

Lesson #43

Lesson Title: Tom Miller: Artist and Creator of Art Furniture

Museum Connection: Art and Intellect

Purpose: In this lesson, students will learn about the life and art of Tom Miller, whose upbeat outlook on life is reflected in his art furniture. Students will learn the characteristics of Miller's art and create a design for their own piece of art furniture.

Grade Level/Content Area: Intermediate Elementary/Art

Time Frame: 3-5 class periods

Visual Arts Essential Learner Outcomes:

Outcome – III Creative Expression and Production

The student will demonstrate the ability to organize knowledge and ideas for expression in the production of art.

Expectation – IIIC The student will discover a variety of ways that artists organize the elements of art in responding to what they see.

Indicators of Learning – IIIC Creative Expression: The student will create a personal object made special, using art elements and principles of design.

Visual Arts VSC Standards:

2.2.a (Grade 4) Identify technologies, processes, and materials from different times and places used to create visual art.

3.2.b (Grade 4/5) Identify and describe color, line, shape, texture, form, space and selected principles of design such as pattern, repetition, contrast, balance, and variety in artworks.

4.1.c (Grade 5) Use established criteria to justify personal responses to works of art.

Reading/ Language Arts VSC:

2.A.1.a (Grade 4) Read, use, and identify the characteristics of non-fiction materials to gain information and content knowledge.

Objectives:

- Students will analyze the art furniture of Tom Miller, a famous African American artist who spent his entire life in Baltimore.
- Students will create a piece of furniture inspired by the style of Tom Miller.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Afro Deco- A term used by Tom Miller to describe his art furniture adorned with African American themes and characters and reminiscent of the Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s.

Art furniture – furniture that has been painted or reconfigured to make a statement.

Materials

For the teacher:

Overhead Transparencies of artwork by Tom Miller:

a screen entitled *Swannee River*

a chair entitled *And the Livin' is Easy*

a chest known as *Jungle Chest*

a cabinet known as *Curious Cabinet*

For the student:

Student Resource Sheet 1 - Idea Web

Student Resource Sheet 2a - Chest Worksheet

Student Resource Sheet 2b - Chest Worksheet Responses

Resources

Publications:

Murphy, Camay Calloway. *Can a Coal Scuttle Fly?* Illustrated by Tom Patton Miller. Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1996

Murphy, Eileen. "Tom Miller." 28 June – 4 July 2000. *Baltimore City Paper* Online, 16 July 2003 <http://www.citypaper.com/2000-06-28/pf/mobs2_pf.html>

Materials:

Baltimore Museum of Art Slide Kit

<http://www.artbma.org/education/BMAteacherPackets.pdf>

Maryland Historical Society Slide Kit

Web sites:

http://www.galwest.com/fine_art/other_artists/miller.htm

<http://www.carlclark.net/tom.html>

http://www.stevenscottgallery.com/artists_miller.html

<http://www.furnituresociety.org/cs/nov2002/baltimor.html>

http://www.artbma.org/collection/cone/cone_html.html

Teacher Background

Thomas Patton Miller (1945-2000) was born in Baltimore, Maryland. The eldest of six children, he grew up in the Sandtown-Winchester area and attended Carver Vocational Technical High School, where he studied to become a commercial artist. Miller won a scholarship to Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and graduated in 1967 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. For the next 20 years, he was an art resource teacher in the Baltimore City Public Schools. When he received a Ford Foundation grant for further study, Miller returned to MICA, and in 1987, he was awarded a Master of Fine Arts

degree. From this point forward, Miller concentrated on his art.

In interviews, Miller revealed that as a child, he was fascinated by and collected discarded objects. He had seen his grandparents repaint household furniture to make it seem “new” and after he had achieved success with his art furniture, he spoke of these early experiences. Moreover, just as his ancestors had gathered scraps for quilts and reclaimed old furniture for their use, Miller collected and combined objects and furniture to create humorous, witty, "Afro Deco" furniture pieces.

Leslie King-Hammond, a longtime friend of the artist and MICA’s dean of graduate studies, says Miller began painting furniture at the suggestion of a friend. "He used a plentiful resource in this country and especially Baltimore City: found furniture. He reconfigured the parts to make enormously clever statements about the people around him, about his environment."

In addition to art furniture, Tom Miller’s artwork includes murals, screens, prints, and paintings. Images of pink flamingos, people, fruits, birds, palm trees, animals, Aunt Jemimas, and watermelons adorn his art furniture. He painted the people and places he knew, and they were mostly from and in Baltimore. His colorful work was in such high demand that people waited years to acquire a work of art from Miller.

Miller’s bright colors and wonderfully animated images appear in all of his art. He often drew on images, such as watermelons and big lips, that have been used to stereotype African Americans. His friend, Carl Clark, said that Miller had suggested that racists “missed something when they made fun of our big lips. Look how big and shiny your smile is!”

