

# Sculptures for Our Time



**Lisa Hirkaler**

Any high-school three-dimensional design and sculpture teacher has experienced the difficulty of getting students to produce solid, stable clay figures, and keeping them motivated in the process. In a search for methods appropriate to adolescent abilities and contexts, I have experimented with many different armatures as the substrate for sculpture. One I have found to be remarkably successful is the simple newspaper cone.

I found that a newspaper cone shape allows for great success in

expressive figurative sculpture and puts students in touch with art history without constraining creativity. The cone shape as the armature underlying sculptures of the human figure is a technique found across millennia, from Mesopotamia, to Han China, to medieval Europe. When exposed to this ancient art form, students create works that combine traditional styles with the context of their own twenty-first-century adolescence.

**Seeing similar expressive strategies from widely different cultures frees students to express their own culture.**

### Studying the Human Figure

To begin the lesson, we study the human figure. I have a volunteer stand on a table in the center of the room and model various and model various takes on “expressive.” Students typically agree, for example, that expressive lines that are gentle or sad in nature fold forward or inward, while excited or angry expressions extend outward. We strike poses, create simple sketches, and discuss gesture. I share a Power-

Point presentation that show artists’ works and the process from sketch to finished work.

### Modeling, Research, and the Melding of Ideas

Students start by rolling a 3/4"-thick newspaper cone and sealing it with masking tape. Then they mold a slab of clay to the exterior of the form to create the basic figure. Head, arms, and accoutrements are shaped with added clay as needed. Students wrap their figures in moist newspaper and plastic and while it sits for a day, report to the computer lab to research clay figures. (The newspaper is removed at the leather-hard stage to allow the work to dry evenly.) I don’t evaluate images from their research, but instead have students look at why a culture creates sculpture. Why are these objects so expressive? What do they mean? How do they capture the period?

Students start their research with the timelines of East Asian, Mesopotamian, and European sculpture on the Metropolitan Museum of Art website. Here they begin to see the historical prevalence of the cone-figure method they have just employed. They think about what they personally want to express and find inspiration in the work of artists.

Students connect to ancient sculptures as supernatural or superhero figures and see the stability and structure enabled by this technique—from standing and dancing figures to seated figures of the Buddha using a wider cone shape. This is the point where students really begin to solve the art problem through their own expression.

### Ancient Substrate for Postmodern Expression

Questions about diverse past cultures resonate for the adolescent student in a twenty-first-century class. Seeing similar expressive strategies from widely different cultures frees students to express their own culture.



What continually surprises me is that my students mix all sorts of aspects of their lives in a postmodern pastiche, creating moving, expressive objects centered on popular culture and fashion, mixed with images reminiscent of their childhood, angels, and other spiritual works.

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### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks.*

### WEB LINK

[www.MetMuseum.org](http://www.MetMuseum.org)