

LESSON PLAN

WHALE TALES: SCULPTING STORIES IN CLAY

Suggested Levels: Grades 5-8

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In this lesson, students will dive into creativity with this imaginative ceramic project! Students will sculpt a whimsical whale bud vase with a bird perched on its back, blending functionality with storytelling. Through hand-building techniques and thoughtful details, they'll explore themes of connection, symbolism, and texture. This project is perfect for creating meaningful, functional art with a touch of playfulness and narrative charm.

This engaging project invites students to create a functional ceramic bud vase in the form of a whimsical whale with a bird perched on its back. The whale symbolizes strength and depth, while the bird represents freedom and perspective, encouraging reflections on harmony and connection in nature.

Students will employ hand-building techniques such

as slab, pinch, and coil methods to shape the whale and create a hollow cavity for the vase. The bird element will challenge them to work with proportion and detail, adding a playful and symbolic touch. Emphasis will be placed on textures and surface details to bring each sculpture to life.

OBJECTIVES

I CAN... create a functional ceramic bud vase using hand-building techniques such as slab, pinch and coil methods.

I CAN... use textures, scale and proportions to design a whimsical whale and bird sculpture that conveys symbolism and storytelling.

I CAN... apply surface details and thoughtful glaze choices to enhance the aesthetic and narrative quality of my ceramic artwork.

NATIONAL VISUAL ART STANDARDS

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

- Students will explore and apply hand-building techniques, such as slab, pinch, and coil, to construct a functional ceramic bud vase in the shape of a whale with a bird on its back.
- Students will experiment with textures, proportions and surface details to enhance the narrative elements of their sculpture.

Refine and complete artistic work.

- Students will refine the details of their sculpture by smoothing edges, enhancing textures and ensuring the proportions are balanced.
- Students will engage in peer critique to give and receive feedback to refine their sculptures.

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

- Students will analyze examples of functional and symbolic art from different cultures, drawing inspiration for their sculpture.
- Students will reflect on the historical and cultural significance of storytelling through art and apply this understanding to create sculptures that communicate a message or a theme.

MEET THE MASTER



Beate Kuhn

(1927-2015) was a renowned German ceramic artist celebrated for her distinctive and innovative work in ceramics. Her art often focused on abstract human and animal figures, creating sculptures that were both playful and thought. Kuhn's pieces frequently incorporated organic, flowing forms, emphasizing the material's provoking natural qualities. She explored themes of movement, relationships, and the human experience in her work.

Kuhn trained at the Cologne College of Arts and Crafts and began to gain recognition for her talent in the 1950s and 1960s. She was part of a generation of artists who pushed the boundaries of traditional ceramics, treating the medium as a fine art rather than just a craft. Her works have been exhibited in major galleries around the world, and she received numerous awards throughout her career.

Beate Kuhn's sculptures are known for their expressive forms, strong use of color, and their ability to evoke emotion. She believed in the power of ceramics as an art form that could communicate stories and feelings. Her work continues to inspire ceramicists and artists alike.



“Working with clay is like having a conversation—every shape tells a story, and the story keeps growing as you go.” – Beate Kuhn

SUPPLY LIST

CLAY

- Clay body of choice

BRUSHES AND TOOLS

- Clay cutting tools
- Canvas sheets
- Slip containers and scoring tools
- Rib
- Needle tool
- Sponges
- Modeling or loop tools
- Rolling pins or a slab roller
- [Whale template](#)



COLORS BY MAYCO

Mayco Foundations® glazes are ideal for this project, offering a smooth, even finish that highlights the sculptural details while providing subtle, natural tones. These versatile, non-moving glazes allow students to experiment with layering and color placement without sacrificing clarity or precision. Foundations® glazes dry quickly, allowing for immediate additional decorating and same day firing.

This lesson plan uses colors from the [Foundations® Assortment Kit](#). Assortment Kits are a great option for any classroom because they contain the best selling glaze colors at an affordable price. The Whale Vase example that's shown in this lesson plan uses the following colors from the Foundations® Assortment Kit: FN001 White, FN009 Black, FN002 Yellow, FN003 Orange, FN019 Dark Blue, and FN018 Bright Blue.

