

Robert Rauschenberg Teaching Resource

Rauschenberg Sculpture / January 31 – April 26, 2026

About Robert Rauschenberg

(Pronounced RAH-bert ROW-shun-burg)

Born Milton Rauschenberg in 1925 in Port Arthur, Texas, the artist grew up in a working-class, Fundamentalist household. Rauschenberg's father was a lineman for a large power company, and his mother worked as a seamstress; both of their occupations greatly impacted his artmaking later in life. His mother often assembled clothing for the family from discarded scraps, which likely influenced his openness to create using found materials and abandoned objects. His familiarity with his father's role at work and his gritty, industrial surroundings fostered an acquaintance with machinery and technical materials. An upbringing in a booming industrial port introduced Rauschenberg to the power of ideas and enterprise, an awareness of environmentalism, self-reliance, and the ability to improvise. Like many young creatives, Rauschenberg elaborately decorated his bedroom by sketching every surface he could reach and dividing the shared space with crates and objects he found around the city.



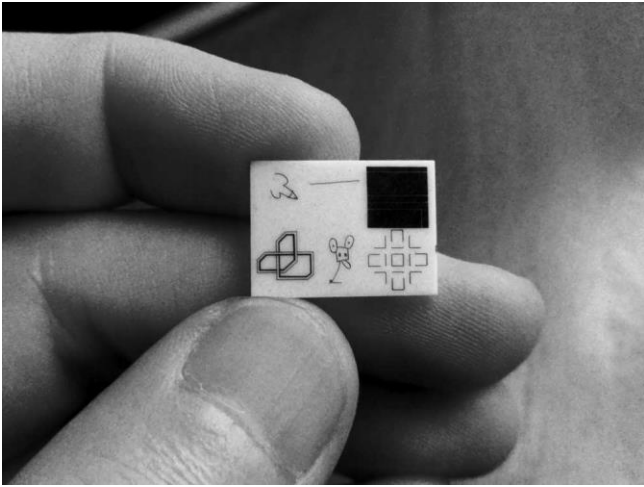
Robert Rauschenberg in Captiva, Florida c. 1982

As a child, Rauschenberg was encouraged to become a Fundamentalist minister, but discarded the idea when he learned that his love for dancing was considered a sin. After graduating from high school (where he was involved in costume and set design for the theater department), he enrolled in a pharmacology program at the University of Texas, Austin. Due to undiagnosed dyslexia, the coursework became too difficult, and he left the program in 1943. Only months passed before he was drafted into the U.S. Navy and served as a Neuropsychiatric Technician during WWII. Years later, after being honorably discharged, Rauschenberg used the G.I. Bill's funding for servicemen's education and studied at the Kansas City Arts Institute, the Académie Julian, and Black Mountain College, where he met the friends and artists that he would know and work with for decades to come.

Rauschenberg is considered one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Due to his impact on other artists, historian Charles Stuckey wrote that the second half of the 20th century should be called the "Rauschenberg Era." In addition to his artistic inspiration, Rauschenberg was committed to activism and worked hard to broaden artists' rights, working with lobbyists and organizations like the NEA. He later self-funded an organization called the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, which sought to expand communication between and comprehension of diverse cultures through the study of art.

Rauschenberg lived primarily in New York City from the early 1950's to the 1970's, when he moved his residence and studio to a property on Captiva Island, Florida. His residence on Captiva Island allowed him

the extensive space he needed to build multiple fabrication studios for the various disciplines he explored in his work. He worked there from 1970 until he died in 2008. His studio was transformed into an artist residency program offered to artists from around the globe.



Moon Museum, 1969. Photo: Jade Dellinger

While you explore, think about this!

Rauschenberg is known for collaborations that crossed disciplines. During his career, he worked with artists of all kinds (dancers, composers, poets, photographers), engineers, scientists, and philosophers. In 1969, Rauschenberg worked with Bell Labs scientists on a project titled *Moon Museum* to place a ceramic microchip filled with art, including his own, on the moon via Apollo 12. His contribution was a single, bold line that resembled the living pulse of an echocardiogram.

What might you include in an art exhibition on the moon?

Keywords and Concepts

Combine: Rauschenberg's combination of painting and sculpture. 'Combines' were hybrid works that did not fit into any category at the time. They were made from accumulations of objects and together create their own sense of storytelling and order.

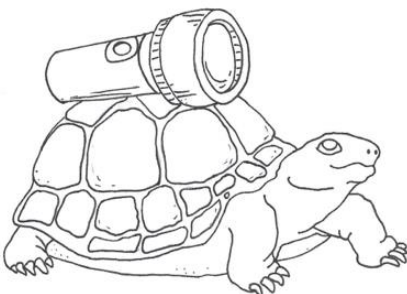
Found Object: Rauschenberg would define a 'found object' as a 'gift from the street.' To him, these objects were not trash but discarded items that carried with them previous histories and context.

Process over Product: For Rauschenberg, improvisation and the journey of creation were vastly more important than producing a perfect, saleable object.

Neo-Dadaism: An art movement (1950-1960's) defined by the use of everyday items, pop imagery, and an anti-aesthetic ideology.



Untitled, 1995. Glass jar and lid with magnifying glass and silver chain. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Fun fact: Rauschenberg's 1965 performance, *Spring Training*, featured 30 desert turtles with flashlights strapped to their shells.

Untitled (Scatole Personali)

A "sympathy for abandoned objects" inspired Rauschenberg to collect the items used in his *Scatole Personali* series. He challenged the art world's perception of value by memorializing found objects within hand-sized boxes. Rather than transforming these items into something wholly new, as was the case for his later 'combines,' Rauschenberg instead allowed them to exist as personal repositories of memories from the artist's time in North Africa and Italy. Chosen off the streets, these items were selected for what he called "the richness of their past," and included twigs, feathers, pebbles, bones, bells, etc.

