

# Essence and Mindfulness

## NORTON SIMON MUSEUM | ART IN THE CLASSROOM



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** *Bird in Space*, 1931, Constantin Brancusi (Romanian, 1876–1957), polished bronze, 73 in. (185.4 cm), The Norton Simon Foundation, © Succession Brancusi/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; *Buddha Shakyamuni*, c. 1100, India: Tamil Nadu, Granite, 50 x 37 x 16 in. (127 x 94 x 40.6 cm), The Norton Simon Foundation; *Basel Mural I*, 1956–8, Sam Francis (American, 1923–1994), oil on canvas, 151 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 237 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (385.5 x 602.9 cm), Norton Simon Museum, Gift of the Artist, © Sam Francis Foundation, California/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

### Objective

Through this project, students learn to slow down, look and process primary resources.

### Background

Constantin Brancusi was one of the 20th century’s most influential sculptors. His *Bird in Space* is a **sculpture in the round**; without a front or back, it is meant to be seen from all angles. Brancusi was inspired by the *Maiastra*, a magical bird of Romanian folklore whose feathers shined like a mirror in the sun and whose song could touch the heart of the sky and earth. He created a series of **abstract** sculptures devoted to the theme of the bird. Eliminating the bird’s anatomy, he simplified its form to evoke its essence—here the soaring, sleek and light form suggests flight. Like the *Maiastra*, the yellow-bronze **finish** of *Bird in Space* is so highly polished that it reflects everything around it, even viewers themselves. Brancusi believed that “what is real is not the external form, but the essence of things,” and his mission was to strip his subjects to their core and sculpt them in their intrinsic forms.

*Buddha Shakyamuni* embodies the essence of meditation. In this sculpture from southern India, the Buddha sits in a classic meditation pose with one hand resting on top of the other, making the gesture of contemplation over the sole of his right foot. His eyes are half-shut, signifying concentration and meditation. His robe is transparent, with just a hint of a fold visible along his torso and the hem falling just under his right breast. His elongated ears symbolize his former life as a prince, when he used to wear heavy jewelry, and the bump of wisdom (*ushnisha*) on top of his head is crowned by flames that represent his enlightenment.

*Basel Mural I* is one of three murals originally painted for the grand stairwell of a contemporary art museum in Basel, Switzerland. American artist Sam Francis described these paintings as “filling great sails dipped in color.” He worked spontaneously, allowing chance and accident to shape his images. Francis began painting at the age of 20, when he was given a box of watercolors while hospitalized for spinal tuberculosis. He painted what he could see and feel, the light and color of his surroundings. Light and color would become the essence of Francis’s art.

### **Activity, Part I**

- Begin breathing, and with each breath, challenge yourself to make your inhales and exhales longer than the ones that came before, until you reach a maximum length of breath that is comfortable for you. Continue breathing at that length for one minute.
- Begin to count your breaths. When you inhale, count 1. When you exhale, count 2. Inhale 3. Exhale 4, and so on. Continue counting until you reach 10, and then begin again with 1.
- Continue this breathing exercise for five minutes. Then turn your attention to an artwork. Spend five minutes looking at the piece in silence.
- How did it feel to look for so long? What did you notice that you hadn’t before? How did the preliminary breathing exercise change your perception of the work or your feelings about extended looking?



## Materials

- air-dry clay
- square cardboard base (5 x 5")
- toothpicks
- paper
- plastic utensils
- pencils

## Activity, Part II

- Discuss your interpretation of the word essence.
- Take a walk outside or around the classroom, and identify something that you're drawn to. If you're outside, it could be a tree, some play equipment, the patterns on the ground, etc. If you're in the classroom, it could be a book, an image in a book, a pen, your lunch, a corner of the room, etc. Then spend five minutes looking at this object or space in silence.
- **Older Students:** Describe the essence of your object or space. How would you express it in the fewest words possible? How would you draw it in the fewest lines?
- **Younger Students:** Describe your first impression of it. Does it remind you of something? Is there something about it that stands out to you?
- Sketch or write out your ideas.
- Using clay, create a sculpture that describes the essence or your impression of this chosen object or space. Plastic utensils and toothpicks can be used as tools to create texture.
- Support your sculpture with a cardboard base.

## Reflection

Present your work to the class. What words would you use to describe it? How does it make you feel, and what does it remind you of?

## Variations

This project can be scaled up or down, made more simple or complex, depending on the students' grade level. **Students with Special Needs:** Have students find something they are drawn to outside, and explore working with clay to express what they noticed. Alternatively, students can express what they felt when they were outside by rolling, pressing and using tools to poke or draw in the clay.

## Vocabulary

**Abstract art:** works of art that may have form, but have little or no attempt at pictorial representation.

**Buddha Shakyamuni:** the Buddha of our age, the founder of Buddhism; formerly Siddhartha, a prince who renounced the luxuries of his life to seek spiritual truth.

**Finish:** the characteristics of a surface; the exterior texture of a sculpture.

**Sculpture in the round:** a freestanding sculpture, not attached to any surface other than its base, one that someone can view from all angles.

## Curriculum Connections

**Visual Arts: K:** Create a three-dimensional form; look at and discuss artworks from a variety of times and places; discuss their own artworks, using appropriate art vocabulary; describe what is seen (including both literal and expressive content) in selected artworks. **Grade 1:** Identify the elements of art; use texture in two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork; demonstrate beginning skill in the manipulation and use of sculptural materials; describe how and why they made a selected artwork, focusing on the media and technique. **Grade 3:** Identify and describe elements of art in artworks; create an imaginative clay sculpture based on an organic form. **Grade 4:** Describe and analyze the elements of art; use additive and subtractive processes in making simple sculptural forms; discuss how the subject and selection of media relates to the meaning or purpose of a work of art; describe how the individual experiences of an artist may influence the development of specific artworks. **Grade 5:** Create an expressive abstract composition based on real objects; communicate values, opinions, or personal insights through an original artwork. **Grade 6:** Discuss artwork as to theme, genre, style, idea and differences in media. **Grade 7:** Describe the environment and selected artworks, using the elements of art and the principles of design; analyze and describe how the elements of art and the principles of design contribute to the expressive qualities of their own artworks; analyze the form and content of artworks. **Grade 8:** Analyze and justify how their artistic choices contribute to the expressive quality of their own artworks. **Grades 9–12:** Analyze their artworks as to personal direction and style; describe the relationship involving the art maker, the making, the artwork, and the viewer; identify the intentions of artists creating contemporary works of art and explore the implications of those intentions; analyze and articulate how society influences the interpretation and message of an artwork.

**English Language Arts: Pre-K–2:** Ask and answer questions about key details in an [artwork]; participate in collaborative conversations. **Grade 3–12:** Cite [visual] evidence to support analysis of what an [artwork] says.