

Handmade Art: Furniture

Lesson plan by Vicki Rovine

“No matter where you find yourself, creativity and expertise are beyond borders and barriers. Through my work, I have this freedom and this balance.” --Ousmane Mbaye, 2016

Overview Students will learn about a rural furniture workshop, led by Saliou Thiaou in his home town of Palo. They will also learn about the work of Oumane Mbaye, a Senegalese artist/designer in Dakar who creates furniture out of already existing materials, like metal containers and pipes. Each of these types of furniture uses different materials, and are sold in different ways. But both illustrate how artists turn inspiration into products. Students will use what they learn to create their own pieces.

Essential Questions

- Can ordinary things be beautiful? Can useful things be art?
- What does art tell us about the artist’s values or point of view?
- What skills are needed to reimagine ordinary materials? Can everyone—including kids—take part in this reimagination?
- How do people make effective use of the materials around them, avoiding waste? Why might this be important?

Grade Levels 3-5

Content Area Visual Art

Standard Alignment with NC Standards

Visual Art K.V.1 – 5. V.1 Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.

Visual Art K.V.2 – 5. V.2 Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.

Visual Art K.V.3 – 5. V.3 Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.

Visual Art K.CX.1 – 5.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

Visual Art K.CX.2 – 5.CX.2 Understand the interdisciplinary connections and life applications of the visual arts.

Materials

[Google slides](#)

[Furniture Design worksheet](#) -- enough copies for groups of 2-3

Sketching materials (paper, pencils/pens)

Inspiration materials (newspaper, tape, scissors, boxes, glitter, glue, egg cartons—anything that already had a use and can be repurposed)

Suggested Length of Time four, 40-45 minute sessions

Procedures

Day 1

- Introduce the unit by telling students that over the next few lessons, they will be learning about several artists from Senegal who design furniture using found items where they live. Today's lesson will teach them about one artist: Ousmane Mbaye ("oohs-mahn m-by-eh")
- Show the images on Slide 1-- these are photos of work by Senegalese artist Ousmane Mbaye. Ask students if they can tell what the pieces are made from.
 - Answer: recycled metal, including pieces of old refrigerators, oil drums, and water pipes
- On Slides 2-3, read aloud (by teacher or call on students to read aloud) excerpts from [interview with Ousmane Mbaye](#)
 - Mbaye on his background: "I have been trained as a technician in air conditioning, a profession that I have been doing for 17 years. This allowed me to work with a lot of work techniques (welding, metal work, copper work, electricity etc ...) that I use today in my job as a designer. People say that I am self-taught but I do not think so. I learned a business and I transformed it."
 - On his priorities as an artist: "Balance! It is essential when creating a piece of furniture (or any piece of art). The piece has to be practical, but also beautiful and elegant."
 - On what inspires him: "The past, the present, the nature, the urban, the people. Life, the street. A song, a look, a picture ... A discussion, an exchange, the work of a poet or a painter. Everything can be inspirational. We must let it "infuse" and listen to one's heart and have fun."
 - On his artistic process: "I design the model in my head, shape, line, balance and I think about it for a few days. When it's ready in my head I go to the workshop and I make a model... In general, the idea is quite precise and I know where I am going. Now there is always a bit of surprise in what the piece can turn into, how it lives once it has taken shape, how it behaves in space. How it wants to orient itself. But in general it's very clear in my head."

- Show the images of Mbaye’s workshop on Slide 5 and ask students to imagine the process of turning old metal into furniture. Make a list of steps it would require to turn an old refrigerator into comfortable and beautiful furniture.
- Return to the pictures of Ousmane Mbaye’s work on slide 1. To encourage close looking, ask each student to contribute an adjective that describes his work.
- Call on students to provide their word and record each into [TagCrowd.com](https://tagcrowd.com). Make a word cloud—what words appear most frequently?

Day 2

- Remind the students of their work in the last lesson: “Last time we learned about Ousmane Mbaye, who made beautiful furniture out of recycled metal. Today we will be learning about another Senegalese artist who makes furniture from palm trees, Saliou Thiao (“sal-iyo ch-yo”).”
- Show Slide 6 and discuss the images:
 - Describe the furniture.
 - Does it look like furniture you have seen before? How is it different? How is it similar?
 - Does it look useful, comfortable?
 - What tools do you think are used to make it?
- Watch the video on Slide 7.
- TURN & TALK | Tell a partner 2 things you noticed about Mr. Thiao’s work.
- Show Slides 8-11.
 - What are the most important steps?
 - What are the tools they use?
- What information and skills do Mr. Thiao and his fellow furniture makers need?
- TURN & TALK | Why is it important to take care of the palm trees? What would happen if they cut down trees to get the palm ribs?

Day 3

- Frame today’s lesson: “So far we have seen furniture made from pieces of trees, and of used and discarded pieces of metal. Now YOU get to be the furniture designer!”
- Put students into groups of 2-3.
- Ask each group to brainstorm a list of found materials that could be used to create a piece of furniture. They may make their list verbally, or you could instruct them to write their lists on paper.
 - Remind students that they have seen artists use both natural and man-made materials to create furniture.

- Remind students that they will need to use materials that are strong enough to hold the weight of their intended furniture piece.
- **CONTENT NOTES:** We shouldn't use the term "recycling" to describe Mbaye's work. Recycling usually refers to materials that have been designated as trash. Mbaye works with materials that are still circulating, and he redirects them to new uses. The implications of "recycling" risk reinforcing associations of Africa with poverty, lack of access to resources. Artists everywhere may have lots of reasons to employ reused materials—they bring histories and associations with them, and they show those histories through the wear evidence on their surfaces. Mbaye's use of repurposed metal is inspired by the design possibilities they offer, not by lack of access to use new, commercially available materials.
- Once students have come up with a list, pass out a Design Worksheet to each group. One student should be designated as the recorder for each group.
- Allow time to complete the worksheet. Students should list all the materials and tools they will need to create their furniture piece, as well as a sketch of their design.
- Groups share sketches with the class.

Day 4

The groups will use their sketches to create their furniture piece out of found and recycled materials. (Note: students may have to revise their sketches based on the available materials.) Provide time to create and facilitate issues as they arise. As students work, you may wish to play [Senegalese music](#) for inspiration.

When time is up, allow groups to share their work. You may also wish to test the strength of their furniture by testing if it will hold a pen, a book, 5 books, a human...

Optional Extension

Watch this [video](#) about students in Senegal using trash to create outdoor benches. This really is recycling, starting with the goal of finding a use for trash. It is also a creative, artistic solution. After watching, discuss the video. Suggested topics: Compare this furniture to Mr. Mbaye's and to the palm rib furniture from Palo. Which furniture would be most useful in your house? Which might be best for use in a park or some other public place? Which looks most like the chairs you have at home or at school? Which would be easier to get students involved with—which would you rather work on, the recycled trash benches, the metal furniture, or the palm rib furniture? Why?