

HENRY STONEMASON TO SCULPTOR DISPIRITO

Lesson for Educators
Artistic Technique: Direct Carving



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

LESSON

GRADES 1–6

This curriculum is aligned
with the New York State
P–12 Learning Standards



New York State
Museum

The New York State Museum is a program of
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ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson draws from the Henry DiSpirito collection at the New York State Museum, a gift of the artist's daughters, which includes examples of his direct-carving sculptures, paintings, and a selection of his carving tools. This lesson serves to aid educators in teaching students about responding to, connecting with, and creating sculptures. This lesson is designed for elementary school students, but can easily be adapted for middle school and high school.

The New York State Learning Standards met in this lesson are included at the end of this guide. For more information on the standards, visit www.nysed.gov/next-generation-learning-standards.

ABOUT THE HENRY DISPIRITO COLLECTION

In keeping with Henry DiSpirito's generous spirit, the DiSpirito family donated a collection of his works to the New York State Museum. In late 2019 the temporary exhibition, *Henry DiSpirito: Stonemason to Sculptor*, opened, featuring nine sculptures and a group of paintings from this collection, with an additional sculpture on loan from Utica College. Historical images and tools from DiSpirito's studio illuminate his creative process. In addition to highlighting DiSpirito's artwork, this lesson includes an excerpt from his memoir, *Le Mie Memorie*, originally spoken and written in his native Italian and translated by his daughter Dolores DiSpirito and provided for use here by the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York.



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE
GRADES 1–6

DIRECT CARVING ANIMAL FIGURES

LESSON



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INTRODUCTION

Direct carving is a *subtractive* sculpture process. This means the artist carves directly into stone or wood, and material is removed to form the sculpture. Other sculptural techniques, such as molding, casting, and assembling, are *additive* processes. The artist adds material to form their work.

OBJECTIVES

This lesson encourages students to assess, respond to, and create sculptures through the direct-carving process. Students will use observation skills to compare and evaluate features of different sculptures created by DiSpirito. They will plan a design and create their own sculptures, using newly explored art-making techniques. Students will present and discuss their finished artwork using vocabulary and concepts introduced in this lesson.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Henry DiSpirito (1898–1995) was born in Castelforte, Italy. At the age of 11, he left school and began his training as a stonemason and bricklayer. Masonry was not his passion, but DiSpirito felt a sense of duty to help support his family. His construction work in the Italian countryside allowed him to experience the landscape in a new way, and his love of nature would later connect in a very meaningful way to his skills with stone.

In his memoir, he would later write of his time as his father's apprentice, saying:

“Many times, I had the desire to leave my work and to design and paint a scene...my interest was not in masonry, I wanted to reproduce nature as it presented itself to me. I loved the sky, the trees, the rustic paths which my hometown had in abundance, all of this excellent material. But, when I would absent myself from work, I thought of the harm I was doing to my parents. They had so much need for my help financially. Until I was a young man, I was tormented by two thoughts: one was the love for my family, and the other was my love for art.”

When DiSpirito emigrated from Italy to the United States in 1921 he was already a trained stonemason and bricklayer. In Utica, New York, he found work in those trades but longed to devote his life to art.

DiSpirito enrolled in Utica's Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute from 1941 to 1943. There, he found his calling as a sculptor. Most of his subjects were animals or human figures, rendered in fieldstone or wood. He exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and SculptureCenter in New York City and at museums and galleries across the state. Renowned for his sculpture, DiSpirito was an accomplished painter as well.

FEATURED WORKS



The Toad, c. 1960
Stone, gneiss
7" x 13" x 12"



The Mole, c. 1960
Stone, gabbro
9" x 8" x 7"



Sucker (Fish), c. 1951
Stone, conglomerate
21" x 14" x 8.25"

At home, DiSpirito began transforming his backyard into a sculpture garden to exhibit his works. Neighborhood children and art curators alike were welcome. One visitor recalled the garden and the artist himself: "We were soon standing in a modest-sized yard filled with magnificent but simple stone creatures—animals, snails, insects. A man with white hair came out of the house and talked in a calm, but passionate voice. It was a stunning moment."

In 1963 DiSpirito realized his dream of working full time as an artist when he was appointed the first artist-in-residence at Utica College, a position he held until his death. In 1989 the college awarded him an honorary degree, and many of his works populate the campus today. Through his art, DiSpirito developed a deep connection with students and faculty, as well as the larger community.

