Grand Rapids Art Museum - School Programs

Concept:
Compare / Contrast

Objective (Goal):
Students will develop their compare and contrast skills by examining the similarities and differences in a work of art and a multimedia presentation (or sculpture and painting), viewing them through the lens of a concept map.

Alexander Calder
American, 1898 - 1976
**About the Work**

*The Blunt-Tail Dog* shows how artist Alexander Calder combined two forms of sculpture to create a playful portrayal of a dog. In the early 1930's, Calder experimented with constructions of abstract shapes that can shift and change as the elements respond to air currents. These sculptures of wire and sheet metal are called "mobiles." They reflect Calder's sense of humor and his interest in physics and movement. He also developed "stables," static sculptures that suggest volume through the intersection of flat planes.

The abstract shapes of Calder's sculptures often allude to forms in nature. *The Blunt-Tail Dog* contains both mobile and stabile elements. The "stabile" portion, which represents the "body," is comprised of simple sheet metal, in a shade of red-orange that Calder often used. The sculpture's "mobile" component contains small circles delicately balanced with wire, which suggest eyes, ears, tongue, and head. The slightest current of air causes these moving features to revolve and create different configurations in space.

Calder began creating his Animobiles later in life. His wife, Louise, coined the name for this series by combining the French word "animaux" (animals) and "mobile."

**About the Artist**

Although Alexander Calder grew up in a family of artists, he initially took a different path and earned a degree in mechanical engineering. After deciding to work as an artist, one of his first jobs was sketching sporting events and circus performances. In 1926, he published his first illustrated book, *Animal Sketching*, a compilation of brush and ink studies executed in New York City zoos. As his career developed, he grew to become a versatile artist, working as a sculptor, illustrator, printmaker, and designer.

The influence of Alexander Calder's early training as an engineer can be seen throughout the course of his lifetime. He built delicately balanced mobiles of sheet metal and bended-wire, which moved gracefully and encompassed their immediate surroundings, making the space nearly as important as the sculpture. These creations made him a leading proponent of kinetic art, meaning works that contain moving parts. The shapes in Calder’s kinetic sculptures changed from geometric to biomorphic forms, reminiscent of organic shapes found in nature. Calder also designed stabiles, standing abstract sculptures, constructed of painted sheet metal. From the 1950's onward, he produced these abstract works in greater numbers, and was commissioned to create enormous stabiles for public spaces all over the world. In 1969, he installed a large stabile, *La Grande Vitesse*, in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan. This giant sculpture is 43 ft. tall x 54 ft. long x 30 ft. wide and weighs over 42 tons.

**Vocabulary**

**Abstract Art** - art that does not attempt to represent external, recognizable reality but seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colors, and textures; term often refers to modern painting and sculpture that abandons the traditional European conception of art.

**Biomorphic** - a term applied to forms in abstract art that derive from or suggest organic (rather than geometric) shapes.

**Composition** - the placement or arrangement of visual elements in a work of art.

**Kinetic Art** - art concerned with real and apparent movement; may encompass machines, mobiles and light objects in actual motion, but most often refers to moving sculpture such as Alexander Calder’s mobiles.

**Mobile** - a type of sculpture made with metal, composed of parts that move either mechanically or by shifts in the air, they are often hung from the ceiling.

**Organic** - shapes that appear in nature and have a flowing and curving appearance; may also be referred to as curvilinear shapes; examples of organic shapes include the shapes of leaves, plants, and animals.
Elements of Art

**Color** - must have three properties: 1) Hue, the name of the color, e.g. red, yellow, etc. 2) Intensity or the purity and strength of the color. 3) Value, or the lightness or darkness of the color.

**Form** - three-dimensional object having volume (ex. cube, sphere, cone). Three-dimensional objects are considered to be viewed “in the round” because they are designed to be viewed from all sides.

**Shape** - is an enclosed space defined by other elements of art. Shapes may take on the appearance of 2-d or 3-d objects.

**Texture** - refers to the surface quality or "feel" of an object, such as roughness, smoothness, or softness.

**Value** - describes the lightness or darkness of a color. Value is needed to express Volume.

**Line** - the continuous mark made on some surface by a moving point. It may be two dimensional, like a pencil mark on a paper or it may be three-dimensional (wire) or implied (the edge of a shape or form). Often it is an outline, contour or silhouette.

**Space** - refers to the distance or area between, around, above or within things. It can be a description for both 2 and 3 dimensional depictions.

Principles of Art

**Contrast** - refers to the differences in a work. You can achieve contrast by using difference shapes, textures, colors and values in your work.

**Balance** - is a sense of stability in the body of work. Creating a feeling of equal weight can create Balance.

**Unity (Harmony)** - is seen in a painting or drawing when all the parts equal a whole. Your work should not appear disjointed or confusing. Unity can be achieved through the repetition of multiple elements.

**Movement** - adds excitement to your work by directing the viewer's eye throughout the picture plane.

**Proportion** - the size relationship of parts to a whole and to one another.

**Emphasis** - in a composition refers to developing points of interest to pull the viewer's eye to important parts of the body of the work.

**Rhythm (Pattern)** - is seen in repeating of shapes and colors, or alternating lights and darks.
Warm-Up Activity:

Alexander Calder
The Blunt-Tail Dog

Artists sometimes create their subjects in unusual ways. At first glance, you may not realize that Alexander Calder’s sculpture is a dog.

1. Draw a picture of your favorite animal.
2. Using a double bubble thinking map compare and contrast your drawing of an animal to Calder’s sculpture of a dog.

Calder gave his sculpture a title.

1. What was the title that Calder selected?
2. What title would you give to your drawing?

Bonus Activity: draw a picture of a realistic version of your favorite animal and then draw a picture of an abstract version of your favorite animal. Compare and contrast these two drawings.

Goal:

The goal for this activity is to compare and contrast two different images of the same kind of animal.

Discussion Questions:

First, view and discuss the artwork The Blunt-Tail Dog.

1. What animal does this sculpture represent?
2. Describe the parts of the dog that are identifiable. What shapes has the artist used to represent these parts? How would the work change if different shapes were used?
3. Calder explored balance in many of his works. What would happen if one or more of the flat shapes became 3-dimensional forms? If the balance were changed, what could be done to restore it?
4. Which direction is the dog looking? How would it look if the head moved?
5. Could the way Calder represented the dog with his head up and tail standing on end suggest what the dog may be viewing or sensing?
6. How does this compare to how a real dog stands? Would a real dog observing food react in this way? Would a dog that is frightened behave in this manner?

Activity:

Next, find a photo or video of a real dog (or if you have a dog at home as a pet, you can refer to your dog for this activity). View and discuss the real dog.

Then, Compare / Contrast dogs (artistic style, dog positioning, physical characteristics etc.) using a double-bubble graphic organizer.

1. Write “Calder dog” and “Real Dog” in the appropriate circles and tell the students to do the same on their handouts.
2. Ask prompting questions to facilitate the process such as, “How does each of these dogs move? Feel? Sound?”
3. Next ask students, “How are these two dogs alike?” and write down one answer in the appropriate bubble showing a similarity in the two dogs.
4. Students write in the next two similarities on their own.
5. Then ask, “How are they different?” and write a response in the appropriate bubbles showing a difference between the two dogs.
6. Direct students to complete the remaining bubbles.
7. When finished, individuals can share some of their answers to the full group.