In 1995, Miller became one of the first local African American artists to be honored with a solo exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Miller’s *Jungle Chest* is in the museum’s permanent collection. A year later, the Maryland Historical Society published *Can A Coal Scuttle Fly?*—a children’s book written by Camay Calloway Murphy (the daughter of renowned bandleader Cab Calloway) about Miller’s life as a boy and illustrated by Miller. His art has been widely exhibited, including at the Smithsonian Institution’s Renwick Gallery and the Studio Museum in Harlem, and is found in museum and private collections.

On June 23, 2000, Miller died of complications from AIDS. One of the memorial tributes read:

Thomas Patton Miller truly lived life! And we are better for it. As a citizen, a loved one, and a friend, Tom Miller’s loving grace and dignity was rivaled only by the brilliance of his pallet. This special soul, and internationally renowned artist has left a profoundly beautiful mark on the world.

Lesson Development:

1. **Motivation:** Ask the students if they have ever heard of an artist named Tom Miller. Have they seen his art? Where? In what form was the art? (painting, furniture?) Hold up the book, *Can a Coal Scuttle Fly?* Examine the cover to discover the bright colors, border pattern, simple shapes, and people. What is a coal scuttle? What animal do you see? Next, read the inside front cover flap.
2. Before you read the book aloud to students, tell them to look at each page or pages as a painting. The students should be observing Miller's colors and shapes, and thinking about his mood and history, as they listen to you read.
3. Read the book with feeling, pausing so the students can interpret the visual impact and meaning of each page.
4. After reading the book, go back and flip through the pages giving the students time to answer a few questions orally. Ask: What did you learn about Tom Miller's life? How would you describe him? What are some of the themes of his work?
5. Display transparencies one at a time, discussing the characteristics of each one. Ask the students, "What do you see?" (*bright colors, patterns, lines, shapes, animals, people, texture*) Is the art telling a story? What is the story? Stop at the "Swanee River" transparency. Ask, "What else is suggested in this piece of art furniture?" (*movement, visual rhythm*) Bugs are flying, wind is swirling, fish are jumping, swans are swimming, trees are swaying, clouds are floating, the sun is setting, waves are peaking, and plants are growing! Each panel is outlined and bordered in a pebble-like pattern with coral growth in each corner. There are strong horizontal and vertical lines that break up the space into smaller areas. Each brush stroke is deliberate, perfectly applied, and evenly spaced.
6. Distribute Student Resource Sheet 1, Idea Web. Use a transparency to brainstorm with the class about happy memories or events from students' lives for a possible theme. Call on students to offer suggestions: holidays, celebrations, reunions, hobbies, births, trips, school events, places of religious worship, vacations, and personal victories. Students may list their own theme ideas during the discussion. Students will choose their favorite theme to redesign the chest. For example: Tom Miller might have chosen as his memory rummaging through his neighbor's garage.
7. Ask students to suggest subjects that could illustrate that idea. Some ideas, in keeping with the garage theme, could be a trashcan, tools, books, tires, bike, furniture, hula hoop, empty frames and car parts. Draw simple shapes in the small boxes.
8. Display Student Resource Sheets 2a-b. Transfer class ideas to the chest still using simple shapes. Next, fill in the colors. Explain your color choices to the students. What other elements can be used to enhance the design? (*line, texture, pattern, shapes, movement, rhythm*). Tom Miller often modified his art furniture by adding

objects or shapes. Draw something at each foot and something attached to the top. Ask students for suggestions such as a coffee can, tennis ball, clock, tool, vase, or toy. Finally, complete the sentences on Student Resource Sheet 2b.

9. Have a student suggest the theme for another chest. Call on different students to add elements to the small boxes on a new Idea Web transparency. Ask a student to volunteer to draw the ideas onto a new Chest Worksheet transparency. Discuss the colors that would go with the theme. What other elements will be included? Discuss what could be added to the feet and top of the chest to complete the look of the chest. Complete the sentences on Student Resource Sheet 2b with students giving the answers.
10. Students will choose a theme from the list on the Idea Web. Next, they will make small sketches in the boxes. Have them first use pencil to embellish their own chests with illustrations from their Idea Web, then they will color in the shapes with markers. At this point other elements may be added: line, texture, pattern, shapes, movement and rhythm. Next, the students will add something to each foot and something to the top of the chest. Students are welcome to add objects to any part of the chest if they choose. Finally, the students will complete the sentences on Chest Worksheet 2b. Student responses should explain the new meaning of their chests and the elements used to achieve that meaning.
11. **Assessment:** Have students use the final drawing of the chest as a plan to build a chest using found objects. The body of the chest could be a shoebox with the legs made of cardboard tubes cut to the proper length. After applying one layer of papier mache to make the seams disappear, the chest would be ready to paint. Final embellishments could be painted and glued onto the chest.
12. **Closure:** Have students take turns showing their chests to the class and explaining how their designs are based on the style of Tom Miller. Ask: In what ways is your chest like Tom Miller's art?

