

# CRAFT IN AMERICA

WHO INSPIRES YOU? EDUCATION GUIDE

*“Having come from a family of my mother who is a really powerful black female and my grandmother who was an educator, who was really a powerful black female...So I feel like it’s something I am really compelled to carry on.” – Alison Saar*

## LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will learn about the artists Alison Saar, Betye Saar, and Maddy Leaser whose works are inspired by the artist Simon Rodia and the Watts Towers as well as their deep interest in history, identity, and African American culture, whose style encompasses a variety of personal, artistic, and cultural references that reflect their own experiences. Their sculptures, installations, assemblages, and prints incorporate found objects including wood, old tin ceiling panels, nails, shards of pottery, glass, fabric, photographs, and other objects from popular culture. The resulting figures and objects become powerful totems exploring issues of gender, race, heritage, and history.

**Grade Level:** 7–12

**Estimated Time:** five or more 45-minute class periods

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

## Background Information

### Alison Saar

*“I wanted to make art that told a story.” – Alison Saar*

Alison Saar is a Los Angeles, California based sculptor, mixed-media, and installation artist. Her artwork focuses on her African American heritage and Black female identity and is influenced by African, Caribbean, and Latin American folk art and spirituality.

Alison Saar combines traditional and found materials to explore African American experiences, especially for women. Alison Saar’s sculptures, installations, and prints often use elements of African and Afro-Caribbean art to transform materials such as tin ceiling panels, nails, shards of pottery, and glass into pieces that evoke mythology and collective memory. Saar’s artwork is influenced by her mother, artist Betye Saar, who earned renown for her own materially inventive, conceptually rich assemblages.



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## Betye Saar

"To me the trick is to seduce the viewer. If you can get the viewer to look at a work of art, then you might be able to give them some sort of message." - Betye Saar

Betye Saar creates installations, shrines and assemblages that reflect her own mixed ancestry and she has been greatly influenced by the artists Joseph Cornell and his assemblage boxes and Simon Rodia and his work, the Watts Towers.

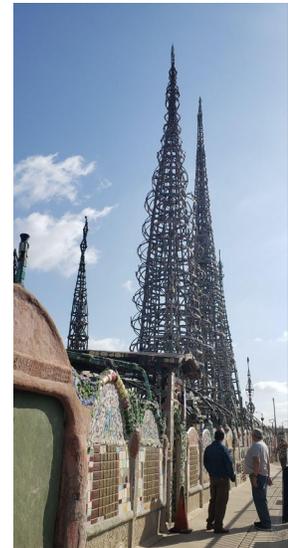
The artist has also often turned to her family and its history as sources for her work. "Keep for Old Memoirs" (1976), for example, includes fragments of letters and photographs saved by the artist's great aunt Hattie, along with a pair of gloves. Saar states that her favorite place to look for objects are flea markets and she keeps her flea market finds in her studio, organized by color and theme.



## Simon Rodia

"He built the towers by hand, alone, without machine tools, without nails, without scaffolding, without written plans and with no client to absorb the costs. He had no drill and used no bolts to hold together pieces of the steel he used." — Bud Goldstone and Arloa Paquin Goldstone in the book "The Los Angeles Watts Towers."

Simon Rodia was an artist mostly known for his large-scale installation in Watts, California, entitled *Nuestro Pueblo* (Our Town), but more commonly referred to as Watts Towers. He designed and built the Towers entirely himself, constructing them out of masonry, tile, and various found objects, and decorating the surfaces with hand-placed mosaics. Several structures compose the complete installation, the largest of which stands at 99 1/2 feet tall. This visionary environment has powerfully influenced generations of local LA artists, such as Betye Saar and many more around the world.



## **Key Concepts**

- Artists sometimes use found objects and materials when creating art.
- Artists can find inspiration for their art making from generations of family, friends, and/or community.
- Materials and objects can have special significance, may suggest associations, and can convey meaning.

## Critical Questions

- Who or what inspires you in your life and art?
- How can found objects and materials be used to convey a message?
- Why is the choice of materials and objects important in creating an artwork?

## Objectives

Students will:

- Carefully describe and discuss possible meaning in some artworks by Alison Saar.
- Investigate materials, techniques, and processes for creating three-dimensional artworks using found objects and materials.
- Choose objects and materials to create an artwork that sends a message or conveys meaning.

