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FOUNDATION FOR  
SELF-TAUGHT  
AMERICAN ARTISTS

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For Students, Teachers, and Parents  
FILMGUIDE

**Using the film *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist***

**About James Castle**

James Castle was born deaf in 1899 in central Idaho's remote Garden Valley. He refused to learn to read, write, sign, or finger-spell, communicating instead through the eloquence of his art. Since his death in 1977, Castle has gained world recognition as a prominent self-taught artist. *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist* is a 53-minute documentary film by writer-director-producer Jeffrey Wolf that reveals the artist's life and creative process, as told by family members, art historians, curators, artists, collectors, and members of the deaf community. A true case of triumph of the spirit, Castle's inspiring story is one of monumental achievement.

[www.jamescastlefilm.com](http://www.jamescastlefilm.com)

**About Jeffrey Wolf**

Hollywood and independent feature film editor Jeffrey Wolf enjoys working in many film genres, from the slapstick antics of *Billy Madison* (1995), to the fun and adventure of the cherished childhood favorite *Madeline* (1998), to the serious *Andre's Mother* (1990). His penchant for cutting comedy and drama has helped to create some of the most entertaining films of the last two decades. Most recently Wolf edited *The Longshots* (2008), directed by Fred Durst; *First Sunday* (2008), directed by David Talbert; *Hoot* (2006), based on the 2002 Newbury Award winner for Children's fiction by the author Carl Hiaasen. His credits include the film *Holes* (2003), based on the 1998 Newbury Award winning novel by Louis Sachar. He has worked with the iconoclastic film director/artist John Waters on *A Dirty Shame* (2004) and *Cecil B. DeMented* (2000); with Ted Demme on *The Ref* (1994) and such dramatic, character driven comedies as *Beautiful Girls* (1996), and *Life* (1999); with Jonathan Demme on *Subway Stories* (1997) for HBO; and with legendary filmmaker Arthur Penn on *Four Friends* (1981) and *Penn & Teller Get Killed* (1989).

In 2005, Jeffrey Wolf began filming *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist*, a blending of his interests in the art and film worlds, which represents his vision—a way of telling the Castle story that focuses on the merits of his art production while showing various aspects of the artist's life as a means of enriching the viewers' understanding and appreciation of the artwork.

**Depending on the age of students and time available, teachers may wish to show the 53-minute film in several sittings. With young and middle school classes, it is possible to get an interesting view of the artist's life by viewing the first 12 minutes and the last 10 or 15 minutes. We encourage the teacher or parent to view the entire film and select those passages that best serve your own goals.**

**A. Some Discussion Questions**

1. Jeffrey Wolf is an artist, too. How is a filmmaker similar to, or different from, an artist who draws, makes constructions, or other objects?
2. If you were making a film about a person, how would you do it? What are the challenges of making a film about a living person? A person who has died?

3. What kind of research do you think Jeffrey Wolf needed to do for this film?
4. What did you learn about James Castle's drawings and books from the film or parts of the film you viewed? How did this help you understand Castle's sense of place?
5. Since Castle never spoke, how did Wolf use other voices to speak for the artist? Which of the speakers in the film help you understand how Castle saw the world?
6. What does it mean for an artist to be "self-taught"?
7. How do you think his deafness affected the kind of art Castle made?
8. Why do you think Castle rejected traditional art tools and materials?

## **B. Meet more self taught artists who made art about place**

1. Use the Foundation's website to look at the work of these self-taught artists and how they made art about place, home, their own lives: Nellie Mae Rowe, Thornton Dial, and Sam Doyle <http://www.foundationstaart.org>
2. See two excellent children's books by Mary E. Lyons: *Talking With Tebé: Clementine Hunter, Memory Artist* and *Bill Traylor, Self Taught Artist*.
3. See artists who built environments and consider how they create "place" and express their connections to it on line at PBS Off the Map Backyard Paradises <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/>
4. View films about other self-taught American artists:

*I Build the Tower*, dir. Edward Landler and Brad Byer, 2005, US, DVD, 87 min, color; a Brad Byer and Bench Movies Production, about Simon Rodia and Watts Towers <http://www.ibuildthetower.com/>

*In the Realms of the Unreal*, dir. Jessica Yu, 2004, US, DVD, 82 min, color, about Henry Darger, production of Diorama Films, LLC., and a presentation of ITVS <http://opiumpandamonium.com/realms/index.html>

*Possum Trot*, dir. Allie Light and Irving Saraf, 1977, US, DVD, 28min, color, about Cal and Ruby Black, produced and distributed by [Light-Saraf Films](http://www.light-saraf.com/)

*The Angel That Stands By Me: Minnie Evans' Paintings*, dir. Allie Light and Irving Saraf, 1983, US, DVD, 29 min, color, produced and distributed by [Light-Saraf Films](http://www.light-saraf.com/)

### **Your Feedback**

It is our belief that students of all ages will find a kindred spirit in the life of James Castle. If you develop any projects for your students, or produce artworks as a result of looking at the Castle film and artwork, contact us at: [mdougherty@foundationstaart.org](mailto:mdougherty@foundationstaart.org) or call 215.979.1155. We would be delighted to create more space and links this site—to capture and document the positive impact of James Castle's fascinating story.

### **Credits**

Our educational suggestions are inspired by the Boise Art Museum Education Department's materials developed by Melanie Fales, Curator of Education for their James Castle exhibition (March 26–June 5, 2005) as well as discussions with Julie Bernson, Director of Education, Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and Lynne

Horoschak, chair of the Art Education Department at Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia.

Visit "James Castle: A Retrospective," on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Oct. 14, 2008 through Jan. 4, 2009

URL <http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/328.html>