

# Ephemeral Nature Art

"I enjoy the freedom of just using my hands and "found" tools--a sharp stone, the quill of a feather, thorns... I stop at a place or pick up a material because I feel that there is something to be discovered. Here is where I can learn."

-Andy Goldsworthy

## Background Information:

### Bin Information

This lesson is the first in a series of three nature art activities. This lesson serves as an introduction to using natural materials in art and fostering connections to a local landscape. It can also be used as a jumping off point for conversations about how to protect natural environments while altering them. It is followed by the activity "A Closer Look" which uses art activities to encourage closer observations and a new way of seeing nature, and "Art for Action" in which students design an art installation to share information or promote a cause.

### Information for Instructors

Ephemeral Art is a broad and flexible category of art for works that exist only once and survive only in documentary form (such as a photograph). This type of art has existed in some form throughout human history and could be argued to be a part of human nature. In its modern incarnation it is often associated with nature art thanks to Andy Goldsworthy, who is widely considered to be the father of ephemeral art and modern rock balancing. Much of Goldsworthy's work can be viewed on his site at [goldsworthy.cc.gla.ac.uk](http://goldsworthy.cc.gla.ac.uk), which includes not only photographs of the finished works, but also frequently photographs of the works in progress, and notes from his diary about his thoughts or process.

Other notable ephemeral artists include:

**Shona Wilson**, an artist who created and photographed a short work of ephemeral art every day for a year. The One a Day project can be viewed at

[shonawilson.com/files/8815/2213/0966/One\\_a\\_Day\\_Book.pdf](http://shonawilson.com/files/8815/2213/0966/One_a_Day_Book.pdf) and more of her work can be found on her site at [shonawilson.com](http://shonawilson.com).

**Zack Pine**, an artist who focuses on the social and environmental components of art and hosts group art making events. More information on Zack Pine can be found at [zpcreatewithnature.com](http://zpcreatewithnature.com)

### Author:

Dominique Menard

### Themes:

Empathy, Art,

### Estimated Duration:

60 minutes

### Audience Identified:

K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade

Can be adapted for older or younger students

### Location:

Natural area outdoors. Can start in a classroom.

### Goal:

Students will use natural materials to create an example of ephemeral art.

### Objectives:

Students will be able to define ephemeral art.

Students will create an example of ephemeral nature art.

Students will take photographs to document and share their art.

## Materials and Set-Up:

This kit includes:

- Because ephemeral art utilizes what is available in an area and does not use outside tools, there are no materials provided for this activity

You will need:

- A way to take pictures, such as a classroom set of iPads or camera carried by the instructor

Set-Up:

- Locate an appropriate outdoor spot for the activity. Ideally choose one with an abundance of natural materials that can be rearranged for the activity but resilient enough to withstand the disturbance. Walk the area to be aware of any potential hazards and determine if there are any site-specific rules that will need to be shared with students before beginning.

## Introduction:

Estimated Duration: 10 minutes

### Attention Getter

Any established group or classroom attention-getters can be used to regain the attention of the students when giving directions for transitioning activities. If you choose to use an attention-getter personalized to this lesson, introduce the following before introducing the lesson:

- The instructor calls out “Artists!”
- The students call back “Creating!”

### Warm Up

If you have ever built a sandcastle or snowman or traced a path in dirt with a stick you have already created ephemeral art. Ephemeral is a word that means “lasting a very short time” and so ephemeral art is art that is not designed to last. Take a quick poll of students to see how many of them have created ephemeral art before and ask a few to share examples. Ask a few students to share *why* they have created ephemeral art. It may be hard for some young students to give an answer beyond “it’s fun” which is perfectly acceptable.

Tell the students that today you will be creating some ephemeral nature art.