VOCABULARY

- **sculpture** – Three-dimensional art made by one of four basic processes: carving, modeling, casting, and constructing.
- **direct carving** – A sculptural technique using tools to shape a form by cutting or scraping away from a solid material such as stone, wood, bone, or ivory.
- **subtractive sculpture** – The removal, as opposed to the addition, of material to create a form. Carving involves cutting or chipping away a shape from a mass of stone, wood, or other hard material.
- **fieldstone** – Stone in its natural form, unaltered, processed, or finished.
- **chisel** – A wedge-like tool with a cutting edge at the end of the blade, often made of steel, used to cut or shape wood, stone, metal, or other hard materials. A hammer is often used to apply force to the chisel.
- **rasp** – A coarse file or similar metal tool with a roughened surface, used for scraping, filing, or rubbing down objects of metal, wood, stone, or other hard materials.
- **form** – The shape or configuration of an object; its physical nature: height, width, and depth.
- **texture** – Physical feel or appearance of a touchable sensation on a surface area.

WARM-UP

Starting with a brainstorm activity, ask students:

- How does a sculptor find inspiration in a stone?
- What does it mean that an artist "sets free" what they see in the stone?

Consider other ways people find animal forms in nature: clouds, constellations, etc.

GUIDED PRACTICE: VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES

To support class discussions and visual thinking strategies while exploring DiSpirito's direct-carving sculptures, have students make careful observations of the featured artwork.

- What is going on in this sculpture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Continued Discussion

- Are there any human emotions represented?
- What adjectives would you associate with this animal?
- Can you imagine this form in nature?
- What other details do you notice?
- How do you think this sculpture would feel to touch?
- Is there evidence of any action or movement?

EXPANDED DISCUSSION

Introduce the following elements of sculpture. This dialogue will help encourage the use of new vocabulary words and understanding of art concepts.

Medium and Material: What material(s) is it made of? How does the medium affect the style? Was this piece built up using an additive sculpting process or carved away in a subtractive process? Does the artist want you to be aware of the medium, or does he want you to see the material as something else? Does the sculpture still have the visual qualities of stone, or does it look like another material? Is the surface polished or textured?

Treatment of Form: Is it a naturalistic or realistic sculpture? Is it abstracted? Idealized? Stylized? What is the attitude toward the animal? Consider the scale of the sculpture relative to the viewer and relative to the subject.

Composition and Balance: Is there a focal point to the sculpture? Is the composition unified or fragmented? Is there symmetry? Does the composition help to direct the viewer's attention? Did the sculptor plan for the work to be viewed from all sides, or is there a main view or vantage point? How is the sculpture balanced, symmetrically or asymmetrically? Are there patterns of lines?

Scale: Is the animal life size or larger than life? Is it meant to be viewed up close or at a distance?

Space and Movement: How does the sculpture relate to the space around it? Is it self-contained or does it reach out? Does it have implied movement? Are the figures fully freed from the material, or are they still attached? Does the sculpture seem restricted by the original shape of the material from which it was carved? Consider physical characteristics like posture, movement, and expression.

Color and Lighting: Is the coloring of the sculpture natural or applied? Was the sculpture painted? Has the sculptor created coloristic effects through contrasting shadows and highlights? Does the color or lack of color hold meaning? How were natural properties of color and texture incorporated into the design of the sculpture?

Function and Meaning: What is this work's purpose? Was it intended for public or private display? What is the nature of this piece? Is there symbolism? Personification? Anthropomorphism?

Place: How might the production site have impacted the creation of the sculpture? Show image of DiSpirito's sculpture garden at home.

ARTMAKING ACTIVITY

Materials: Bars of soap, pencil, tools. If you have clay-working tools available, use those. If not, household items, such as scrapers, vegetable peelers, spoons, scissors, and paperclips will also work.

Using Henry DiSpirito's inspiration and direct-carving process as a guide, students will explore sculpture through soap carving.

Students will be assessed on their participation in class discussions, completion of sketches, and completion of sculpture.

Step 1: Study

- If possible, take students on a walk around the school grounds. Identify the animals found along the walk. Have students make careful observations of the animals, including details, texture, shape, and movement.
- Back in the classroom, have students make a detailed drawing of one animal seen in nature. It may also be helpful to have some reference pictures and videos of local animals available in the classroom.
- Encourage your students to identify motions typical of the animal. Discuss characteristics and traits of animals.

