STRATEGIES

### Reflection

Looking at the final products, have students conduct a Peer Review by attempting to decode the messages of each others' sculptural forms.

If the message is different from the artist's intent, ask the artist what they think of the interpretation. Does it change their initial idea for the message of their piece?

Have students consider the following questions in their sketchbooks: What was harder or easier—building the physical form or building the message from the design vocabulary? If considering personal adornment, will they wear what they have made? Did they make it for someone else? Do they think the person for whom they made the piece will be able to "read the message?"

### Assessment

By lesson's end, the students should be able to:

- Describe the work of Thomas Mann.
- Understand why artists might create a design vocabulary.
- Explain how they determined which visuals would best serve their message.
- Manipulate found/fashioned objects into meaningful jewelry/sculpture.

### Additional Resources

A further exploration of the ideas found in this lesson can be found in the Craft in America Educator Guide, *Community: Hand in Hand*: [www.craftinamerica.org/guides/community-hand-in-hand](http://www.craftinamerica.org/guides/community-hand-in-hand)

### Authors

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Lead Author for *Thomas Mann: Design Vocabulary* is Dolores E. Eaton. May 2011.

# Worksheet: Thomas Mann: Mann Made Hearts



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**Worksheet: Design Vocabulary**

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