

H. C. Westermann, *Cliff* (1971)

Horace Clifford (H.C.) Westermann (1922-1981) worked as a logger and rail worker in the Pacific Northwest. When World War II intensified, he enlisted in the Marines, serving as a gunner in the Pacific from 1942 to 1946. Westermann toured the region as an acrobat with the United Service Organization, and following his discharge, he enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago. His education was cut short, however, and he re-enlisted to in the Korean War from 1951 until 1953. Following this war, Westermann returned to Chicago, completed his art education, and worked in a carnival as a trapeze artist, acrobat, and contractor. In time, Westermann drew from his diverse past and became one of the most famous American sculptors of his time.

Taking pride in his hand-made carpentry, Westermann worked in diverse media and art forms, from wooden boxes to metal machines, tableaux, model houses, and a wide variety of figural sculptures. Up until his death in 1981, Westermann incorporated his carpentry skills into his sculpture, constantly shifting and challenging his viewers' expectations of both his style and art in general.

H. C. Westermann was wildly original, working in a broad range of scale, materials, and symbolic vocabularies, alternating between naiveté, sharp wit, complexity, austerity, cliché, and vivid originality. An eternal wisecracker, he lampooned American materialism, war, and artistic sensibilities. He greatly valued physical fitness, independence, and hard work, as well as a wry sense of humor.

Cliff is both an example of a *vitrine*, a box with glass sides, and Westermann's visual-verbal punning, here a play on his middle name, Clifford. Westermann is a master of the corny, the comic, and the ironic, creating capricious and complex artworks that consistently display both wit and whimsy. Whether as a printmaker or a sculptor, Westermann was particularly interested in warfare and visual humor, mingling the brutal with the delightful, and frequently drawing imagery from popular culture.

In *Cliff*, Westermann creates a dramatic, technically complex scene, incorporating borrowed elements and humor. Westermann presents an iconic image of American popular culture, a cowboy on a horse rearing back from a plunging cliff, pursued by "savage Indians." The tableau seems straightforward, communicating Westermann's

ideals of manliness and self-reliance in a thoroughly American setting. The pun involving his name associates these traits with himself.

Questions to Consider

1. What sort of setting does the background depict?
2. What information can you glean from looking closely at the silver person?
3. What sort of qualities would you expect a cowboy to have?
4. What is the mood of this scene?
5. Create a narrative from the details of the scene.
6. The silver cowboy figure is actually a chrome-plated hood ornament and the background is a painting by Westermann's wife, Joanna. How do these inclusions affect your interpretation?

Connections

Art: Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, American crafts, carpentry.

Authors: Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller.

History: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War.

Further Reading

McCarthy, David. *H. C. Westermann at War: Art and Manhood in Cold War America*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, c2004.

Rooks, Michael. *H. C. Westermann: Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné of Objects*. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art in association with Harry N. Abrams: 2001.

Storr, Robert. *H. C. Westermann*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Contemporary Museum. *Dreaming of a Speech Without Words: the Paintings and Early Objects of H. C. Westermann*. Honolulu: Contemporary Museum, 2006.

Westermann, H. C. *Letters from H. C. Westermann*. New York: Timken Publishers, 1988.

Teachers' Extensions

Work: Cliff (1971)

Artist: Horace Clifford Westermann

Location of work: Indiana University Art Museum (IUAM)

Vocabulary/Key Concept(s):

American Popular Culture is the collection of ideas that are popular, well-liked or common and create (mirror) the prevailing culture. These ideas are heavily influenced by the mass media. Popular culture is the views and perspectives most strongly represented and accepted within a society.

Materialism A preoccupation with or a stress upon material [things/objects] rather than spiritual or intellectual things.

Art Connection(s):

Vitrine A glass-paneled cabinet or (show) case for displaying articles such as china, objects d'art or fine merchandise.

Modernism The dominant theory guiding the creation of art from the 1860's through the 1960's. In the mid-nineteenth century, a growing middle class, the increasing capitalism of the art market, and the gradual secularization and industrialization of society all contributed to a radical shift in the role of art in society. This new sentiment manifested itself in a variety of styles, but common throughout was the idea that art should be valued for its own sake. Artists abandoned traditional subjects of historical and religious scenes, experimenting instead with formal elements of color, space, and light.

Found Object (art) Any item found by the artist and presented as a work of art, with little or no alteration. An object not originally designed to have "artistic value" that the artist selects and displays as a work of art.

