
FOUNDATION FOR
SELF-TAUGHT
AMERICAN ARTISTS

For Students, Teachers, and Parents
HANDOUT 1

Introduction

These art making ideas and discussion topics can be adapted for different ages, grade levels, and curriculum goals. They can be done in school or at home and introduced before or after viewing 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.

Two months premature, Charles James Castle was the sixth of seven children born to Mary Nora Scanlon Castle, a mid-wife, and Francis John Castle, the local postmaster. Growing up in the early 1900s American West, with the "can do" culture and hard work that frontier-life symbolized, Castle exemplified this regional character and pioneering spirit.

Though Garden Valley was isolated, the Castle residence was a rustic social center, serving not only as family home, but also as the community's post office and general store. In the mail came publications designed for the pew (*The Catholic Sentinel* and liturgical calendars), the plow (scores of almanacs and periodicals devoted to animal husbandry, agriculture, and gardening), and the outhouse (Sears and Roebuck catalogues)—a favorite source for drawings and collaged illustrations. Everywhere, the tactile allure of packaging, twine, rope, paper, envelopes, cardboard, heavy cloth, and leather stimulated Castle's imagination.

Using a mixture of stove soot and his own saliva on tips of sharpened sticks, Castle recorded his immediate surroundings—the interior and exterior of his house, the shed, the barn—in drawings with perfect perspective and almost scientific attention to detail. He was supported by his family in his zeal to produce, which resulted in works stacked and bundled by the thousands—drawings, books, and constructions that thoroughly captured his singular view of the world.

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 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.

Art Making Activity—Making Art with Found Materials

See downloadable images – downloaded for projection or reproduction – constructions of a turkey, pitcher, and doll; drawing/collage using product labels (coffee); drawing on an envelope. Download the entire set as a .zip file at http://www.foundationstaart.org/education/_images/castle_image-set1.zip

Recommended Steps

1. Discuss the four images focusing on James Castle's use of found materials.
2. Collect similar materials—students can bring in their own or the teacher can supply them.

3. Discuss how found materials from 21st century homes differ from those available to Castle.
4. Ask each student to choose one of the Castle images as a model and make their own artwork.
5. Invite students to talk about their pieces and why they selected the particular Castle artwork as their model.
6. Discuss how these artworks function as design objects and how they might reflect each maker's life and experience.
7. Reconsider "About James Castle" and discuss how his life, rural environment, his deafness, and lack of formal education might be reflected in his art.

Meet more self taught artists who used found objects and recycled materials

1. Use the Foundation website to look at the work of these self taught artists: Bill Traylor, Howard Finster, David Butler, and Sister Gertrude www.FoundationSTAART.org
2. See artists who use trash and recycled materials to create environments and consider classroom activities about these artists on line at PBS Off the Map Backyard Paradises <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/>

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 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>