

AN ARTS CURRICULUM GUIDE: WHAT CAN THE HIGH LINE TEACH US ABOUT THE MACHINE AESTHETIC?

Grades 6 and 7

Materials:

Period 1:

- PowerPoint presentation

Period 2:

- Paper
- Pencils
- Colored pencils
- Crayons
- Watercolor paint
- Watercolor paper

LESSON GOALS

Students will:

- Learn that the High Line was built in the 1930s to carry freight along Manhattan's west side
- Learn that the High Line is now open as a public park
- Be introduced to the term machine aesthetic
- Learn the characteristics of the machine aesthetic
 - Repetition
 - Horizontality
 - Lack of ornament
 - Simple, "pure" forms
 - Mass-produced materials, e.g., concrete, metal, glass
- Learn the role design plays in functional objects
- Make observations about the High Line's design
- Design a functional object, such as a highway median

Duration: 2 periods

Period 1—PowerPoint presentation with exploration of the Machine Age aesthetic

Period 2—students design a functional object

PERIOD 1:

Ask students, 'What is a machine?' Generate a list of machines that students use. Items may run the gamut from iPods, to computers, to cell phones, television, to cars, to washing machines, to blenders, etc. Ask students if machines have always existed (they have, but were not always powered by electricity or another energy source.) Ask if

students can think of early machines that were not powered by electricity or gas. (Windmills, watermills, or sawmills would be good examples.) Explain to students that in the first decades of the 20th century, machines were becoming more and more important. New machines were being invented and marketed. Families bought radios, went to movies, rode in cars, etc. Machines were becoming ubiquitous. Ask students if they think the flood of all these new machines had an impact. (They did.) Explain that machines were new, they were fast, they were mass-produced. All of these things had an impact, especially on design. The impact was so large that there was a name for this style: the machine aesthetic. In fact, beginning with the early years of the 20th century and reaching a peak between WWI and WWII, the time was known as “The Machine Age.”

Set up PowerPoint presentation.

Slide 1: Walter Gropius quote.

Have a student read the 1919 quote from Walter Gropius. Explain that Gropius was an architect who started a school of architecture and design that became very influential called the Bauhaus. This school was located in Germany. After World War II, Gropius emigrated to America and became the dean of the Harvard School of Architecture. Make sure students understand all of the vocabulary, as some of it is difficult. Discuss the meaning of this statement. Ask students to react to it. What does it mean to them? Tell students that these design ideas applied to many objects, from buildings to bridges to radios.

Slide 2: Iron.

Have students identify the object. Ask if it is something that they would think of as “designed,” or if somebody made an effort to make it attractive. (Answers will vary.) Remind students that it is a strictly utilitarian object, but one that has been designed according to the ideas of the machine aesthetic. Ask students to respond to the image. How does the iron look to them? Of what material is it made? What are some of the elements of the design?

Slide 3: Pioneer Zephyr train.

Tell students that this train was built in 1934 and that it embodies many of the ideas of the machine aesthetic. What are those principles? Explain to the class that one idea is speed. How does the design of this train communicate speed? What are the aspects of its shape, and design that make you think of speed? Why would a train company want its train to convey the idea of speed? Students should be able to understand the principles behind this conversation.

Slide 4: Clock.

Another idea of the machine aesthetic is horizontality. Ask students to define this word. How does this clock express the idea of horizontality?

Slide 5: Microphone.

Have students identify the object. Another idea of the machine aesthetic is a lack of ornament. Ask students to explain the meaning of the word ornament. Tell them that before the Machine Age, it was the style to have lots of ornament decorating common objects. Does this microphone have any ornament? (None.)

Slide 6: Record player.

Remind students that before the age of iPods and CDs, people listened to music on records. In order to listen to the record, they had to have a record player. This record player would open from the top, and the turntable is inside the cabinet. Ask students if they think the shapes in this record player are complicated or simple. (They are simple.) This is another aspect of the machine aesthetic.

Slide 7: The High Line.

Ask students if they are familiar with the High Line. Some may be, and others may not be. Explain that it is an elevated train line that was built to carry cargo on the west side of Manhattan. It fell into disuse in the 1980s, and now it is being turned into a park. (It was built in 1934 as part of a program called the West Side Improvement to ameliorate heavy shipping traffic on Manhattan's west side. At that time, the west side of Manhattan was NY's center of freight traffic—ship, train, and truck—and the streets were clogged with all manner of conveyance. Freight trains actually ran at grade along portions of 10th, 11th, and 12th avenues, and were a public nuisance as well as safety hazard. The High Line was built to get the freight trains off of the streets. It begins at 34th Street and runs to Gansevoort Street (a southern portion was previously demolished) between 10th and 11th Avenues. By 1980, the High Line had become defunct, and it sat idle for more than 20 years. In the late 1990s, threatened with demolition, a grass-roots organization, Friends of the High Line [FHL], formed to preserve this important piece of New York's industrial history. FHL was successful in saving the structure and it is now open as a public park. FHL now serves as a conservancy, raising funds and operating the park in a partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.)

Ask if this train viaduct is a utilitarian object or something very fancy and decorative? (It is utilitarian.) Ask the students to respond to the design of the High Line. What are some adjectives that come to mind that describes the High Line?

Slide 8, The High Line railing detail:

Ask students if they can detect any of the ideas of the machine aesthetic in the design of this railing? (Yes.) It is horizontal, the shapes are simple, and there is little or no ornament. Help students identify these ideas on the slide. Tell them that the railing illustrates other ideas of the machine aesthetic: repetition and the use of mass-produced materials. What materials do they think the High Line is made of? (It is steel and concrete.) Have students identify where they see repetition in the slide.

Slide 9, High Line railing detail:

Ask students to respond to the railing design. Ask students to think about adding elements of design to a railing of a train viaduct. Why would anybody bother? What are utilitarian objects that we use today? Are they designed to be attractive at all?

Designing a Functional Object

PERIOD 2:

Remind the students of some of the ideas of the machine aesthetic. Discuss the fact that these design ideas were a response to what was happening at that time period. In other words, all types of machines that hadn't existed previously were flooding the market, and consumers were able to buy all of these things. They represented the modern world.

Brainstorm with the class some examples of functional objects. Ideas include highway dividers, garbage pails, etc.

Tell students that they will design a functional object, but with the goal of making it beautiful. They can design the same object twice—once, using the ideas of the machine aesthetic (i.e., horizontality, repetition, lack of ornament, simple shapes, and mass-produced materials) and the other according to design ideas that capture our age. Brainstorm with students what are some of the words that capture the essence of our age?

Students may first create a sketch in pencil or colored pencil, and then develop their design further into a watercolor painting.