
FOUNDATION FOR
SELF-TAUGHT
AMERICAN ARTISTS

For Students, Teachers, and Parents
HANDOUT 2

I. A Sense of Place

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*.

II. 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.

With 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.

III. Art Making Activity

Creating a simple book from found paper or paper bags. Excellent models and directions for making simple books of 6 to 8 pages are available on line at:

<http://www.makingbooks.com/teachingtips.shtml>

http://www.arts.ufl.edu/art/rt_room/sparkers/artist_book/make_a_book.html

- A. See downloadable images – downloaded for projection or reproduction – including a self-portrait, his house, interiors of rooms, and several of Castle's books. Include one or two book images with letters, words, or numbers. Download the entire set as a .zip file at http://www.foundationstaart.org/education/_images/castle_image-set1.zip

B. Recommended Steps:

1. Discuss the downloaded or projected images focusing on what they tell us about Castle's "sense of place"? What did you learn about his use of materials?" Explore the time and character of Idaho during Castle's life?

2. Collect and discuss pictures from magazines showing towns, landscapes, homes, interiors. Ask students what these pictures might tell them about the people who live in these spaces.
3. Ask each student to create a personal book including pictures of his or her own town, home, interiors, and surrounding architecture and landscape.
4. Suggest students include text as well as drawings.
5. Provide an opportunity for students to share their books and describe how their pictures communicate their personal experiences of place and home.
6. Show students the Castle images referred to above and ask what these images tell us about Castle's home and his experience of place.
7. If students have included text in their books, ask how they think the artist's deafness and the fact that he never learned to read or write changed his expression of place and ability to communicate about it. Consider how he used letters and numbers in his compositions.

IV. 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/>

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>