Thoughtful Application:

Will you ever look at discarded objects the same way? What do you have at home that you could create a new meaning for? Does it have to be furniture? What collections could you gather together for this art form and how would you sort them? Do you know of other people who have the confidence to express themselves? Who are they and how do they show their confidence?

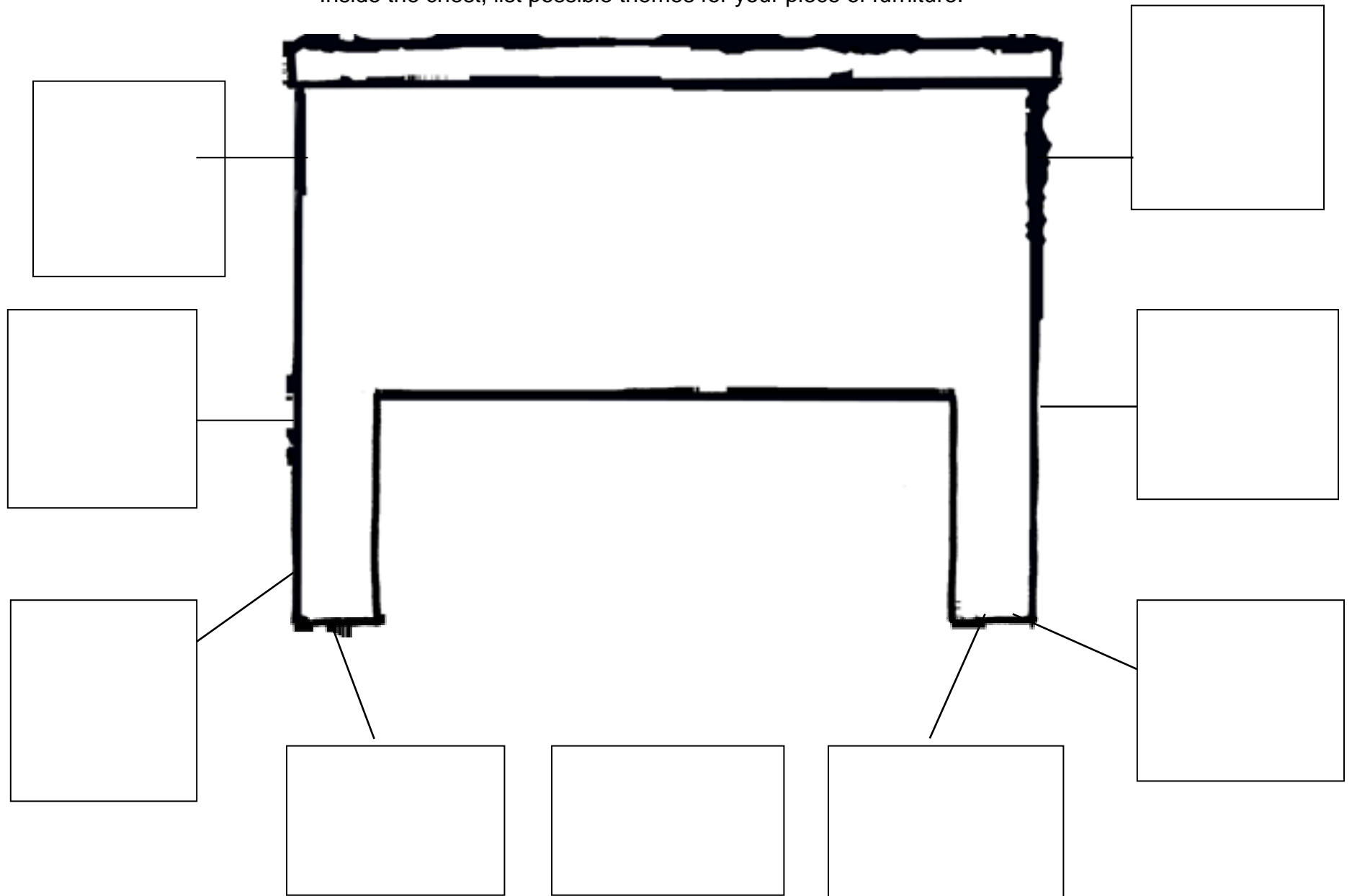
Lesson Extensions:

- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. Ask students to compare and contrast the works of Tom Miller with the work of another artist displayed in the "Strength of the Mind" gallery.
- Compare Henri Matisse's painting, *Purple Robe and Anemones*, to Tom Miller's screen, *Swannee River*. Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the two pieces. Discuss how Matisse's art may have influenced Tom Miller's art.

