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Children love the physicality of sculpture. So break free from convention and take your art into the third dimension, says Robert Watts

Sculpture vultures!

Whether it is carving into clay or assembling structures from various odds and ends, children love the physicality of sculpture. And contemporary artists have found many ways in recent years to test its boundaries – from pickled sharks to unmade beds.

Sculpture topics in school can offer children opportunities to experiment with processes and really engage with the properties of materials. In this month's creative topic, you will find a selection of ideas for practical work that will inspire children to take their artwork into the third dimension!

What is sculpture?

A sculpture is essentially any 3D artwork. Unlike a drawing, print or painting, a sculpture doesn't have a 'front' and 'back' – it can be viewed from different angles. A hundred years ago, all sculptures were representational; materials were carved or moulded to create lifelike forms. For many children, it is this image of a 'statuesque' form of sculpture that comes to mind when prompted to describe a sculpture. However, throughout the 20th century artists explored a huge range of approaches to sculpture, and challenging children's preconceptions about the nature of artists' work is a great way to begin this topic.

While images of sculptors' work are widely available on the internet, there is no substitute for seeing the real thing. Try to organise a visit to a local museum or gallery to provide children with first-hand experience of looking at a sculpture. Encourage them to ask questions about the processes and materials the artist has used to create their work, and to reflect on possible reasons why they wanted to make it. A little technical knowledge can help, but let children understand that you don't have all the answers – and their responses and opinions are just as valid as anyone else's.

If a gallery visit isn't an option, then simply take the children on a walk around the local area and encourage them to see familiar objects with a critical eye. What materials have been used to make the objects they see? What processes have been followed to construct them? Which shapes can they see repeated or reflected? You'll soon find that the streets are filled with sculptures – you just need to look for them.

Getting started

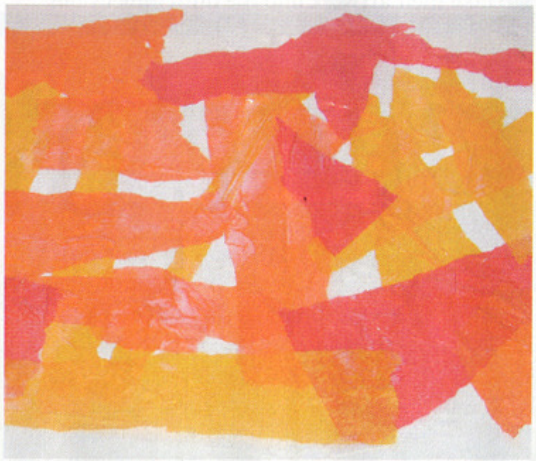
Back in the classroom, let the children experiment with creating temporary pieces from different materials such as Plasticine, wooden blocks or building bricks. Promote a sense of playful exploration and discourage children from making representations of houses, cars and animals; suggest that they simply explore what the materials can do. Try not to have a fixed idea of what children should produce at this stage, and emphasise that there is no right or wrong way to make their sculptures. Look for the unexpected: bricks and blocks might be the obvious materials to use to build a tall sculpture, but can the children find ways of manipulating soft materials? Almost any material that is available in large quantities – newspaper, for example – can be used to create structures. (Try rolling sheets tightly and taping securely.) Photograph the results of the experiments and get children to make observational sketches of their creations before they are dismantled. ➤

Alexander *Calder*

If you're in a gallery looking for sculptures by Alexander Calder, try looking up! Calder is famous for his brightly coloured mobiles, designed to hang from ceilings so that they subtly change as they move slowly around. For more information on the artist and examples of his work visit **www.tate.org.uk/collection**

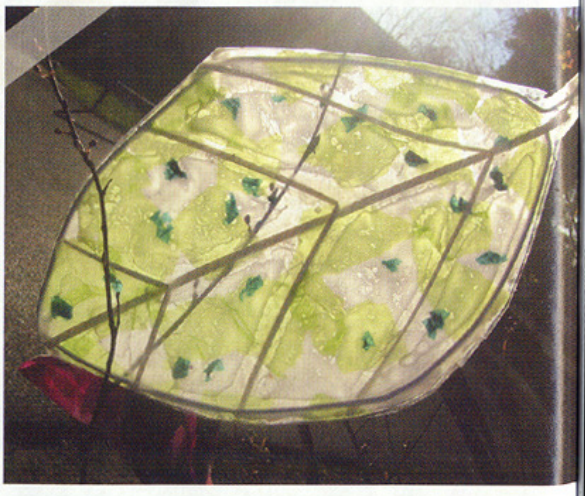
You will need: acetate sheets (or transparent plastic sleeves); tissue paper in a range of colours; PVA glue (mixed with water) and spreaders; wire coat hangers.