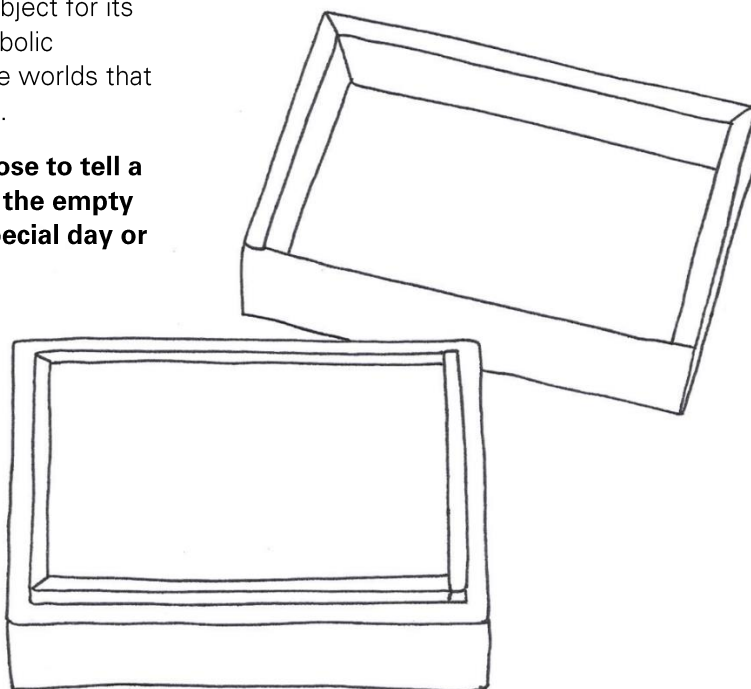
The works were so unconventional at the time that an enraged Florentian art critic wrote a scathing review encouraging Rauschenberg to dispose of them by throwing them into the Arno River. Perhaps as a precursor to his interest in performance art, he took the critic's advice and tossed many of his creations into the river near Florence.

TOP: *Untitled (Scatole e Feticci Personali)*, 1952. Wood box with paint, containing twig and beetle. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. BOTTOM: *Untitled (Scatole e Feticci Personali)*, 1952. Wood box with paint, containing thorns, fabric, and snail shells. Collection of Jasper Johns.



Rauschenberg selected each object for its ability to carry narrative or symbolic significance. They are miniature worlds that tell a story only the artist knew.

What objects might you choose to tell a story? Draw the objects into the empty box below to remember a special day or to tell a new story.



Revolver VI

Five silkscreened, plexiglass discs revolve on a mechanized base; their slow circular movement emits a low droning noise that hints at the electrical mechanisms within the artwork. Each disc is covered with colorful images drawn from newspapers, magazines, and Rauschenberg's personal archive of photographs. *Revolver VI* transformed what the art world knew of fixed collage into a fluid, moving experience.

Controlled by a nearby switchboard, the artwork seems to change constantly; the patterns it creates depend on the order and cadence of the operator working the panel of switches. The operator can also select whether to send discs clockwise or counterclockwise. *Revolver VI* embodies Rauschenberg's passion for collaborating with those working in scientific disciplines and his extraordinary ability to accept and celebrate chance.

Rauschenberg said more than once that he was more interested in doing things he didn't know how to do than the things that he did.

What is something that you're excited to learn about?

Art Materials Everywhere

Rauschenberg said, "There is no poor subject. A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric." This statement challenged elitism around artmaking materials and illustrated that beauty can be found all around us, even in everyday objects.

Look around you. Can you find an object that Rauschenberg might have used in one of his artworks?



Revolver VI, 1967. Silkscreen ink on five rotating plexiglass discs in metal base with electric motors and control box. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

The Brutal Calming of the Waves by Moonlight (Kabal American Zephyr)

In 1980, Rauschenberg visited an exhibition of work by the Japanese artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, considered the last great Ukiyo-e (woodblock) master of 19th-century Japan. The show had a lasting impact on Rauschenberg and inspired a series of works in which he chased a "fantasy-macabre" aesthetic. This sculpture, inspired by Yoshitoshi's *Benkei Calming the Waves at Daimotsu Bay*, consists of a crumpled metal drum and a long scrap of metal resembling a vehicle's discarded bumper bar. The result is a simple visual "combine" that feels aggressive, yet controlled, much like the giant wave in Yoshitoshi's print (below).



Robert Rauschenberg, *The Brutal Calming of the Waves by Moonlight (Kabal American Zephyr)*, 1981. Acrylic on assembled metal parts. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

In what ways might Rauschenberg's title impact our interpretation of the piece?

What other connections might we see between these two works?

Additional Resources

Paul Mattick. "Robert Rauschenberg Combines | the Brooklyn Rail." Brooklynrail.org, The Brooklyn Rail, 20 Aug. 2024, brooklynrail.org/2006/04/art/robert-rauschenberg-combines

"Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project | Robert Rauschenberg Foundation." Rauschenbergfoundation.org, 2017, www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist/oral-history

"Robert Rauschenberg - Visit Port Arthur Texas." Visit Port Arthur Texas, 11 June 2019, visitportarthurtx.com/things-to-do/attraction/robert-rauschenberg

"Sympathy for Abandoned Objects | Gladstone Gallery." Gladstonegallery.com, 2025, gladstonegallery.com/exhibit/robert-rauschenberg-bgg25

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Fine Arts: Knowledge and Skills | §117.302. Art, Level I (b) (4)
Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation and Response | §117.4 (b), (d) and (e)
Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation | §117.52 Art, Level I (c) (3) and (4)



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *Benkei Calming the Waves at Daimotsu Bay*, 1886. Yale University.