

Meet the Artist: Isaac Scott Hathaway

Introduction

Like other fine arts, sculpture is a representation of human experiences and individual accomplishments. This lesson plan reviews the nationally recognized art of African American sculptor, ceramicist, and illustrator Isaac Scott Hathaway, who created sculptures of notable African Americans from Arkansas.

About the Artist

Born in Lexington, Kentucky on April 4, 1874, Isaac Scott Hathaway—a sculptor, ceramicist, illustrator, and educator—became the first African American to design a circulating United States coin. He is also known for his plaster cast life and death masks of notable African American leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Frederick Douglass. Trained as a sculptor in Boston, Hathaway moved to Arkansas in 1915 to teach at Branch Normal College in Pine Bluff, where he introduced ceramics as the first art class at the all-black college.

While in Arkansas, Hathaway made pottery and created 32-inch plaster busts and masks of several influential black Arkansans including John E. Bush (co-founder of the Mosaic Templars of America), Floyd Brown (founder of the Fargo Agricultural School), John Brown Watson (president of Arkansas AM&N now University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff), and Scipio A. Jones (civil rights attorney). Hathaway also moved his art company to Arkansas. The Isaac Hathaway Art Company sold small 12-inch busts, plaques, pottery, china, and some cooking utensils.

The Fine Arts Commission of the United States Mint commissioned Hathaway to design the Booker T. Washington commemorative half-dollar in 1946 and a second coin featuring both Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver in 1950. At age 92, Hathaway died on March 12, 1967 in Tuskegee, Alabama.



Life mask of Isaac Scott Hathaway. Made of plaster and painted bronze.

Resources

Arnold Auerbach. *Modeled Sculpture and Plaster Casting*. London: Elek Books, 1961.

Clay. Milwaukee, WI: Gareth Stevens Publishers, 2003. (JUV)

Frederick M. Finney. "Isaac Scott Hathaway: An Uncommon Artist." *The Numismatist*. April 2000.

Gail Gibbons. *The Pottery Place*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987. (JUV)

Malvina Hoffman. *Sculpture Inside and Out*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1939.

Related Activities

Grades K-4

Objectives: Define form; recognize and describe various forms; create a form using clay.

“Form” refers to one of the elements of art. Forms are three-dimensional while shapes are flat. Cubes, spheres, and cylinders are all examples of forms; and artists use forms to create sculptures. With your students, discuss the forms of Hathaway’s art. Talk about the artist’s use of plaster and clay to create forms. Allow students to use clay to create forms or to model a sculpture.

A.1.1. Examines art and communicates ideas and feelings using the language of art (art elements and principles).

A.1.2. Explores skills associated with media and processes.

Grades 5-8

Objective: Familiarization with plaster casting in a manner similar to Isaac Scott Hathaway.

Artist Isaac Scott Hathaway used molds to create his plaster sculptures. However, he sometimes created a plaster cast directly from the object. Using a shallow tray, plaster of Paris, sand, and water allow students to make plaster casts of their hands. In the tray place sand about two inches deep. After moistening the sand with water, have students press their hand firmly so it leaves an impression. Mix the plaster according to the directions and pour into the impression. Allow the cast to dry (drying time will vary based on plaster directions). Once it is dry remove it from the sand and dust any loose sand from the cast. Students may paint their cast using acrylic or tempera paints.

A.2.1. Utilizes a variety of art media, tools/ technology, and processes, both two- and three-dimensional, to communicate ideas and feelings to achieve artistic solutions.

A.2.16. Produces art work which displays knowledge of diverse cultures, styles, and periods of art.

Grades 9-12

Objectives: Understand Hathaway’s process and rationale; increase awareness of African American artists; critically analyze the connection between art and politics.

Isaac Scott Hathaway gained national distinction as an artist after designing two commemorative United States coins. However, prior to this fame, he was a renowned sculptor using plaster to create cast of famous African Americans of political importance. Discuss the purpose of sculpture, particularly that of life/death casting. Are life castings or other forms of sculpture memorials that communicate ideas and history? Is there a connection between art and politics? If so, to what extent? Ask students to examine sculptures (especially, during and after World War II) and discuss their responses to the art.

