

Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland

Education and Programming Resource

Lesson Idea 2 Handmade Horses and History of the Carousel

Grade levels 4 and up

Summary

This lesson uses the carousel horse featured in the exhibition *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland* as inspiration for students to learn about the history of the carousel, understand how carousel horses were made and who carved them, and provides students an opportunity to design and fabricate a version of a carousel horse using papier mâché.

Objectives

- Students will understand the origins of the carousel related to its history and development in America
- Students will learn about American carousel carvers important to the history of Coney Island
- Students will understand how carousel horses are designed and crafted
- Students will design and craft an individual version of a three-dimensional carousel horse using simple materials such as cardboard, tape, and the papier mâché process.

Materials Needed:

- access to the internet for research and images of historic carousels

- access to texts such as *Painted Ponies: American Carousel Art*
- shoeboxes
- scrap cardboard tubes (paper towels and wrapping paper)
- masking tape
- newspaper
- flour paste (flour and water mixture)
- pencils
- newsprint paper
- tempera paint
- clear gloss acrylic medium

Carousel, Carver, and Coney Island History

Rides similar to carousels were mentioned in history as early as 500 A.D. and were adapted from games played over the centuries—the earliest thought to be an Arabian game. The 17th-century Italian word *carosello* meant “little war.” This game was a contest among men on horseback who tossed clay balls filled with fragrant oil to one another. When a ball was dropped, it broke, announcing a “smell of defeat.” The French aristocracy also developed variations of the carousel, one of which included riders who tried to spear metal rings. Before the 1860s, carousels were hand- turned (either by horse or human). The engineer Frederick Savage (1828–1897), adapted steam engine technology to move machinery to rotate a carousel “roundabout” platform. In America, hand-carved carousels began in the 1860s with Gustav Dentzel who constructed a simple bench seat horse-powered machine. The American carousel industry developed slowly until the advent of the electric trolley. European immigrants from 1870–1910 brought skilled craftsmen from all over Europe to America’s shores. Unable to find work in their traditional fields of furniture carving, cabinet making and

architectural woodworking, many sought work in New York's amusement industry at Coney Island. To make a horse, often several carvers were employed—the most skilled often carved the expressive heads. Carousel carvers followed basic patterns, using large blocks of wood carved first with a band saw to match the standard pattern design. Tumbling gold leaf manes are a stylistic feature of Coney Island carousel horses, which also featured fanciful and romantic details such as cherubs, frogs, eagles, or rose garlands. Charles Looff (1852–1918), was a carousel carver who installed the first carousel at Coney Island in 1876. He also designed the second one, commissioned by Charles Feltman (1841–1910), who installed it on the grounds of his restaurant complex (the originating site of the American hot dog) in 1880. Looff's carousel carvings incorporated an entire menagerie of animals—including camels, deer, ostriches, and more. Marcus Illions (1874–1949), a Lithuanian-born carver who also lived in Brooklyn, worked in Looff's carving shop beginning in 1886. Illions' carvings often display flamboyant figures with wild manes and exciting poses. After working as a freelance carver for several years, Illions later opened his own factory in partnership with his sons. William Mangels (1866–1958) was another figure important in the history of the American carousel industry. Mangels was not a carousel horse carver but an amusement manufacturer and inventor who worked at Coney Island. Mangels was a German immigrant who came to Coney Island as a teenager and who worked as a mechanic and later became the leading manufacturer of amusement park rides. He patented a version of the overhead gears that controlled the galloping motion of the carousel horse and had a successful carousel factory at Coney Island that employed various carvers.

Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein were two Russian immigrant carousel carvers who worked for a brief period in Mangels's

factory and who were influenced by the artistry of Illions (for whom they worked as freelance carvers for a short period of time). Stein and Goldstein's carved creations often donned suits of armor and were known for their grand scale.