## Vocabulary

Found Objects, Totem, Heritage, Inspiration, Assemblage

## Interdisciplinary Connections

**Environmental Science:** This lesson explores materials and objects found in the natural world. The artists are inspired by history, cultural traditions, and family. Science classes can investigate found materials/objects and how they are used in daily life. Students explore environmental science concepts through their exploration of the local environment. Students will use found objects that are often discarded and repurpose them to create a found object sculpture. Key concepts surrounding this project are single use and disposable items and their impact on the environment, recycling, and repurposing. Students are asked to sculpt a form that communicates a message about the environment.

**History/Social Studies:** This lesson explores aspects of found materials and objects in the environment. The artist is inspired by history, stories, family and found objects. Students may investigate the history of Assemblage, materials and techniques as related to cultural traditions. What purpose did found objects and other types of materials serve in a particular family, culture or society?

**Language Arts:** The activity in which students are encouraged to explore who and what inspires them has a clear connection with Language Arts. Students may write a story about who inspires them and how it has influenced their life and art. They can be encouraged to consider artists in their family or community whose work is inspired by where they live. You may wish to invite an artist to class, or take your students to visit the artist, focusing on the artist's inspiration.

## National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Anchor Standard #1, CREATING: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #2, CREATING: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #4, PRESENTING: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- Anchor Standard #8, RESPONDING: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11, CONNECTING: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

## Resources and Materials for Teaching Resources

- Craft in America INSPIRATION episode, [craftinamerica.org/episode/inspiration](http://craftinamerica.org/episode/inspiration) and Craft in America's website, [craftinamerica.org](http://craftinamerica.org)
- <https://youtu.be/tZgWbUkqB7I>
- [https://youtu.be/oENxmirq\\_eA](https://youtu.be/oENxmirq_eA)
- <https://www.artsy.net/artist/alison-saar>
- <https://youtu.be/b1j5pVULdS8>
- <https://youtu.be/T7CFz9xzhIM>
- <https://youtu.be/TBC8nOr4jqg>
- <https://youtu.be/ELvubvM0H64>

## Worksheets

- Worksheet 1: Investigating the Art of Alison Saar
- Worksheet 2 : Materials, Techniques and Process

## Materials

- Found Objects – from home and/or natural environment
- Various materials and resources: fabric, magazines, newspapers, butcher paper, drawing paper (fine and heavy grain), cardboard, picture books, photographs, wood, metal, tin, canvas, etc.
- Pencils, crayons, ink, paint
- Sketchbooks
- Tools/media: adhesives, thumbtacks, hammer, scissors, nails, string, yarn, etc.

Classroom materials and supplies will vary depending on the student's choice of form. Provide guidance for students regarding the materials available to them and encourage students to select materials that may enhance the visual messages they want to communicate.



## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

(one 45 minute class period)

Students will view the video to learn how Alison and Betye Saar are inspired in their artmaking by Simon Rodia and generations of their family and other artists. Students will be introduced to Alison and Betye Saar's materially inventive, conceptually rich assemblages and sculptures. They will carefully describe and interpret meaning in several of Alison's sculptures. They will learn about the belief shared by women spanning three generations that the choice of materials can enrich the meaning of the artwork. Students will explore various sources of inspiration for their artmaking. They create a three-dimensional artwork that incorporates found objects and materials and conveys meaning. They reflect upon their completed work, noting its use of materials and objects, its meaning, and the sources of inspiration.

Students will watch the segment on the Saar family and Simon Rodia and the Watts Towers in the INSPIRATION episode at [craftinamerica.org/episode/inspiration](https://craftinamerica.org/episode/inspiration).

### Before Viewing

Begin a discussion about objects and meaning. You may wish to share a personally significant object with your students (a rolling pin that belonged to your grandmother, a dog collar from a special pet, a baseball from a game in which you played very well, etc.). Invite students to tell about objects in their own lives that have special personal significance.

Note with your students that these objects mentioned look like any other of their type. Their significance has little to do with how they look; they are significant because they are connected to a person or an event. The objects have histories. And they represent ideas—family, relationships, accomplishment, for example.

Explain that in the video segment they are about to see, they will learn about some artists who created artworks by combining objects and materials. Invite students to note the various materials used by the artists. Also suggest that they pay close attention to objects that get combined with materials in the artworks they will see.