Step 2: Prepare

- Have students trace their bar of soap onto a piece of paper to create a template.
- Next, students will use their sketch to create a simple design outline that fits onto the soap-sized template.
- Students will then cut out their design outline and trace it directly onto their bar of soap.

Step 3: Subtractive Sculpting

- Instruct students to carefully scrape into the soap using the tools provided.
- Encourage students to work slowly, to check their work at each stage, and decide how to adapt, using control of tools and new techniques.
- Students should add details using smaller tools. Textured details may include the appearance of fur, feathers, scales, eyes, nails, etc.

LESSON TIPS

- Start by working together and having students follow your lead in slowly scraping the brand name off the soap.
- Use a potato peeler to smooth the edges. Use a paperclip to create smaller details. Dip cutting tools in warm water to help soften soap.
- Have students save the soap shavings, which can help with minor repairs. Remember to work from all angles on this three-dimensional sculpture.

Modified Activity for Younger Students:

- Materials: Modeling clay or playdough. If you have clay tools available, use those. If not, use household items, such as scrapers, vegetable peelers, spoons, scissors, and paperclips.
- Focus on the difference between an additive process of modeling and subtractive process of carving. Have students experiment sculpting animals using clay or playdough, first by taking small pieces and adding to their work and then by using tools to carve away from a block of clay.

WRAP-UP

- Have the students reflect on their own artmaking process and again pose the question: How does the process of direct carving add to the meaning of the artwork?
- This is a good opportunity for students to present their artwork and to make connections and comparisons to the work of their classmates.

OPTIONAL CROSS-CURRICULAR EXTENSIONS

Science Extension: Make observations of and compare details of specimens used and depicted in the featured artworks.

- **GEOLOGY:** Make observations and compare details of specimens used and depicted in the featured artwork. Look for any patterns or features found in the stone.
- **BIOLOGY:** Make observations and compare details of animals depicted in the featured artwork.
- **IMAGES:**
 - Gabbro (*The Mole*)
 - Gneiss (*The Toad*)
 - Conglomerate (*Sucker (Fish)*)
 - Sandstone (*Toiler's Hand*)
 - Ventifact (wind and water-eroded stones)

ELA Writing Extension: Have students write an Artist Statement explaining their subject, process, what they liked best about the activity, and any challenges they faced creating their piece.

Advanced Art Extension:

