
Art Masterpiece: Frederick MacMonnies - *Nathan Hale*

Keywords: Sculpture, Light, Shadow, Texture

Grade: 5th and 6th

Lesson: Wire/Clay Sculpture

About the Artist:

Frederick MacMonnies was born in 1863 and showed his talent for sculpture at an early age. At age 18 he apprenticed with famed sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. In 1888 he opened his own studio in Paris and began to create some of his greatest works. Soon after, he was chosen by the City of New York to display his sculpture of American patriot, Nathan Hale. MacMonnies is considered to be one of the most accomplished sculptors of his time and his works can still be seen in parks throughout New York, Paris and many cities throughout America.

About Nathan Hale, the man:

The bronze sculpture, *Nathan Hale*, is based on a real-life person who was a Captain in George Washington's Army during the American Revolutionary War. He volunteered for an intelligence-gathering mission in New York City to spy on the British but was captured and sentenced to death. He was 21, and the first American executed by the British, for spying on behalf of his Country. He is also remembered for his famous last words before his execution: **"I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."** Hale has long been considered an American hero and, in 1985, he was officially designated the State Hero of Connecticut.

The original sculpture is located in City Hall Park, New York, but many copies have been commissioned and placed in many cities throughout the United States. One copy stands guard between the CIA Auditorium and the Original Headquarters Building. It serves as a constant reminder to CIA employees of the duties and sacrifices of an intelligence officer.



About the Art:

Through the sculpture, MacMonnies is able to convey to the viewer both the consequences of war and the patriotism of the American people. The statue is meant to capture Hale moments before his execution—a 21-year-old man prepared to meet his fate for honor and country. His face resolute and eyes on the horizon. Hale stands very upright, with shoulders back and chin lifted as an indication of pride and steadfastness. However, his appearance is not idealized, as his clothes are stretched and rumpled and his hair is disheveled. The sculpture suggests determination. Notice that only the face, neck and chest are polished, and are used to reflect light and bring attention to Hale's expression. The use of texture and light enhances Hale's expression and makes him appear proud but realistic about his fate.



Nathan Hale also suggests larger themes of sacrifice and bravery. Sculpture is the ideal medium to convey these themes because the artist is able to play with light, shadow, and texture to create a vivid and powerful image for the viewer. Furthermore, famous historical figures are often sculpted and placed in public areas where viewers can enjoy and understand their significance.

Discussion Questions:

- * What do you see in this sculpture?
- * How does the artist make *Nathan Hale* appear brave and patriotic?
- * How does this sculpture make you feel? What artistic techniques are used to make you feel that way?
- * How does creating a sculpture of Nathan Hale seem more appropriate than a painting?
- * If you had to create a sculpture of a famous historical figure, who would you choose and how would you sculpt him or her?

Activity: Wire Sculpture

Materials: Twisteeze colored wire and air-dry clay for mounting.

1. Give each student 2 twisteeze colored wires and tell them to experiment with it before deciding what they will sculpt. Left to their own innate inventiveness, and given total creative rein, your students may invent new and different methods of wire sculpture.
2. Tell the students to loop, twist, wrap, or mangle their wires around until they like what they see. They may connect the wire as they loop, snag, twist, and braid or kink the wires to hold them in place as they work on their "wire drawings". As they train themselves to draw with wire instead of ink, their hands will invent new ways to handle the wire.
3. Once they have completed their sculpture, have the students create a base using a lump of air dry clay. Have them scratch their name and room number onto the underside of the base using a paperclip or sculpting tool. Finally, tell them to stick an end of the wire into the clay to mount their sculpture.