Finally, explain that as they view the video, there will be a focus on the idea of Inspiration. They will be introduced to Simon Rodia, an artist who lived and worked in Los Angeles in the past, and three generations of women artists--Betye Saar, her daughter, Alison Saar, and Alison's daughter, Maddy Leaser. Invite students to pay attention to who or what serves as an inspiration for each of these artists.



## After Viewing

First, invite students to respond in general to the video. What did they find especially interesting? What questions do they have?

Discuss the following:

- Have students recall the artists featured in the video. Who was Simon Rodia? What did he create? What kinds of materials did he use?
- Who is Betye Saar? What kind of artworks does Betye Saar create? What materials and objects does the artist use in her artwork? Who or what inspires Betye Saar? How do you know?
- Who is Alison Saar? What kind of artworks does Alison Saar create? What materials and objects does she use in her artworks? Who or what inspires Alison Saar? How do you know?
- Who is Maddy Leeser? What kind of artworks does Maddy Leeser create? What materials and objects does she use in her work? Who or what inspires Maddy Leeser? How do you know?

Recall with students that they learned about Betye and Alison Saar, both contemporary artists living in Los Angeles. The video presented the artists as they discussed the inspiration for their conceptually rich works of art and the messages they convey. One such inspiration is Simon Rodia whose work, the Watts Towers, had a great influence on Betye Saar's artmaking. After seeing Rodia's work, Betye was inspired by the materials that Simon Rodia used, the broken dishes, sea shells, rusty tools—all pressed into cement to create spires. Alison is also inspired by Rodia, but more importantly, she is inspired by her mother, her grandmother, and the many other strong African American women in her family and community. At one point in the video, she refers to them as "intense ladies."

Recall the idea of Inspiration. Ask the following questions:

- Who or what inspires you? Where do you get your ideas for your artwork? Is there someone, an event or other artists that inspire you? In what ways do family members or artists inspire you? Perhaps materials or objects offer you inspiration. Explain that artists have different sources of inspiration and that they might be inspired by different cultural traditions, family, and other artists.

Share the following comment made by Alison Saar.

*"Both of my parents were artists. I think my own work falls in between the influences between both of them."* – Alison Saar

Hand out the Worksheet 1: Investigating the Art of Alison Saar. Students may work in pairs or small groups to address the questions. Students may return to the video and/or go online to find examples of the artist's sculptures. Ask students to share their responses to the questions about Alison Saar's art.

Ask them to consider the following quote by the artist as they discuss her work.

*"I make art about my African American ancestry."* – Alison Saar

- What does the artist mean by this statement? Why is her African American ancestry important to her?



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Help students understand why the artists select the materials they use in their work and that they choose materials purposefully.

Help students understand that the artists often begin with an idea, are inspired by family, events, or history, and allow for ideas to change during the process of working.

Explain how each artist uses different materials, techniques, and processes for their artmaking. Discuss Alison and Betye Saar and show examples of their installations and assemblages. Discuss how they both work with found objects and symbolism.

### **Studio Production**

**(three or more 45-minute class periods)**

Have students complete Worksheet 2, *Inspiration and Meaning*. They may work together in pairs or individually. Ask them to discuss the questions and share their answers. As a prelude to their own art making, this worksheet focuses on sources of inspiration and ways that objects and materials can have meaning.

Tell students they will be creating a three-dimensional artwork that has meaning. They will use found objects and materials that add to its meaning. In addition, students are to identify one or more sources of inspiration for their artwork. The inspiration may be a person, place, object, a piece of writing or music, for example. Students also might be inspired by an event.

Explain that their three-dimensional artwork should demonstrate an understanding of the relationship among various objects, materials, techniques, and subject matter. Remind students that the juxtaposition of the objects and materials can enhance their artwork's meaning or message.

You may wish to discuss and show examples of other artists who use found objects in their works of art. Possible examples include artists Ulla-Stina Wikander, Shih Chieh Huang, and Howard A. Jones.

Have students collect various found objects and materials to use in their artwork. They may choose to bring in objects and materials from home and/or the natural environment. Have them look through the materials gathered and discuss the objects and materials and their possible significance or symbolism.

In their sketchbook, have students sketch possible ideas for their project. Artists put a lot of thought into how they want to organize their artworks. Investigate ways to arrange/create your artwork and record the process and techniques you investigated.