Geography Connection(s):

Cliff: The American West

Time Line Connection:

1971

Resources:

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) *Picturing America* website:
<http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/>

Connect to web links below by clicking on individual address or access through the NEH site for Additional Resources at:

http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/about.php?subPage=about_ad_res

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=641

National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITement, *Horse of a Different Color: An Introduction to Color in the Visual Arts* has two lesson plans on color; the first: In-Depth with the Full Spectrum, for Grade 9-12, introduces students to color basics, the color wheel, and how artists manipulate color to draw attention to the aspects of their work.

http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/building_lessons/

Getty Museum Education department Web site, *Teachers' Programs and Resources*, is designed for K-12 teachers who wish to introduce art and art history into their classrooms. The site uses works from the museum's collection along with pages A Grade-by-Grade Guide, The Elements of Art (teaching the formal components of art such as line and color) and a PDF file, Lesson Template.

Web sites:

Horace C. Westermann: Meet the Artist

http://www.mcachicgao.org/westermanncurriculum/right/meet_the_artist.html

Includes: Bibliography, glossary, images of his work and additional resources

http://www.mcachicago.org/westermanncurriculum/right/looking_at_printmaking.html

Includes information about printmaking (Westermann and printmaking)

http://www.mcachicago.org/westermanncurriculum/thematic_links.html

Includes: Thematic Links –

Craftsmanship: Creative Writing, Mathematics
War (World War II) : Social Science, Art, History
Social and Political Commentary: Creative Writing, Art
Technology and Science: Mathematics, Science, Art
Travel and Transportation: Social Science, Geography, Art
Humor: Language Arts – Creative Writing, Art

http://www.mcachicago.org/westermann/right/craftsmanship_process.html

Includes information, glossary regarding Westermann's craftsmanship and woodworking skills with accompanying lesson plans for grades 6-8.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._c._Westermann

Includes: Bibliography, list of works, additional resources

Popular Culture

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_culture

Includes: definitions, examples from popular culture (images included) and additional references

Modernism

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=618

Lesson Plan: Navigating Modernism – Introduction to Modernist Poetry

U.S. History

Grades: 6-12

Includes: Introduction/history, questions, learning objectives, activities, assessment, lesson extensions, additional website resources

Indiana Academic Standards – Visual Arts Grade/Level 5

RESPONDING TO ART: History

Standard 1

Students understand the significance of visual art in relation to historical, social, political, spiritual, environmental, technological, and economic issues.

5.1.1 Identify the relationship between a work of art and the geography and characteristics of the culture, and identify where, when, why, and by whom the work was made (Focus: North America).

5.1.2 Identify and compare works of art and artifacts with similar functions.

5.1.3 Identify themes and symbols used in works of art and artifacts throughout history that portray universal ideas and beliefs.

Standard 2

Students recognize significant works of Western and non-Western art and understand the chronological development of art movements.

5.2.1 Identify and be familiar with a range of selected works of art identifying artists, culture, style, and period.

5.2.2 Identify distinguishing characteristics of style in individual artists work and art movements.

RESPONDING TO ART: Criticism

Standard 3

Students describe, analyze, and interpret works of art and artifacts.

5.3.1 Analyze the artist's use of sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties in a work of art.

5.3.2 Construct meaning in the work based on personal response, properties found in the work, and background information on the context of the work.

5.3.3 Use appropriate art vocabulary.

Standard 4

Students identify and apply criteria to make informed judgments about art.

5.4.1 Listen to multiple critiques of works of art by peers, teachers, people from the art world and identify criteria used.

5.4.2 Apply criteria based on properties found in the work and research from the historical context of the work to make informed judgments.

RESPONDING TO ART: Aesthetics

Standard 5

Students reflect on and discuss art theories and aesthetic issues concerning the meaning and significance of art.

5.5.1 Identify problems or puzzles in a work of art or aesthetic issue, construct a hypothesis, and evaluate alternate hypotheses.

5.5.2 Identify and analyze a variety of well reasoned points of view on aesthetic issues (censorship, plagiarism) and develop a personal point of view.

Standard 6

Students theorize about art and make informed judgments.

5.6.1 Identify artwork made from the artist's philosophy that art is at its best when it moves people to act for the betterment of society (instrumentalism).

5.6.2 Understand that personal preference is one of many criteria used in making judgments about art.

INTEGRATED STUDIES

Standard 13

Students identify and make connections between knowledge and skill in art and all other subject areas such as humanities, sciences, and technology.

5.13.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple perspectives of different disciplines.

5.13.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

National Academic Standards – Visual Arts – Level 5

Content Standard #3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Achievement Standard:

Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks
Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

Content Standard #4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Achievement Standard:

Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures
Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts
Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

Content Standard #5: Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Achievement Standard:

Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art
Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry
Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures

Content Standard #6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Achievement Standard:

Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context