ACTIVITY

1. Introduction to Whale Tale Project

- Show examples of finished pieces, sketches and reference images of whales and birds to inspire students.
- Introduce the symbolism behind the whale and bird (e.g., strength, freedom, harmony) and how they'll design a functional and artistic piece.

2. Brainstorm and Sketch

- Have students sketch their whale and bird design from different angles, focusing on proportion and how the vase opening will integrate seamlessly.
- Guide students to determine where the hollow cavity (vase) will be located and how it will balance structurally.

3. Create the Whale Form

- Roll a slab of clay for the whale's body or start with a pinch pot to create a hollow base.
- Use hand-building techniques (slab, pinch, coil) to shape the body and add details like fins, the tail, and mouth.
- Ensure the interior of the whale remains hollow to allow it to function as a vase.
- **Optional:** Use the paper whale template to create a slab form that will remain hollow to form the vase.

4. Texture the Surface

- Use carving or texture tools to add details like whale skin or water patterns.

5. Sculpt and Attach the Bird

- Use a small amount of clay to form the bird, focusing on proportion relative to the whale.
- Score and slip the bird onto the whale's back, ensuring a secure bond. Adjust placement for balance and aesthetics.

6. Refine and Dry Slowly

- Smooth edges, refine textures and make any necessary adjustments. Ensure the vase opening is even and functional.
- Allow the pieces to dry evenly to prevent cracking.

7. Bisque Fire

- Fire the dried sculptures in the kiln to prepare them for glazing.

8. Glaze Application

- Discuss Mayco Foundations® glazes and their benefits for creating smooth, even colors. Encourage students to layer or combine glazes for visual interest.
- Apply glazes using brushes, ensuring even coverage and attention to detail. Wipe glaze off the bottom for kiln safety.

9. Final Firing

- Fire the glazed piece in the kiln according to the glaze specifications.

ACCOMODATIONS

Here are some accomodations that can support a diverse range of learners for this project:

Modified Instructions: Provide clear, step-by-step written and visual instructions to help students who need additional guidance. This can include visual aids like diagrams or video tutorials for the hand-building techniques.

Extra Time: Offer extended class time or individual sessions for students who may need more time to complete their sculptures.

Peer Support: Pair students with peers for collaborative support, allowing for shared ideas and guidance during the creation and glazing process.

Alternative Glazing Techniques: For students with fine motor difficulties, offer alternative glazing methods, like dipping, which may be easier to control.

Sensory Accomodations: For students with sensory processing challenges, offer a quiet, distraction-free area to work to minimize sensory overload during the creation and firing processes.

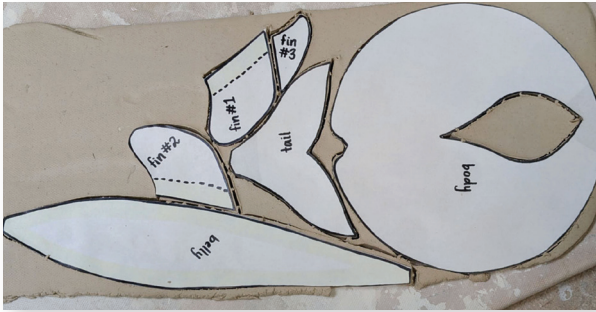
Visual and Color Choices: Allow flexibility with the color schemes for students who may have color vision deficiencies, ensuring they can select shades that work best for them.

Modified Assessment Criteria: Adjust the evaluation rubric to emphasize progress and effort for students who may struggle with certain technical aspects but show growth and creativity in their process.