- Visit the Baltimore Museum of Art to see Tom Miller's *Jungle Chest* and Henri Matisse's *Purple Robe and Anemones*. The Baltimore Museum of Art has pieces of painted furniture from the Colonial period. Compare that furniture to Tom Miller's art furniture.
- Take a field trip to the Maryland Historical Society. Visit the third floor furniture collection that includes original works by Tom Miller.

Idea Web

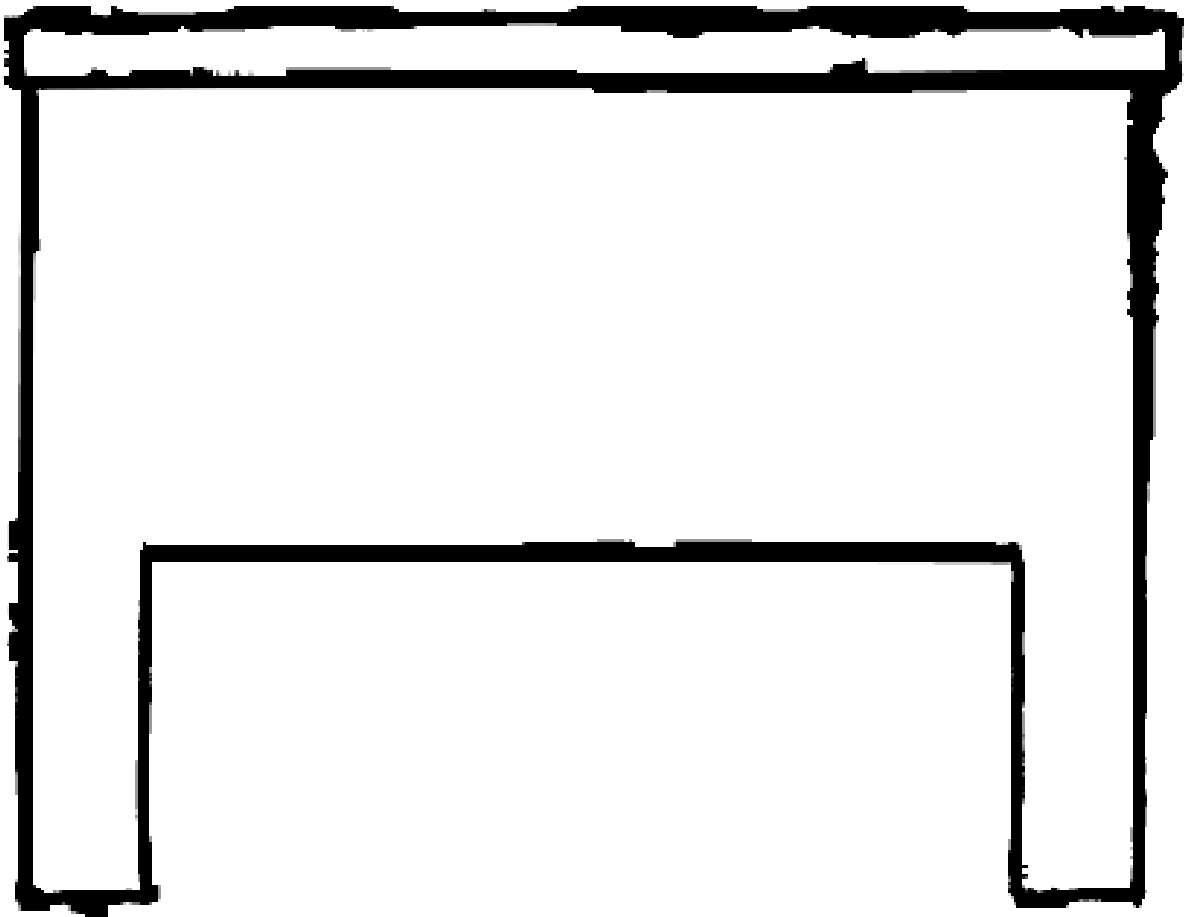
Inside the chest, list possible themes for your piece of furniture.



Name _____ Date _____

Chest Worksheet

Sketch your design inside the chest. Use your ideas from the Idea Web. Add something to the feet and top of the chest. (You may add shapes to other areas as well to give new meaning to your chest.)



Name _____ Date _____

Chest Worksheet Responses

1. The name of my chest is:
2. The theme or new meaning for my chest is:
3. The different elements I used to achieve a mood are:
4. Other elements I added to the chest:
5. My chest and Tom Miller's art are alike in these ways: