

John Buck: Prints and Sculpture

from the
**Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer
and His Family Foundation**

Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University
January 25 – March 29, 2020

Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *John Buck: Prints and Sculpture*, and to offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of John Buck.
- To explore the artist's characteristic style and his use of personal imagery and symbols.
- To explore the viewer's role in understanding and interpreting a work of art.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of the artist's style
- Identify and discuss the artist's use of recurring imagery and symbols.
- Discuss their own interpretations of the artist's work and how they are influenced by their individual experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

John Olbrantz

The Maribeth Collins Director, Hallie Ford Museum of Art

John Buck (American, born 1946) is a nationally recognized Montana artist who has created a large and powerful body of woodcut prints and wood sculpture over the past four decades. Born in Ames, Iowa, in 1946, Buck knew early on that he wanted to be an artist. His father had aspirations to be an artist as well but was forced to put those dreams aside, and instead supported his family as a construction worker. His son was luckier.

Buck earned his BFA degree at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1968 where he learned the basics of sculpture, working primarily in welded steel and bronze casting, and completed his MFA degree at the University of California, Davis in 1972, where he studied with the artists Robert Arneson, Roy DeForest, Manuel Neri, and William T. Wiley. It was at Davis that he met his wife, the artist Deborah Butterfield.

In 1976, Buck moved to Bozeman, Montana, where he accepted a teaching position at Montana State University. Because he no longer had access to the expensive equipment required for welding and casting that he had found at Davis, he turned to wood carving and, in time, to woodcut prints. A virtuoso draftsman and imaginative sculptor, Buck explores a wide range of national and global issues in sophisticated works that are imbued with complex iconography and often layered with multiple meanings.

Over the years, Buck has become fascinated with the cultural imagery surrounding his homes in Montana and Hawaii, where he and Butterfield reside for half the year, as well as with current events, popular culture, and the irony and humor found in world history. His large-scale woodcut prints are deliberately couched in the language of popular art, recalling graffiti art, cartoons, posters, and political broadsides.

Buck's approach to printmaking is unique. Starting with a large block of wood, he carefully carves the central image with a variety of sharp tools. Next, the images in the background are incised into the wood using a sharp object like a nail, hard pencil, or ballpoint pen. When the image is complete, he cuts the block apart in sections that can be reassembled like a large jigsaw puzzle. The individual parts can be inked in various colors and once reassembled, can be printed at one time.

Because the background lines are so shallow Buck prints the key blocks by hand-burnishing rather than using a press, which would slowly crush the wood as well as flatten out the smaller lines. His burnishing tools range from metal spoons and drawer-pulls to knobs of various size and shapes to objects like folding bones. The process is very labor intensive but allows Buck to work on a scale that is unprecedented in the history of printmaking.

Similarly, his wood sculptures draw on popular sources—especially the simplified forms of country woodcarvers—but there are echoes of modernist sculptors like Constantin Brancusi,

Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso in much of his sculptural work. Moreover, his freestanding sculptures are less overtly narrative than his prints, and instead offer assortments of symbolic objects balanced upon the headless bodies of male or female figures, or held in their hands.

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Buck has been featured in dozens of solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States, and his work can be found in numerous public and private collections throughout the region and nation, including the Hallie Ford Museum of Art. The legendary print collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation are particularly rich and deep in their holdings of John Buck's prints.

John Buck: Prints and Sculpture from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation has been supported by Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation and by general operating support grants from the City of Salem's Transient Occupancy Tax funds and the Oregon Arts Commission.

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the images and suggested discussion below to introduce students to the work of John Buck.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette

Looking at the Work of John Buck: *Argosy* and *Taj Mahal*

“My work focuses on three basic formats: woodblock prints, wood relief panels, and [wood] sculpture, which feed into one another. By shifting from printmaking to sculpture . . . I am able to see with a fresh eye.”

— John Buck

John Buck is a collector of images – natural and man-made objects that are part of his ever-increasing visual vocabulary. These images are recurring in his work, over a variety of media. Their meaning, however, is rather fluid: sometimes a single image can take on different roles in different works, and while it may bring with it universal associations, its interpretation ultimately lies with the viewer. As writer and curator Linda Tesner says about Buck’s imagery:

While Buck’s work is highly representational, his vocabulary of imagery is not meant to be specific.... [He] is willing to concede that many elements of his work speak to a universal understanding – his frequent use of the world globe, for instance – [yet] he is reticent to share too much of what his imagery means personally, let alone what it “should” mean to the viewer. He cautions that no matter what the art form, each individual confronts a work of art with visual references built on his own or her own experiences, memories, and emotions.¹

John Buck’s prints are full of imagery reflecting current events, political issues, the human condition, ideas about place, and the artist’s personal history. The background is filled with figures and objects – either as part of little vignettes or scenes or by themselves in a more symbolic way – that are incised into the surface of the block. These images are in conversation with the large, often multi-colored central form: together they create a deeper or more complicated reading of the print, and while together they, and perhaps the title, can influence interpretation, a literal reading eludes the viewer.

Buck’s wall reliefs (as well as the freestanding sculpture featured in the exhibition) are less narrative than the prints, and rely more on association than storytelling. The reliefs consist of individual wooden niches with a visual symbol set inside. Some are carved, some are panels that are painted, drawn, and/or incised. These elements are arranged to encourage visual or conceptual connections. Many of the same figures or symbols from the prints are found in the reliefs (and freestanding sculptures), but their meanings and relationships are more ambiguous, even mysterious.

¹ Tesner, Linda, “John Buck: Storyteller of the Human Experience,” p. 7, *John Buck: Recent Sculpture and Woodblock Prints*



Argosy

1998

Edition 10/15

Eight color woodcut

Sheet: 62 1/2 x 37 inches

Framed: 65 1/8 x 39 3/8 inches

Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, 1999.32

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About the Work

The glass jar, which is the central figure in the print, *Argosy*, is a recurring image in John Buck's work, both carved and printed, but also as sculptures actually fabricated in glass. These large glass jars were created during residencies at Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington. When Buck and his wife, the sculptor Deborah Butterfield first arrived at their bungalow they discovered a forgotten potato growing a profusion of foliage on the kitchen table. This led Buck to direct the resident gaffer to fabricate glass jars, which he initially used to create a glass sculpture of a blown jar and a lampworked sprouting potato, titled *Idaho Potato Jar* (1997). He then followed with *Argosy*, as well as several other prints and sculptures featuring the glass jar.

Like much of Buck's work, *Argosy* explores the contradictory qualities of familiar symbols, and the conflict between our ideals and reality. The title refers to Argus, the hundred-eyed creature from Greek mythology who was all-seeing (the term "Argus-eyed" means to be keenly observant). Here, the many eyes of the potato suspended in the jar observe the human folly, and tragedy, represented in the background images. These include:

- A blindfolded Mickey Mouse evoking the symbol of blind Justice, holding a bag of money.
- A Bambi-like pulling a cart filled with emblems of American power, among them the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument.
- The Statue of Liberty rising from a shopping cart pushed by the shrouded figure of death.
- Other characters include a skeleton on a pogo stick and several homeless people, one of whom dabs at an artist's palette with a paintbrush. What else can you find?

Suggested Discussion (Always begin with aesthetic scanning before sharing the title or other information about the work)

Aesthetic Scanning:

- What do you see here?
 - Describe what you see in the work. Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?

- What do you think is happening in this work?
 - What objects or symbols has the artist included? Do they relate to each other? Explain
 - Are there stories, and do they relate to each other and the central image? Is there a theme? Explain
 - What do *you* think the objects could mean? What are your own associations with the object(s) or figure(s)? Are they personal? Cultural or historical? Do your own associations influence your interpretation of the object(s)? Of the meaning of the work as a whole? Explain.
 - What do you think the artist is trying to say?

Share with students the title and information about the work.

- What, if anything does this add to your own interpretation of the work? Did your initial interpretation change at all with this information? Explain.



Taj Mahal

2003

Jelutong wood with acrylic

48 x 48 x 2 3/4

Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer, 2005.162

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About the Work

In *Taj Mahal*, we once again see the image of the sprouting potato in the glass jar, but how it relates to the other images in the composition is more elusive than how it relates with the other elements in *Argosy*; the relationships are more associative than narrative. As Linda Tesner notes, the artist's intention was to make the wall panels deliberately nonnarrative and nonlinear, and that "[t]hey are more appropriately viewed in the spirit of surrealism or dream content."²

Along with the image of the sprouted potato in the jar, Buck has included:

- The Taj Mahal
- The Guggenheim Museum in New York City
- A map of lower Manhattan, New York City
- Two world globes, one with the USA featured prominently.
- A beard
- A hand holding a stick beneath a wasps nest
- Two forms; one solid and geometric, the other sinuous and amoeba-like

² Tesner, Linda, "The Mechanical Nature of John Buck," p. 31, *John Buck*

Suggested Discussion (Always begin with aesthetic scanning before sharing the title or other information about the work)

Aesthetic Scanning:

- What do you see here?
 - Describe what you see in the work. Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - How do the individual elements relate to each other visually?

- What do you think is happening in this work?
 - What objects or symbols has the artist included?
 - Do the objects relate to each other conceptually as well as visually? Is the artist trying to tell a story? Create associations or feelings? Explain
 - What are your own associations with the object(s) or figure(s)? Are they personal? Cultural or historical? Do your own associations influence your interpretation of the objects? Of the meaning of the work as a whole? Explain.
 - What do you think the artist is trying to say?

Share with students the title and information about the work.

- What, if anything does this add to your own interpretation of the work? Did your initial interpretation change at all with this information?
- Is it important to know the artist's meaning or intent in creating a work, or do you think it should be left up to the viewer? Explain

Compare and Contrast

- How are *Argosy* and *Taj Mahal* similar? How are they different?
- Think about how you responded to each work. How and why were your responses to *Argosy* and *Taj Mahal* similar? How and why were they different?

AT THE MUSEUM

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at individual works of art and consider the same discussion strategies they used in the classroom. Breaking into small groups works well for this.
- Before looking at the title or label information, spend time with the work using Aesthetic Scanning.

Aesthetic Scanning:

- What do you see here?
 - Describe what you see in the work.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Why?
 - How does your eye move around the painting? Is it led by color? By line? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - How has the artist created compositional unity and balance?
 - How do the individual elements relate to each other visually?
- What do you think is happening in this work?
 - What objects or symbols has the artist included?
 - Do the objects relate to each other conceptually or visually? Is the artist trying to tell a story? Create associations or feelings? Explain
 - What are your own associations with the object(s) or figure(s)? Are they personal? Cultural or historical? Do your own associations influence your interpretation of the object(s)? Of the meaning of the work as a whole? Explain.
 - What do you think the artist is trying to say?

Read the title and any information included in the label.

- What do you think the artist is trying to say?
- What, if anything does this add to your own interpretation of the work? Did your initial interpretation change at all with this information?

Compare and Contrast

- Look for prints, free-standing sculpture, and reliefs that share the same imagery – a figure, shape, or symbol. How does the way the artist uses this element (its visual impact, its meaning, its relation to other figures and forms) change from one work to another, and from one medium to another? Do you see it as part of a linear narrative (a story or vignette); creating an association; a visual element? Explain.
- Think about how you responded to each work. How and why were your responses similar? How and why were they different?

RESOURCES

Tesner, Linda, *John Buck: Recent Sculpture and Woodblock Prints*. Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon, 1999.

Tesner, Linda, et. al., *John Buck*. Marquand Books, Inc., Seattle, 2014.

OREGON STATE CONTENT STANDARDS: Grades 4-HS

Visual Arts

Anchor Standard 7: Responding—Perceive and analyze artistic work.

VA.7.RE1.4

VA.7.RE1.5

VA.7.RE1.6

VA.7.RE1.7

VA.7.RE1.8

VA.7.RE1.HS1-2

Anchor Standard 8: Responding—Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

VA.8.RE2.4

VA.8.RE2.5

VA.8.RE2.6

VA.8.RE2.7

VA.8.RE2.8

VA.1.RE2.HS1-2

Anchor Standard 10: Connecting—Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

VA.10.CO1.HS1-3





Argosy (detail)



Argosy (detail)

