South Station Hoard: Imagining, Creating and Empowering Violent Remains

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Treasure Seeking

Before I started elementary school, I remember being obsessed with the idea of treasure. I loved tales of pirates and jewels, and relished movies including secret compartments and magical amulets. An older sibling bought me beloved kitschy treasure chests from pet store aquarium sections. I also used to dig in the backyard, scour the basement, and sift through my mother’s jewelry in hopes to find some ancient, forgotten, secret objects. Treasure, with its preciousness and stories are interesting to children with good reason. The acts of discovering, discussing, defining, and creating treasure are inherently and usefully artistic, for we must decide what qualities of color, shape, luster, history, myth and meaning might render an object to become treasured.

This lesson explores local treasure through visual culture activities and more mythic aspects of treasure in the studio. The hook or essential questions of this lesson include:

What is treasure?

Who decides how treasure is found, preserved, and recorded?
Lesson Plan

| When does a possession become treasure? |

**Relevant Vocabulary**

**Artifact** – an object made by human beings; a hand-made object or tool characteristic of a time period or culture

**Heirloom** – a family possession passed down from generation to generation

**Symbol** – a material object representing something

**Art History Content**

**Staffordshire Hoard Treasure:**
http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/

**The Staffordshire Hoard.** Leahy, Kevin and Bland, Roger.

**African American Memory Jars**
http://www.amesgallery.com/FolkArtPages/Memory.html
1. **Content Standard**: Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
   b. intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of *art* media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas

3. **Content Standard**: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
   b. use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

4. **Content Standard**: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
   c. analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

*Others may be included from Common Core, State Standards, etc.*
**Introduction**

Begin this exploration by viewing all or part of the recent excavation video from the BBC regarding the treasures of the Staffordshire Hoard:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQNUdMets6I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQNUdMets6I)

After viewing the video, compare treasure of the past with treasure today by talking to students about any precious or treasured objects in their lives – if there was one thing they could give to a niece, nephew, or child in the future, what might it be? Is there anything they have that has been passed down in their family? What is it that makes these objects precious?

Create a list or wordcloud of these objects, encouraging students to sketch some of the objects with symbols and/or take written notes in their sketchbooks:

Archaeological Practice:

You may wish to start with the following quote:

“Every day someone throws away a fortune because he does not know a lost treasure when he finds one.”

(Jeanne Horne in Hidden Treasure)

Encourage students to think of a trusted adult that they might interview about family heirlooms and personal treasure. It could be someone from their families, a former teacher, a friend’s parent, etc.

(If working with a girl scout troop or all-girls’ group, you may wish to encourage them to speak with a grandmother, aunt, or female mentor.)

Students will be asked to interview the adult about a keepsake, heirloom, or other precious belonging. (Discussion/recap: what is a heirloom?) Work with students to develop interview questions such as the following:

What is the most precious possession you own?

Do you have any objects that have been passed down from another person?
Is there anything you own that is like treasure to you?

What is the story or history of these objects?

Students should photograph or sketch the treasured object if possible, video or audio record interviews, and come back to the class to discuss findings.

Discussion topics might include:

Where any of these objects work of art?

Could they be defined as art?

Where did they come from?

Where these objects valuable monetarily speaking, or more in a personal sense to the owner?

See oral history and storytelling resources for examples and ideas for recording and sharing:

http://www.nypl.org/locations/tid/55/node/35207

https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!forum/tsdigs
Studio Treasure Activities:

The Staffordshire Hoard was first discovered by a metal detector, which uncovered a gold strip from 1300 years ago “set with garnets but still covered with earth.”¹ Create or annotate and personal treasure. Begin by brainstorming what treasures and artifacts are. Discuss physical qualities and meanings of these objects. Discuss gems, gold, glitter, silver, bronze, coins, and other symbols we may associate with treasure. You might even think about how art itself is seen as a form of valuable treasure. A few possibilities for the studio project:

Consider also creating trash from treasure, as ecological or eco-artists often do.

See more here:
http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/16/world/environmental-green-art

Consider creating a collection of treasure through collage.

What objects will be highlighted through scale and color?

How will they be collected or displayed through overlapping and juxtaposition?
Create a treasure sculpture.

*How could you re-create the Hope Diamond?*

*A gigantic ruby?*

*A magical golden key?*

*Or a precious gemstone growing inside of a cave?*

Create a memorial to a famous figure in the African American Memory Jar tradition.

You might create a memorial to Rosa Parks, using objects significant to her life to decorate a bottle or jar.

Reflection

In lieu of an artist statement, create an archaeological record or museum placard that would explain to visitors what this object was in the future.