- To create your own Calder-esque sculptures, begin by spreading PVA glue thinned with water across a sheet of acetate.
- Tear strips of coloured tissue paper and place across the acetate, making sure that gaps are filled.
- Seal the tissue paper in with a second thin layer of PVA.
- Gently twist a wire coat hanger into a new shape and carefully wrap the tissue-covered acetate around it, using the PVA glue to seal the edges.
- Find a tree or other suitable outdoor site. Then hang up your sculptures and watch them dance in the breeze.



Extension:

Try adding art straws to the sculpture to create additional structures and patterns (see below).

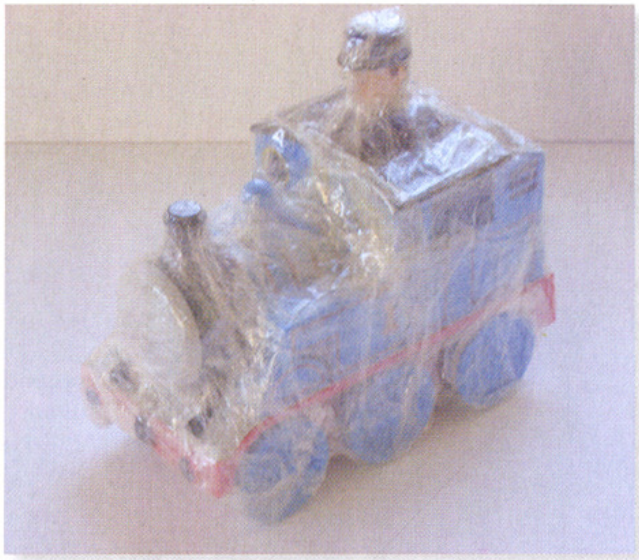


Mark Jenkins

Mark Jenkins (**www.xmarkjenkinsx.com**) is becoming well known in the US for his amazing sticky tape sculptures (see page 31 for an example). His life-size artworks suddenly appear overnight in cities across the country. Examples include a troop of translucent fairground horses placed on trees in a forest, or a pair of ducks swimming gently around a puddle on an inner-city street corner. Jenkins' technique is a simple one that is being widely adopted in primary schools across the US as a mess-free alternative to papier-mâché. Note that adult support is required for some of this process.

You will need: sticky tape (as much as you can find!); Clingfilm; objects – small toys are ideal; sharp scissors.

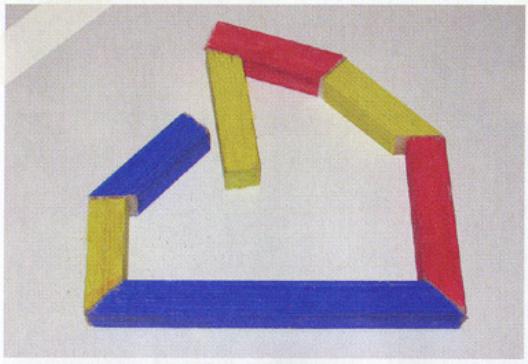
- Working in groups of two or three, select an object and wrap it tightly in Clingfilm. Make sure that the film goes into as many corners, nooks and crannies as possible.
- When it is completely covered, peel off a strip of sticky tape and wrap it around the toy. Do this again – and again and again – until eventually the whole object has two or three layers of tape around it.
- Now the teacher will need to use sharp scissors to cut a straight line through one side of the taped-up toy. The toy can then be removed, leaving a 'skin' of sticky tape.
- Use a piece of tape to carefully seal the section that was cut. You will now have a translucent version of the original object.