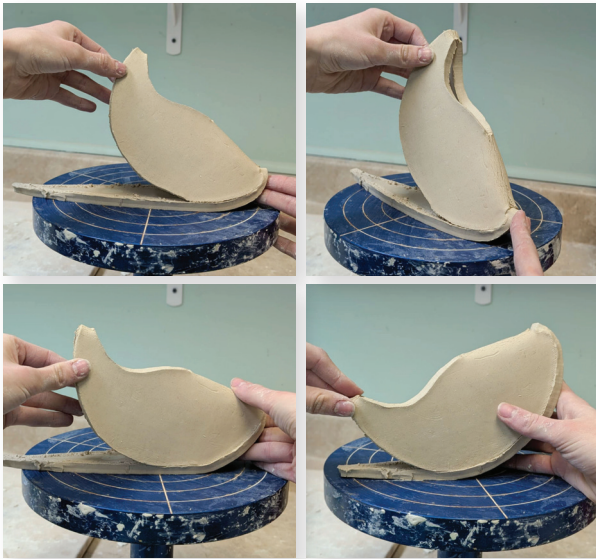
DIRECTIONS

BUILDING

1. Cut template pieces from a 1/4" slab, compressed with a rib.



2. Assemble the form by folding the body in half and pressing it down into the belly, starting at the lips and rocking it back into the tail. Slip and score all attachments.



3. Use your finger to compress any cracking over the folded slab. Weld seams using your finger or a wooden modeling tool.



4. Slip and score to attach the tail and weld the seams with your finger or a wooden modeling tool.



5. Attach fins by slipping and scoring along beveled edges. Not every species of whale has a dorsal fin!



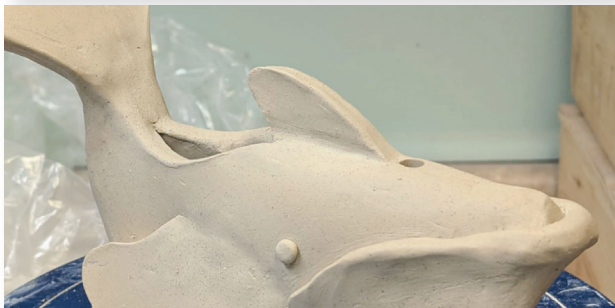
DIRECTIONS

BUILDING

6. Create a mouth by attaching a coil and welding it down. Some species of whale have textured ventral pleats.



7. Add eyes and cut the blowhole/stem holder with a straw. Customize your whale, then dry slowly to mitigate cracking caused by the tension between a dry exterior and a damp interior. Fire to cone 04.



GLAZING

1. Select Foundations® colors and apply them with three coats for vibrant opacity, or less for a variation of effects. Enhance texture with Foundations Sheers. Stilt and fire to cone 06.



The pictured whale features FN001 White and FN009 Black, with FN002 Yellow, FN003 Orange, FN019 Dark Blue, and FN018 Bright Blue on the birds.

ADDITIONAL ADAPTATION - BIRDS

Attach birds to demonstrate *commensalism*; a symbolic relationship where one species benefits while the other is not affected.

1. Start by cutting toes into two small, flattened balls of clay and attaching them to the whale by slipping and scoring.



2. Pinch a larger ball of clay into a bird shape, cut wings and define features with modeling tools. Firmly attach the bird onto the feet by slipping and scoring.



EXTEND THE LEARNING *using Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory*

LINGUISTIC (Word Smart)

Introduce key art and ceramic-related vocabulary (e.g., texture, form, proportion, symbolism, bisque, glaze) and have students use these terms in written reflections or group critiques.

Have students write a vivid, sensory description of their completed sculpture. Encourage them to focus on texture, color, and form, imagining how their piece might interact with its environment.

SPATIAL (Picture Smart)

Ask students to sketch their whale and bird from multiple angles (front, side, top) before sculpting. This reinforces their understanding of spatial depth and helps them think three-dimensionally while planning their sculpture.

Have students create small clay or paper models of their whale and bird before beginning the full sculpture. This helps with planning proportions and balance.

INTERPERSONAL (People Smart)

In small groups, students can collaborate to create a fable featuring their sculptures as characters. Each group member's whale and bird contribute to the narrative, fostering teamwork and shared creativity.

Facilitate a group discussion about the symbolism of whales and birds, encouraging students to share their own interpretations while learning from each other's perspectives.