Remind students that their artwork might feature something they care about deeply, and that it conveys a message inspired by someone or something. Suggest that they return to one of the artists' websites and pay attention to the ideas the artists have explored in their artworks. Ask students to brainstorm with each other for ideas.

Once they've settled on an idea, have students sketch their idea with notes about how their object and what materials will convey a message or idea. Encourage students to explore possible ways to construct their artwork and to help each other determine the best way to create it.



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Tell students they must use at least one found object as well as different materials. This could be fabric swatches, metal, plastic, newspapers, magazines, book illustrations, images from the internet, photographs, sticks, stones, beads— again, the possibilities are open. Provide materials and tools.

## CLOSING STRATEGIES

### Reflection

Engage students in a discussion or have them write in their sketchbooks about their completed artworks. Are they pleased with their completed work? Why or why not? Do they believe that the object(s) and materials contribute to its meaning?

Have students write an artist's statement to accompany the display of their artworks. Suggest they include the source of inspiration for their artwork. Have students consider how they might display their artworks as a class.

You may also invite students to work in pairs to discuss each other's story/message. Pairs should discuss what it is like to create artwork using found objects and the materials, techniques, and tools they used.

### Assessment

By the end of this lesson students should be able to:

- Carefully describe and discuss possible meaning in some artworks by Alison Saar.
- Discuss similarities and differences among materials, techniques, and processes for creating three-dimensional artworks using found objects and materials.
- Choose objects and materials to create an artwork that sends a message or conveys meaning.

### Additional Resources

- <https://www.howardjonesartist.com>
- <http://www.ullastinawikander.com>
- <https://feldmangallery.com/artist-home/shih-chieh-huang>
- <https://artincontext.org/found-object-art>



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## **Extensions**

Students may investigate the work of other artists, discovering their inspirations and materials used in their art and the meaning behind the materials and designs. Are their artworks autobiographical, or tell a story? Who or what inspired the artist?

## **Authors**

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## Worksheet 1: Investigating the Art of Alison Saar

Work with at least one classmate to investigate the art of Alison Saar, based on the artworks shown in the video. You may rewatch the video or find examples of her sculptures online.

1. Describe in general terms a few of the artworks by the artist shown in the video.  
What do they have in common?
  
2. Recall that in one scene, the artist ties small cast-iron skillets together. What was she making?  
How do you suppose she was going to use the skillets?

What significance do you think these objects have? What might they symbolize?

How does this use of these objects fit with other sculptures by the artist shown in the video?

3. What materials do you recall the artist using? How was she working with the materials?

What tool or tools was she using?

What significance or special meaning might her choice of materials and tools have?

4. According to the artist, tin ceiling sheets have histories and "memories." She says they are "witnesses." What do you suppose she means? How might a piece of ceiling tin serve as a witness?



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5. Alison Saar also says that the tin ceiling pieces refer to “scarification, tattooing, and identity that depends on how you mark your body.” In order for those pieces of tin to have that meaning, how would the artist need to use them?
  
6. About Alison Saar’s work, a curator in the video says, “What makes her work so compelling is her efforts to reclaim the narratives of gender and race by presenting ordinary individuals as agents of their own change and monumentality in this life.” Do you agree with this description of her work? Why?
  
7. In the video, the artist says that the women on her mother’s side of the family and her African American heritage is profoundly important for her identity. She also says that her mother and grandmother were both powerful Black females and that she feels compelled to “carry on.” Do you think her artwork is about powerful Black females? Why or why not?
  
8. What can you take away from thinking carefully about the work of Alison Saar?
  
9. How might her work become an inspiration for your own artwork?

What ideas about people might inspire you?

What ideas about materials might inspire you?

What ideas about objects might inspire you?



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## Worksheet 2: Inspiration and Meaning

*"Both of my parents were artists. I think my own work falls in between the influences between both of them."* - Alison Saar

### Making and Inspiration

1. List some family or community members who make things. They may make cakes, videos, embroidery or other kinds of needlework, boats, as well as paintings or pottery, for example.
2. How did these family or community members learn to make what they make?
3. What are the sources of their inspiration?
4. What kinds of things have you made in the past? Who taught you how to make these things? What has inspired you in your own artmaking?

