

Jean (Hans) Arp

Teaching Resource

The Nature of Arp / September 15, 2018 - January 6, 2019

About Jean (Hans) Arp

Artist Jean (Hans) Arp was born in 1886 in Strasbourg, the capital city of Alsace. This region was claimed alternately by Germany and France because of changing borders caused by World War I and World War II. Arp's given name was Hans, but he later chose to go by the French equivalent, "Jean," reflecting the shifting cultural and personal identity he experienced in his lifetime.

- Think about a time in your life when you shifted between two identities. How did that experience shape how you think about and express yourself?

Arp was a pioneer in making abstract artwork. He was a founder of the Dada movement and later explored Surrealism and other art movements of the early 20th century. Creating sculptures, reliefs, collages, drawings, textiles, and writings throughout his lifetime (d. 1966), Arp challenged art traditions and introduced chance, humor, and collaboration in his artistic process. Arp influenced fellow artists as well as the generations of artists that followed. Among them are Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Barbara Hepworth, Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Claes Oldenburg and Alexander Calder, whose works can be seen at the Nasher in *Foundations: The Nature of Arp*.



Jean (Hans) Arp with *Navel-Monocle*, c. 1926

Nature

we do not want to copy nature. we do not want to reproduce, we want to produce. we want to produce like a plant that produces a fruit and not to reproduce. we want to produce directly and not through representation.

– Jean (Hans) Arp

After witnessing what he called "the ugliness of man" during the war, Arp turned to nature for inspiration. The result was a body of work that featured organic shapes and fluid forms. Human and animal parts like torsos and navels, plant buds, branches and pistils were common components of Arp's work that lent themselves to a range of interpretations. A form called a torso in one work might be called a bottle, vase or mandolin in others.

- Go outdoors and observe four natural objects. Make simple shape sketches of these life fragments (leaf, branch, grass, cone, cloud, etc.). Combine two or more of these to make your own biomorphic creation.



Lunar Fruit, 1936. Duralumin, (1/1; cast 1958).
41 3/4 x 57 x 44 7/8 in. (106 x 145 x 114 cm).
Fondazione Marguerite Arp, Locarno.

Arp wanted to capture the "immediate and direct production" he observed in nature's repeated and varied cycles—buds growing on a tree, leaves falling on the ground, a stone breaking away from a cliff—so he often followed nature's operations of growth, decay and gravity in his work.

- Sketch one of Arp's nature-inspired sculptures. Now imagine that artwork has grown to a later stage of development. Add these thoughts to your original sketch.

Chance

i was born in nature. i draw things that recline, drift, ripen, fall. – Jean (Hans) Arp

Arp sometimes made art by tearing paper, closing his eyes and dropping the torn pieces, allowing the law of chance and gravity to control the composition's outcome.

- How does this process change the artist's role in making art?
- How do you think these abstract collages reflected his thoughts about nature's processes?
- In your classroom, create a class collage using drawings and torn, patterned, printed or colored paper. As you work together, think about other ways you can involve chance or gravity in this process.



First Papier déchiré, 1932. Torn-paper collage, 11 3/4 x 9 3/4 in. (30 x 23.8 cm). Fondazione Marguerite Arp, Locarno.

Collaboration

Arp worked with his wife, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and other artist and writer friends on collaborative drawings, collages and poetry. One type of collaborative art-making popular with the Surrealist group was called an "exquisite corpse." This strange title came from a Surrealist game in which each person in a group contributed random words to form an absurd sentence—an early example of which produced the phrase, "the exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine." Arp and other artists also used this process to create collaborative drawings on folded paper where each person was unaware of others' contributions until the work was unfolded.

- Create your own "exquisite corpse" with your classmates. First divide into groups of 2 – 4 people. Fold a piece of paper horizontally with one section for each person in your group.
- Have the first person draw in the top section, making marks just over the edge of the fold to show the next person where their drawing should connect.
- The first person should fold their drawing over so it is hidden, then pass the paper to the next person. Repeat until all sections are filled.
- Unfold the composition to enjoy everyone's contribution to the whole.



Exquisite Corpse, 1937. Collaborative work by (from top to bottom) Marcel Jean, Oscar Dominguez, Jean (Hans) Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Collage, 12 x 9 3/8 in. (31.4 x 23.6 cm). Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin / Rolandswerth.

Object-Language

Many of Arp's reliefs and two-dimensional drawings include objects and symbols that he used over and over, often combining them into new forms as one might combine two nouns into a compound word. These works combined body fragments such as torsos, noses, and navels as well as things objects like mustaches, shirtfronts, monocles, watches and hammers.

- Sketch a few things you have, wear or use every day that symbolize you? Create a title that personalizes your suite of things.



LEFT: *Mustache Hat*, *Merz 5: 7 Arpaden* by Hans Arp. *Second Portfolio of the Merz Publisher*, 1923. Made for the fifth issue of Kurt Schwitters's journal *Merz*. Lithograph. Each sheet approx. 17 11/16 x 13 3/4 in. (45 x 35 cm). Yale University Art Gallery. Gift of the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier. RIGHT: *Shirtfront and Fork*, 1922. Painted wood, 23 x 27 9/16 x 2 3/8 in. (58.4 x 70 x 6.1 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1983.3.1.



Arp stacked layers of wood, cut by carpenters, joined them with screws and painted them with defined areas of color. He often took them apart and reconfigured them. Hung in orientations high and low to expose their thickness and grain, the subjects of the works were hybrids of things that gave them an absurd twist of humor, much like his poetry.

Fragmentation

Arp started making plaster sculptures in the 1930s. Often making multiple casts, he would slice them apart for new works, stacking fragments together, conjoining them with fresh plaster, then filing, sanding and painting them to become an entirely new sculpture. In the remaking of the sculpture *Ptolemy I*, Arp used a saw to slice the work to create *Daphne*, a woman in Greek mythology who turned into a tree to escape the god Apollo.

- How does Arp's process of transforming one sculpture into another reflect the story of Daphne?
- How does the sculpture *Daphne* resemble a tree fragment?



LEFT: *Ptolemy I*, 1953. Plaster, 40 ½ x 20 ¾ x 17 in. (102.9 x 52.7 x 43.2 cm). Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden, University of California, Los Angeles. Gift of Madame Marguerite Arp. Courtesy Hammer Museum.
RIGHT: *Daphne*, 1955. Plaster, 48 3/16 x 15 3/8 x 11 3/4 in. (122.4 x 39 x 30 cm). Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin / Rolandswerth.

Glossary

Biomorphic – an abstract form or image that refers to or evokes a living form, such as a plant or the human body.

Dada – an art movement started in response to World War I that challenged traditional art and societal norms through humor, absurdity and mockery.

Relief – a sculpture with raised elements attached to a flat background plane.

Surrealism – an art movement founded in the early 1920s that focused on the subconscious mind and the importance of dreams.

Additional Resources

- [The Nature of Arp exhibition page](#)
- [Jean \(Hans\) Arp biography at the Guggenheim Museum](#)
- [Summary of the events of World War I and World War II](#)
- [Jean \(Hans\) Arp lesson plans from the Turner Contemporary](#)

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Creative Expression, Historical and Cultural Relevance, Critical Evaluation and Response | §117.302 Art, Level I (c) (2), (3), and (4)

English Language Arts and Reading: Listening and Speaking | §110.31 English I (b) (24)

Social Studies: Causes and Impact of World War I | §113.42 World History Studies (c) (10)