A.1.21. Identify how art translates ideas, knowledge, emotions, and experiences to others.

A.1.28. Connect visual arts issues, ideas, and themes with concurring humanities and science characteristics.

Answer Key

Answers to page 4 discussion questions.

1. Ge is another word for “plaster,” which is a mixture of a lime and calcium-rich powder and water.
2. Plaster casting is the creation of a plaster sculpture from a mold.
3. A mask is of a person’s face, and a bust of is a person’s head and shoulders.
4. Answers will vary.
5. Answers may include that ge allowed for ancient art that might have been destroyed to be copied; new forms of art/expression; and new fire retardant building material.

Gee, What's Ge?

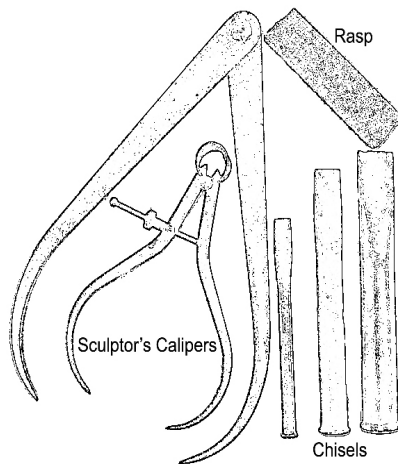
Plaster is a mixture of a lime and calcium-rich powder and water. Once the mixture hardens it can be used to make casts, molds, and even sculptures. The ancient Greeks called plaster *ge*, meaning "from the earth."

For centuries, plaster has been exported from Europe. Unlike other areas in Europe, the Montmartre hills in Paris have very large deposits of gypsum, which is a soft white mineral used to make plaster. Because of this, France became the leading plaster supplier in the world! Since so much plaster came from Paris, plaster became known as "plaster of Paris." Plaster is great for art work and as a building material because it is easy to use.



Plaster Casting 101

Plaster casting is a sculpture process that uses wax or gelatin molds that can be used again and again to make new sculptures or to create copies of famous statues. Plaster casting has been used for thousands of years to make replicas of



Tools of the Trade
Hathaway used these tools to create his artwork.

sculptures. The earliest plaster casts appeared in Egypt in 3000 BCE. These early casts were of the heads of Egyptian mummies. Later the Romans adopted the plaster casting techniques to copy popular Greek sculptures.

Plaster casts of the faces of people were considered true portraits. Death masks, or creating masks upon a person's death, were traditionally used in royal tomb effigies and funeral effigies. However, in the 1900s, photography made life-casting, or the creating life masks using plaster casting, a very popular art.

African American artist Isaac Scott Hathaway created life and death masks and larger-than-life busts of famous African Americans using plaster casting techniques. A few of Hathaway's models included educator Booker T. Washington, agricultural chemist George Washington Carver, Arkansas businessman John E. Bush, and Arkansas civil rights attorney Scipio A. Jones.

Discussion Questions

1. What is *ge*?
2. In your own words, explain plaster casting.
3. What is the difference between a mask and a bust?
4. *Thinking Critically.* Why do you think Isaac Scott Hathaway created sculptures of famous African Americans?
5. *Thinking Critically.* To what extent did the discovery of *ge* affect art and architecture?



Washington-Carver half-dollar designed by Isaac Scott Hathaway



did you know...

Plaster became a popular building material because it was fire resistant. Early craftsmen even mixed ox or goat hair with the plaster to make it stronger.

Terms to Define:

- Bust
- Calipers
- Chisel
- Ge
- Gypsum
- Mask
- Plaster of Paris
- Rasp
- Sculpture

Artist Isaac Scott Hathaway created busts and masks of famous African Americans. Select one of the individuals listed below and create a “people bag.” In a paper sack place six to ten items that represent the person or the person’s life. Be creative and be ready to discuss your “people bag!”

Mary McLeod Bethune, educator

John E. Bush, businessman

George Washington Carver, scientist

Benjamin Oliver Davis, Sr., military officer

William Levi Dawson, musician

Frederick Douglas, abolitionist

W.E.B. Du Bois, sociologist

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, poet

Scipio A. Jones, attorney

Booker T. Washington, educator

Carter Woodson, historian

Monroe N. Work, author

