

Harry Bertoia

Teaching Resource

Harry Bertoia: Sculpting Mid-Century Modern Life | January 29 – April 24, 2022

About Harry Bertoia

Born in Italy in 1915, Harry Bertoia left his homeland at the age of fifteen to join his brother in Michigan. Studying at Cranbrook Academy of Art, he honed his printing and metalsmithing skills and met colleagues Charles and Ray Eames, Florence Knoll and Eero Saarinen, with whom he would later collaborate on significant architectural and design projects.

Bertoia's work impacted all facets of life from personal to public, creating work that ranged from jewelry and domestic furniture to large-scale commissioned works. He was at the forefront of shaping the look of mid-century spaces.

"Mid-century modern" was a design period influenced by a post-World War II environment, full of mass production and technology that had an optimistic outlook for the future. Mid-century modern elements often feature natural forms and colors, clean minimal lines, and a mixture of manufactured and organic materials.

Objects in Space

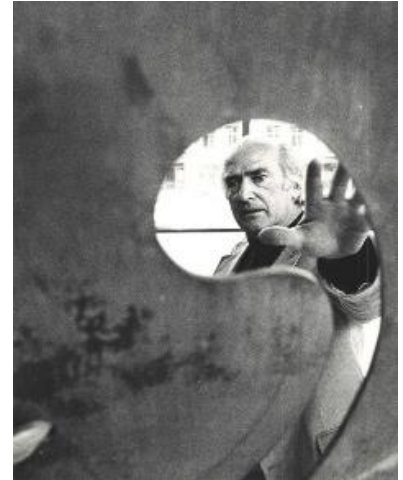
"What can you do with objects in space?" Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius asked Bertoia this question and it became a lifetime quest. Bertoia stated: "I started to get interested in all of these space experiments long ago... and the 'floating-in-space' idea."

- **Find a sculpture that appears light or buoyant. How does the composition of the sculpture make it appear to float in space?**
- **Consider the relationship of a sculpture (positive space) with the negative space around it.**

Nicknames

Most of Bertoia's works are untitled because he wanted to let the viewer experience the work directly and make their own associations. Some commissions were given descriptive nicknames in order to identify them more readily. Look for the wire constructions on view that have nicknames of "Cloud", "Dandelion", or "Sunburst."

- **When viewing an artwork, do you prefer knowing the artist's intent or forming your own interpretation? Why?**



Harry Bertoia, c. 1970. Photo: courtesy Harry Bertoia Foundation



Harry Bertoia, *Untitled (Sunburst)*, 1960. Polished bronze wire and rod, 76 x 32 x 32 in. (193 x 81.3 x 81.3 cm), Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection. Photo: Kevin Todora.

Furniture

"If you look at these chairs, they are mainly made of air, like sculpture. Space passes right through them..."—Harry Bertoia

Bertoia designed his famous "Diamond Chair," for Knoll Furniture in 1952. In order to create this prototype, Bertoia suspended the chair so he could rotate the curved grid and weld the intersections into place. Knoll still commercially produces this stainless-steel wire chair today.

- **Using your imagination, how would it feel to sit in this chair? Design your own innovative chair.**



Harry Bertoia, *Hand Made Chair Prototype* (Asymmetric Chaise Lounge), c. 1952. Bronze brazed steel rods on chrome-plated steel base, 37 x 53 x 32 ½ in. Collection of Wilbur and Joan Springer. Harry Bertoia © 2021 Estate of Harry Bertoia / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Sounding Sculptures

Bertoia set up a studio barn in Barto, Pennsylvania where he constructed innovative "sounding" sculptures. There are three types of these sculptures: **tonals**, which are made up of vertical metal rods that reverberate when someone strums them, **gongs**, made of large round plates played by striking with a mallet, and **singing bars**, which are pairs of metal rods that hang from a string and make sounds when they collide. Bertoia coined the term "Sonambient" to describe way these sculptures sound when played together. **Have you ever made music using everyday objects? What different types of sounds can you produce with objects found in your home or classroom?**

- **Scan the QR code to see a video of these sculptures in action.**

Stop by the Front Desk to see reproductions of Bertoia's sounding sculptures and to find out when you can see a demonstration of how the original sculptures are played.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSYQ0-Rmmk>

Monotypes

Through experimentation, Bertoia developed his own process of printmaking without formal training.

Bertoia said, "(I) paint just a shape here, leave a lot of space around it, and then another space and another color there. Then I would stretch the paper on a frame and hang it up against the light..."

- **Have you ever developed your own way of doing something by experimenting with materials? What was the result?**



Harry Bertoia, *Untitled*, n.d., Monotype, ink on Japanese Paper, Harry Bertoia Foundation, Harry Bertoia © 2021 Estate of Harry Bertoia/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Wearable Art

Early in his career, Bertoia crafted jewelry using his metalsmithing skills. Nature was a primary source of inspiration for his jewelry. Bertoia wanted his artwork to “parallel natural processes, rather than simulate the visible world.”

- **Look at the jewelry on display on the lower level. What natural forms does it remind you of?**
- **What inspires you? On a separate sheet of paper, sketch an artwork you would want to wear.**



Harry Bertoia, *Ornamental Centipede*, c. 1942. Hammered brass, 19 ¾ x 8 x ½ in. Cranbrook Art Museum, Gift of George Gough Booth and Ellen Scripps Booth through the Cranbrook Foundation, Harry Bertoia. ©2021 Estate of Harry Bertoia /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Large-Scale Commissions

Bertoia completed over 50 large-scale commissions for public and private collections all around the world. In addition to those in the exhibition, the city of Dallas has a “Reflective Screen” installed at the J. Erik Jonsson Dallas Public Library. Despite an initial rejection by the city, the sculpture is permanently installed thanks to the support of Dallas citizens.

- **Describe a time when you defended an artistic choice or viewpoint.**



Harry Bertoia, *Reflective Screen*, 1955. Brazed and welded copper, brass, and nickel alloys, 10' x 24'. Photo from the collections of the Dallas History & Archives Division, Dallas Public Library.

Additional Resources

Harry Bertoia Foundation:

<https://harrybertoia.org/>

Metalsmithing and Jewelry Processes by James Thurman, University of North Texas:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLSyeN8FxEQBkizZK_QY0dZvcUv39HU202

Treasures at the Dallas Public Library:

<https://www.dallaslibrary2.org/central/docs/central-walkingTourArts.pdf>

Dallas citizens voice support for Bertoia commission that city mayor rejected:

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/a-bunch-of-junk-january-1986/>

Suggested Curriculum Connections (TEKS)

Social Studies: Culture | §113.16 (a) and (b)

Fine Arts: Historical and Cultural Relevance | §117.3 Art, Level I (c)

Fine Arts: Critical Evaluation and Response | §117.4 (b), (d) and (e)

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Nasher Sculpture Center