## Content and Methods:

Estimated Duration: 35 minutes

### Art Inspiration (Optional)

Before having students create their own art pieces, you may choose to browse through some examples of other ephemeral art for inspiration. This step can be cut either for time or to see what creativity will emerge from a lack of guidelines. Other examples of art can also be shared after completion of the activity. If you do choose to share, pull up the PDF of Shona Wilson’s “One A Day” book on a projector and scroll through as a class. You can also choose a few of the images to print out and pass around if that fits the group better. Starting with the “One A Day” for inspiration can help inspire students with

works that were created in a comparable timeframe compared to some of the more intensive works by Goldsworthy or Nils-Udo which are a much larger undertaking-consider sharing some of these works at the end of the lesson instead.

## Creation

Transition outside if still inside and preface by designating boundaries for students and other safety rules as apply. Determine before the activity if art creations can remain after the lesson. If not, be sure to let students know so they are able to keep appropriate expectations. This is also when to share any site specific rules. For example, in some places it is acceptable to pick and arrange flower or other living parts of plants, and in others you may have students take only what can be found on the ground.

Guidelines for this activity are inspired by Shona Wilson. The bolded phrases are excerpts from her 'recipe' for ephemeral art, and italics are ways they can be applied to the activity.

- **Use only found natural materials on site:** *Nothing needs to be brought with, and what is available can direct the art.*
- **No tools:** *Students do not need to bring anything with them besides a way to take pictures if it applies. If they ask about scissors, tape, etc. encourage them to come up with a creative alternative or change in plans.*
- **Rain or shine:** *The weather may be uncooperative with a student's original idea, but encourage students to think of how to incorporate it as a part of the natural setting. For example, if it is very windy it may not be possible to arrange leaves on the ground without them moving, but perhaps there could be a new idea that incorporates the wind like long grasses tied in a way where they blow with the breeze.*
- **Tired or inspired:** *Students may be inspired and excited about the project or they may be unsure and feel like they have no ideas. Encourage students to create something and play around with materials anyway. They may become inspired, or they may not. Both are okay. If a student becomes frustrated it may be helpful to compare it to an exercise; something to build creativity like running drills for a sport.*
- **5 minutes-50:** *This exact timeframe may not be used, but it can be a good way to share with students that it's alright to have some projects that take a long time to complete and others that may be shorter. For students who have '5 minute' works, they do not need to continue adding after it feels complete and can move on to another project, or find someone to collaborate with, such as gathering a certain shape of leaf for a fellow student still working.*

After giving directions and guidelines, give students free time and space to create. You may circulate among them and ask questions as well. If students have personal devices, they may want to document the process of creating their works. If not, you may choose to take pictures while circulating.

## Conclusion:

Estimated Duration: 5 minutes

Give a warning at least 5 minutes before students need to be finished or return indoors. Students can take final pictures to document and preserve their work, and then demolish if wanted or necessary.

## Reflection and Evaluation:

Estimated Duration: 10 minutes

### Reflection

Form on large group again. Ask the following questions:

- Is there a part that was your favorite?
- Is there anything you would do differently next time?
- What would you think if you found someone else's ephemeral nature art unexpectedly?
- What are some ways that ephemeral nature art might look different through different seasons?

Let students share on a volunteer basis. This is also a time when more examples of nature art can be viewed.

### Evaluation

Students for this activity will be considered successful if they create a work of art following the guidelines given under the Creation headline. Evaluation can be completed by visually assessing students' work after they have finished, by the pictures that they take, or through their explanation of their work if using the exhibition extension.

## Extensions:

### Accessibility and Adaptations

**Distance Learning:** Because ephemeral art uses no tools and the materials available at a site, it is a good candidate for distance learning. To run this as a distance lesson, introduce the concept either with a presentation sent out or through web conferencing when the class meets. Explain the directions as laid out in the content section and assign students to create a work of ephemeral art and send in a picture of it. Not all students will have equal access to natural areas, so encourage them to find little bits of nature to work with and be creative with the materials they do have available to them.

A shortened Seesaw version of this lesson can be found at:

[https://app.seesaw.me/pages/shared\\_activity?share\\_token=mD-9i6pVTEKOOZ24TJRk7A&prompt\\_id=prompt.bacc8c11-2395-420f-adfd-3b1ab44e85b1](https://app.seesaw.me/pages/shared_activity?share_token=mD-9i6pVTEKOOZ24TJRk7A&prompt_id=prompt.bacc8c11-2395-420f-adfd-3b1ab44e85b1)

### Exhibition

An alternative fun way to wrap up the activity is by giving students a chance to present their work.