Extension:
Experiment with adding an extra layer of coloured tissue paper to the sculpture. ➤

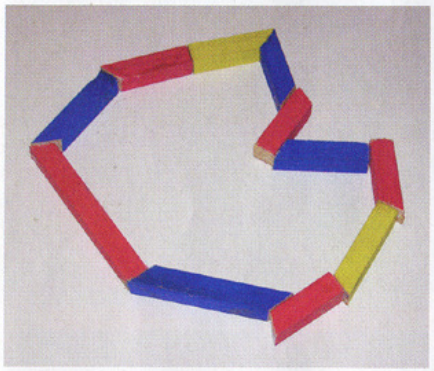
Richard Deacon

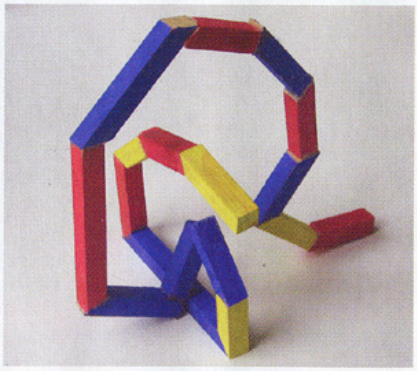
When it comes to exploring the properties of materials, Richard Deacon's work is a great inspiration. Deacon manipulates materials into unexpected shapes and structures, creating fluid, twisting sculptures that seem to defy the materials they are made from. There is a playful quality to his work that children will really respond to. Examples of his work can be found on Google Images.

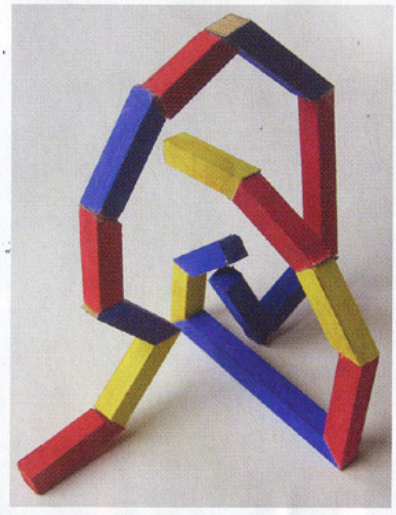


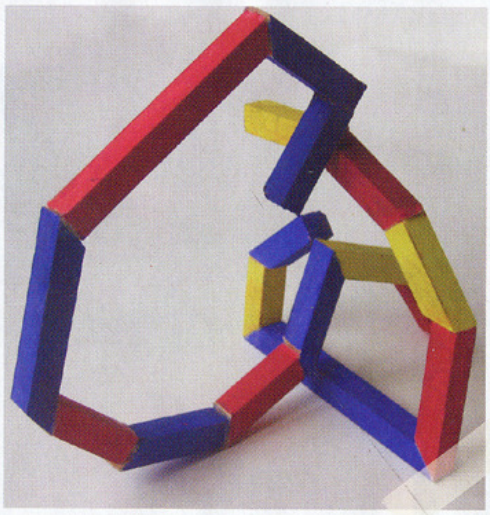
You will need: wood strips (2.5cm x 2.5cm is ideal) cut to short lengths at 45° angles; wood glue; paint; brushes.

- Children will need a number of short lengths of wood cut at 45° angles. Decide whether you want the children to saw through the wood strips themselves or whether you want to do it before the lesson. If the children want coloured strips of wood, it's easier to paint the strips before cutting them.
- Children will be gluing the strips together to create their sculptures. But before they stick them into place, encourage them to experiment with different combinations and interesting patterns.
- After experimenting, children can put the pieces flat on the table and glue them into place. (Use plastic or paper to avoid sculptures sticking to desks!)
- Leave the sculptures overnight to dry solid. When dry, the sculptures may not stand unsupported, so suggest to the children that they combine their work with that of a classmate. If they keep the shapes 'open' rather than 'closed', they will be able to join their sculptures to other ones more easily.
- Sculptures can be combined in various positions and photographs taken to record the new shapes they create. Some joins will be stronger than others, so this might be a case of look at my artwork – but please don't touch!









Extension:

Experiment with taking a sequence of photographs or video stills of each sculpture from different angles. Play them in a sequence to give the impression of a moving artwork.

Is this sculpture or D&T?

Many of the practical skills that children can develop through making sculptures in art and design – planning, constructing, cutting, joining – also relate to their learning in Design and Technology. Yet there are essential differences between the two subjects. Although children engaged in a D&T topic should be concerned with the functionality of their work, a sculpture's qualities can be purely visual. For example, in D&T children might build a newspaper chair designed to be strong enough to support the weight of a doll, whereas in art it's fine to say *'Don't touch my chair sculpture! It might break!'* ■

IMAGES COURTESY OF ROBERT WATTS