BODY KINESTHETIC (Body Smart)

For advanced students, include a wheel-throwing component to create parts of their sculpture, such as the vase cavity. This enhances their understanding of symmetry and control.

Assign an activity where students experiment with stretching and shaping slabs of clay to create dynamic curves, mimicking the fluidity of the whale's body and tail.

NATURALIST (Nature Smart)

Assign a project where students study the habitats of whales and birds. They can create an accompanying piece of artwork, such as a drawing, that reflects the ecosystems these animals inhabit.

Have students experiment with natural objects like leaves, shells, or bark to create unique textures on their sculptures.

LOGICAL/ MATHEMATICAL (Number Smart)

Assign students the task of estimating and measuring the internal volume of their vase to determine how much water it can hold.

Create a logic puzzle where students match different animals (like whales and birds) with symbolic meanings, habitats, and cultural associations.

INTRAPERSONAL (Self Smart)

Have students reflect on what the whale and bird represent in their own lives. Ask them to journal about how the themes of strength, freedom, or connection resonate with their personal experiences.

Encourage students to keep a sketchbook where they privately brainstorm or sketch about their ideas for the sculpture. This allows them to refine their concepts and work through personal inspirations before beginning their sculpture.

MUSIC (Music Smart)

Ask students to choose a piece of music or compose a short rhythm that represents their sculpture's story. They can present their sculpture alongside the music to emphasize the narrative.

Introduce students to the idea of creating simple ceramic instruments, like ocarinas or percussion pieces, inspired by their whale or bird. They can experiment with combining function and sound in their design.

RUBRIC

| | 4 - EXCELLENT | 3 - GOOD | 2 - SATISFACTORY | 1 - NEEDS IMPROVEMENT |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| CRAFTSMANSHIP | Work is neat, clean, and well-constructed; seams are fully blended, textures are clear, and no cracks or weak areas. | Work is mostly clean and well-constructed; minor flaws do not detract from the overall piece. | Construction shows some effort but contains noticeable flaws such as cracks, weak areas, or unfinished textures. | Work is rushed or incomplete, with significant structural or finishing issues that compromise the piece. |
| DESIGN & CREATIVITY | Demonstrates excellent creativity and originality; the whale and bird are uniquely styled with thoughtful symbolism. | Shows creativity and some originality; whale and bird designs are clear but may rely on common ideas. | Some attempt at creativity, but the design lacks originality or doesn't fully reflect the project's symbolic theme. | Design lacks creativity or effort; the whale and bird forms are unclear or incomplete. |
| FUNCTIONALITY | The vase is fully functional, with a stable base and hollow cavity for holding flowers; proportions are well-considered. | The vase is functional but may have minor balance or proportion issues. | The vase is partially functional, with noticeable issues such as an unstable base or uneven hollowing. | The vase is not functional due to major issues with balance, hollowing, or structural integrity. |
| SURFACE FINISH | Glazing or surface treatment is expertly applied, enhancing the texture, form, and symbolism of the piece. | Glazing or surface treatment is well-applied but may have minor flaws, such as uneven coverage. | Glazing or surface treatment is incomplete, uneven, or does not enhance the sculpture's form or theme. | No glazing or surface treatment, or the finish detracts from the piece due to poor application or neglect. |

Total Score: ____/16

| PERFORMANCE LEVELS |
|---|
| <p>16-14 POINTS (A): EXCEPTIONAL WORK; DEMONSTRATES OUTSTANDING CRAFTSMANSHIP, CREATIVITY, AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL.</p> <p>13-11 POINTS (B): STRONG WORK; FULFILLS THE REQUIREMENTS WITH MINOR ISSUES IN ONE OR TWO AREAS.</p> <p>10-8 POINTS (C): BASIC WORK; MEETS MOST REQUIREMENTS BUT LACKS REFINEMENT OR HAS SIGNIFICANT ISSUES IN SOME AREAS.</p> <p>BELOW 8 POINTS (D/F): WORK IS INCOMPLETE OR DOES NOT MEET THE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PROJECT.</p> |