There are several ways to set up a small art exhibition. Some example ideas include:

- If students all have their own devices that they used to take pictures, the simplest way may be to have each student pull up an image on the device and set it up on their desk. Students can then move around the room and observe the works that their classmates produced.
- If time allows, students can make a short presentation with two or three slides showing the in-progress pictures and final results and take turns presenting and explaining their ideas to the class.
- Each student can choose one picture to be printed and hung around the classroom. They can also fill out a small card with their name, the title of the piece and the medium used.

## Social Studies Extension: Cultural Significance of Ephemeral Art

There are many forms of ephemeral art that exist with a long history or special cultural significance. This lesson can be used either as an introduction to learning about some of these art forms or they can be incorporated into the body of the lesson. *Please be aware that some of these arts, such as the drypainting of the Diné (Navajo People), are highly sacred and should not be replicated outside of their proper cultural context.*

### Sand painting/Drypainting

**Rangoli:** Rangoli is an Indian art form often made during Hindu festivals and other significant events. It has also been embraced by the tourism industry and there are many videos online showcasing how to create new designs. Designs are created on the ground with colorful powders such as sand or colored rice. Rangolis are often geometric designs with radial symmetry, but can also be very elaborate scenes.

**Bonseki:** A Japanese art form back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century in which dry sand and pebbles were poured on black trays and brushed to form images on landscapes.

**Tibetan Sand Painting:** As a metaphor for teaching impermanence, large mandalas are created with sand on large tables over the course of several days and destroyed shortly after completion.

**Dine Sand Painting:** Used as a part of healing ceremonies, sand is poured on a buckskin or other surface in a traditional design, of which there are between 600-1000. After the ceremony is complete, the sand painting is treated as toxic, having absorbed the illness and destroyed. When replications of sand paintings are created for documentation or exhibition there are intentional mistakes or changes in colors.

### Snow and Ice Art

Snow and ice are great examples of mediums that are often used to create ephemeral art still today, most commonly in the forms of snowmen or snow angels. Sculpting ice for practical purposes dates back thousands of years with known examples including the Inuit using the ice for building shelters or early examples of Chinese farmers flooding their farms in the winter and cutting the ice into blocks for early refrigeration. Ice lanterns can be dated at least back to China in the 1600s in the Heilongjiang province, and the earliest written documentation of a snowman goes back to 1380 in the Netherlands.

### Flower Arranging and Related Plant Art

Flower arranging in different forms is so common that it is easy to overlook as a form of ephemeral art, but indeed the choosing of flowers in different colors and shapes and arranging them carefully utilizes elements of art and cut flowers are certainly ephemeral. Other examples of plant art could include bonsai, in which trees are kept in pots and carefully pruned and shaped to slow their growth so that they stay miniature for years or even decades. The trees are living art, and so endure, but are also always changing. In the Midwest, a fun tie in to plant art could be bringing up corn mazes, especially ones that create pictures when seen from an aerial view. Ask students to discuss if they should be considered art or not.

### ELA Extension: Stone Stacking Debate

This extension is primarily intended for students in grades 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>.

Stone stacking, or the building of cairns, has grown in popularity recently. This has led to some amount of backlash from opponents who note that the stacking can cause environmental damage and take away from the natural beauty of the place. In some places, cairns are also used as trail markers, and building them in inappropriate places can be dangerous for hikers. This controversy can be used as a debate topic, either before or after students create their own art.

Either give students time to research or choose and print some articles for them depending on the timeframe and ability of the group. The activity can be run as a debate or mediation session. If it is done before the main activity, it may be helpful to have students use what they learn to create a set of guidelines for what materials are appropriate to use in ephemeral art and what should be done with the art after it has been created and photographed.

### Reference Materials:

<http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20130116-the-origins-of-ice-sculpting>