Russian-born Charles Carmel (1865–1931) was another carver at Coney Island who worked for Looff as a freelancer for many years and alongside Stein and Goldstein for a period of time and also in Mangels' factory. His work was influenced by many different carousel carvers and reflects varied styles and characteristics.

Lesson Time

- one class period to explore the exhibition *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland* and examine Coney Island carousel history and that of other carousels across the United States
- one class period to explore individual aesthetic qualities of particular carousel animals and introduce the lesson
- one class period to allow work on the carousel figure design and construction
- one–two class periods to complete the construction
- one–two class periods to paint and varnish the figures

Lesson Procedures

Step One

Following time spent in the *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland* exhibition, discuss the role and style of the carousel horse at Coney Island and its history in the development of American carousel horses. Using images from *Painted Ponies: American Carousel Art* and *Coney Island Visions of an American Dreamland 1861–2008* (p. 87–88) (and other resources found

online) compare and contrast various styles of carousel horses. Use the touchable miniature carousel horse and postcard image of a carousel horse (in the education outreach kit) as hands-on examples to pass around and examine imagery more closely.

Step Two

Invite students to sketch ideas using newsprint and pencils for a carousel horse that displays an action and expresses energy through its head features, body, and stance. Encourage students to think about movement of the mane; the horses' eyes, mouth, and nostrils; and the position of the legs to suggest a prance or gallop or leaping action. Encourage students to look at realistic examples of horses in motion from other sources (online, encyclopedias, photo books of horses, etc.) to gather ideas and inspiration.

Step Three

Have each student select a sketch that is most expressive and that conveys the most action for his or her version of a three-dimensional carousel horse. Demonstrate how to build an armature (or framework) for the body of the horse, beginning with a shoebox for its middle section. Show how to add legs to the body, a neck, and how to choose a smaller box as a head. Model for students how to build up muscle and a rounded body by wadding up newspaper and covering it with masking tape to flesh out the form. Encourage students to cut out shapes of thinner cardboard for ears and build up with tape.

Step Four

Once students have formed a solid body with rounded forms for the horse, demonstrate how each student can further refine, shape, and finesse the form to create a more detailed sculpture using strips of newspaper dipped in a flour paste to smooth out

the body with papier mâché. This technique can be used for several class periods if needed to allow paste to dry and allow time for students to fully develop the horse shape and expressive features (an open mouth, a wide eye, a tongue, flared nostrils, a standing mane).

Step Five

Following completion (and dry time) of the papier mâché process, have students think about colors to use to create a painted colorful carousel horse. Demonstrate how to mix tempera paints (and wash out brushes) and allow time to carefully paint the horse. When the paint is dry, allow students time to coat the finished sculpture with a clear acrylic medium to give the paint a sheen and protect it from chipping.

Step Six

If desired finished carousel horses can be displayed a group (and arranged in a circle to reflect a carousel display) and discussed for class comparison and contrast and self-reflection.

Resources:

<http://selftaughtgenius.org/sites/stg/images/2513/The%20Construction%20of%20a%20Carousel.pdf>

http://carousels.org/Carvers_Builders.html

Connections to National Visual Arts Standards (grade 4 example)

Creating: Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

VA:Cr1.1.4a Brainstorm multiple approaches to a creative art or design problem.

VA:Cr1.2.4a Collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose to the makers.

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

VA:Cr2.1.4a Explore and invent art-making techniques and approaches.

VA:Cr2.2.4a When making works of art, utilize and care for materials, tools, and equipment in a manner that prevents danger to oneself and others.

Refine and complete artistic work.

VA:Cr3.1.4a Revise artwork in progress on the basis of insights gained through peer discussion.

Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

VA:Re8.1.4a Interpret art by referring to contextual information, and analyzing relevant subject matter, characteristics of form, and use of media.

VA:Re9.1.4a Apply one set of criteria to evaluate more than one work of art.

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

VA:Cn10.1.4a Through observation, infer information about the time, place, and culture in which a work of art was created.