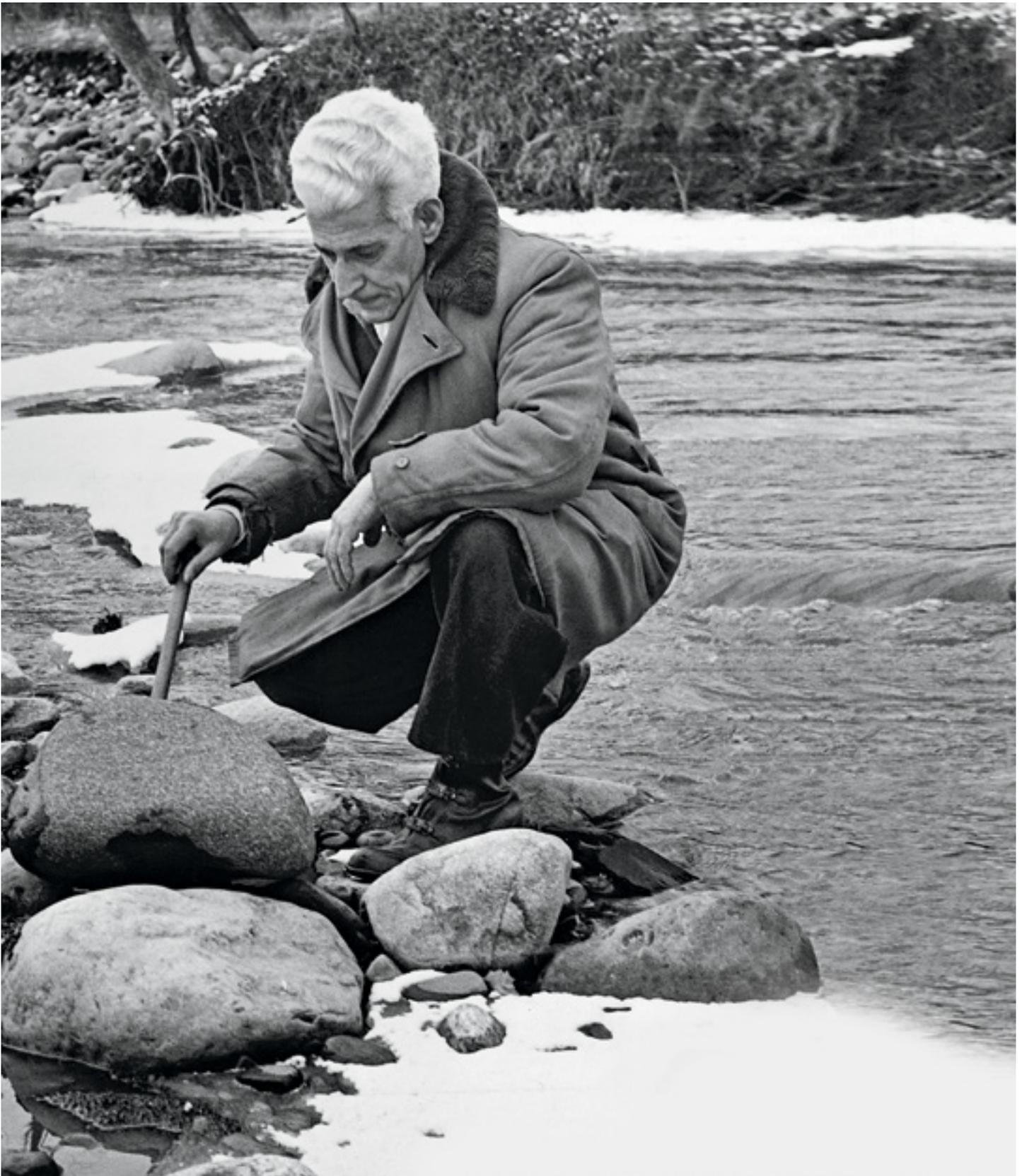
- **SENSORY:** Think about the tactile experience of your sculpture. Have students feel their sculpture, without looking at it, to experience its texture and three-dimensional nature. DiSpirito showed that his art could be observed and appreciated through touch and used his sculpture to champion the cause of the blind and visually impaired through gifts and special exhibits.
- **SETTING:** Determine the best setting for your sculpture. The setting of a sculpture can complement and add to the meaning of the artwork. Some of DiSpirito's sculptures lived in his garden surrounded by nature, while other pieces were created for the college campus, firehouse, or gallery exhibits. What would be the best setting for your sculpture? Can students describe or design settings for their sculptures?
- **CULTURAL CONNECTIONS:** Look at examples of designs based on nature and natural forms from different eras and cultures. Students can comment on the similarities and differences. Discuss the use of shape, color, and texture, as well as mediums and materials.



Henry DiSpirito in his garden, Blandina Street, Utica, New York, c. 1960
Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York



DiSpirito carving in his yard on Jay Street, Utica, New York, n.d.
Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York



Looking for stones in local creek beds, 1948

DiSpirito papers, NYSHA Research Library

Photograph by Dante Tranquille

Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York



Sunflower, n.d.

Wood

61.25" x 10" x 11"

NYSM, H-2019.20.7, gift of the DiSpirito Daughters



Toiler's Hand, c. 1947

Stone, Limestone

13" x 8" x 6.5"

NYSM, H-2019.20.3, gift of the DiSpirito Daughters



Stone-carving tools, c. 1940s–1980s
NYSM, H-2017.34, gift of the DiSpirito Daughters

LESSON LEARNING STANDARDS

NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

- 2.1:** Artists and designers experiment with forms, structures, materials, concepts, media, and artmaking approaches.
- 2.2:** Artists and designers balance experimentation and freedom with safety and responsibility while developing and creating artwork.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- 2.1:** How do artists work? How do artists learn from trial and error?
- 2.2:** How do artists and designers care for and maintain materials, tools, and equipment? Why is it so important for safety and health to understand and follow correct procedures in handling materials, tools, and equipment?

EDUCATION STANDARDS

- VA:CR2.1:** Safe and responsible use of tools. Use a variety of artmaking approaches/techniques.
- VA:CR2.3.1:** Create art that represents natural environment.
- VA:CR:3.1.5:** Create artist statements by using art vocabulary to describe personal choices in artmaking.

The New York State Museum
Cultural Education Center
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Cover Photo: *Toiler's Hand*, Henry DiSpirito, c. 1947

