

Suggested for Middle & High School Students

Recycling the Past: The Art of Willie Cole

Fun, funky, and provocative, Willie Cole's work is in part defined by his creative use and re-use of materials. Forms, patterns, and traditional themes in African art also play a large role in influencing his work.

I made a conscious choice in 1989 to work with objects that had been handled—irons, doors, shoes, maps, hairdryers, windshield wipers—because of the energy transference, which to me has to do with telekinesis and chi transfers.

—Willie Cole (American, b. 1955)



Source: williecole.com



Left: Bamana culture, Mali, *Crest Mask: Female Antelope (Chi Wara)*, 20th c. Wood, cane, shell, and yarn. Memorial Art Gallery. Gift of Isabel C. Herdle, 93.14

Right: Willie Cole (American, b. 1955), *Sears Ross tji wara (mother and child)*, 2002. Bicycle parts. Memorial Art Gallery. Maurice R. and Maxine B. Forman Fund, 2006.40

Look at the traditional Chi Wara (*CHEE WAH-rah*, sometimes spelled *tji wara*) crest mask and Willie Cole's *Sears Ross tji wara* above, and answer the questions on the next page . . .

Willie Cole is interested in the traditions of African art. The Bamana made their *tji* (work) *wara* (animal) masks to capture the powers of the legendary antelope-man who taught them to farm. The masks were worn on the heads of male and female couples as they performed ritual dances to enhance agricultural and human fertility.

Cole speaks of making African things out of American things, and sees bicycles as “work animals.” His sculpture combines Sears brand bicycle parts for the “mother” figure with pieces from a Ross bike for the “child.” The heads and necks are upturned wheel braces and shafts; the bottom of the mother’s head is a handle grip. The figures rest on a coiled gear chain that suggests the woven caps that hold the African masks on performers’ heads.

QUESTIONS

- What similarities do you see? What differences? How does the choice of different materials make us see the pieces differently?
- Cole used bicycle parts for his sculpture. What energy do the bicycle parts bring to the piece? What associations and memories come to you as you look at this sculpture?

ACTIVITIES

I want them [my artworks] to be links between worlds . . . You live in the U.S., but here is a piece of art that looks like it is from another culture and another time, even though the materials in the work are strictly American. That shows there is a world culture.

—Willie Cole

Cole’s artwork is a link between two worlds. Your challenge is to create similar links to your past. Is there an object whose materials, design, or tradition is important to who you are? Is it the materials it is made of? Is it the design or decoration? Is it the tradition behind it?

- How can you repurpose this object (or part of it, or an image of it) to create an artwork that tells your story?
- What materials or found objects would you use to create a sculpture commenting on—or reflecting—our 21st-century world? Why?