



Huntington and Scott Gallery Programs

THE ART OF FURNITURE: DECORATIONS INSPIRED BY NATURE



Grades K–12

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

I. Introduction

The beauty of furniture depends of form, materials, and surface decoration. This lesson plan highlights examples of eighteenth-century French furniture and early twentieth-century American examples in the Huntington's collection. Specifically, it explores how intricate floral motifs are created in wood, using the techniques of veneer, marquetry, and inlay.

II. Objectives

- ✦ Students will discover how artists abstract plants and flowers into two-dimensional designs.
- ✦ Students will learn about techniques used by woodworkers to translate these designs into furniture decoration: veneer, marquetry, and inlay.
- ✦ Students will abstract a natural form and develop a design to decorate a piece of furniture.
- ✦ Students will be introduced to important local furniture designers, Charles and Henry Greene, who worked in the Pasadena area in the early years of the twentieth century.

III. Standards Assessed

Visual Arts Standards

California Department of Education

Standard 1.0

Artistic Perception: Processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the language and skills unique to the visual arts.

Standard 2.0

Creative Expression: Creating, performing, and participating in the visual arts.

Standard 3.0

Historical and Cultural Context: Understanding the historical contributions and cultural dimensions of the visual arts.

Standard 4.0

Aesthetic Valuing: Responding to, analyzing, and making judgments about works in the visual arts.

Standard 5.0

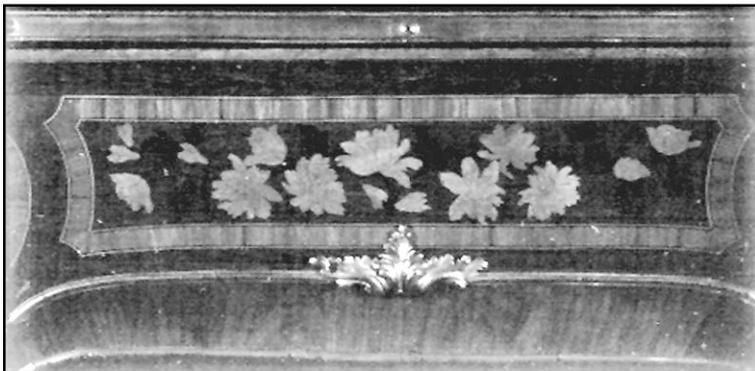
Connections, Relationships, Applications: Connecting and applying what is learned in the visual arts to other art forms and subject areas and to careers.

IV. Background

Woodworkers have used the techniques of veneering, marquetry, and inlay since ancient times. Veneer and marquetry are related, in that both result in a thin piece of wood, which is affixed to the surface of furniture. Veneer may be made of a single type of wood, typically one unusual in its color and/or grain. Veneer can also refer to a surface comprised of many small pieces of wood fitted together, analogous to a puzzle. This process is called marquetry, and can produce a range of images, from single flowers to entire landscapes. Elaborate examples may include exotic woods, metals, shells, and precious or semi-precious stones.

Inlay is a different technique. The woodworker prepares a channel in the wood (either the primary wood of the furniture or the veneered surface) and lays the materials into the channel. Materials similar to those used in marquetry may be selected for an inlay.

In eighteenth-century France, all these woodworking techniques became popular. The intricate designs, meticulously crafted of expensive materials, fit the elaborately appointed homes of wealthy people, especially those associated with the French court. The Huntington displays many examples of French furniture from this time, variously decorated with veneer, marquetry and inlay. One example, a writing table in the style of a royal cabinetmaker, Jean-Francois Oeben, features floral motifs on the drawer fronts (see illustration). The abstracted design of the flowers and leaves on a curving stem



beautifully fits the shape of the drawer front. The choice of colored woods also reveals the care of the woodworker. The delicate petals are shown in the lighter woods, and the leaves and stems in darker ones. Originally, some of the woods were stained a blue color, which has faded over time. A similar table in the Getty's collection

can be viewed online. Visit <www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/o6157.html>. Click on the smaller details to learn about how these writing tables functioned. Also view the short video provided at this website; it explains the process of marquetry.

Pasadena architects and furniture designers, Charles and Henry Greene, mastered the use of inlay in hand-crafted objects they made in the early twentieth century. A suite of dining room furniture for the Thorsen House (1908–10) is displayed in the Huntington's Virginia Steele Scott Gallery. The table top, sideboard doors, and chair backrests are all decorated with a periwinkle-like flower, inlaid with abalone, oak, and fruitwoods. Charles Greene may have found this flower in his Pasadena neighborhood, as he was inspired by the plants native to Southern California. In this and other designs (for example, the carpet for the Gamble House living room, also shown in this gallery), he included the intricate lines of the roots in his finished design. To see images of the Thorsen House furniture and the sketches prepared for the project, visit <www.usc.edu/dept/architecture/greeneandgreene/259.html>.

V. Activity

Using a flower as inspiration, create an abstract floral motif for a piece of classroom furniture.

Materials Needed

- ✎ A flower (ideally one with roots, stem, leaves, and simple flower)
- ✎ White paper, any size
- ✎ Pencils
- ✎ Assorted materials for decorating the design: yarn, buttons, shells, colored paper, etc.
- ✎ Glue
- ✎ As desired, colored pencils and paint

Procedure

- 1) Study the plant, observing the elements of line, color, shape/form, and texture.
- 2) Using a pencil, draw the plant on the white piece of paper, noting as many details as possible.
- 3) From the following list, choose one furniture element you want to decorate:
 - ✦ Drawer front
 - ✦ Cabinet door
 - ✦ Backrest of chair (the upper, horizontal part)
 - ✦ Table top

- 4) Determine the (rough) dimensions of the furniture element you selected (for example, a drawer front might be 4 inches high and 8 inches wide). Draw a box that size on a piece of blank, white paper.
- 5) Using this box as your guide, abstract your drawing into a floral motif. You might choose one or more of the following means to abstract the flower:
 - ✦ Simplify: take away some parts of your drawing
 - ✦ Elaborate: add details to your drawing
 - ✦ Exaggerate: choose a single part of your drawing (the stem, for example) and make it longer, or more curvilinear, or shorter
 - ✦ Create a repeating design: choose one form and repeat it, developing a pattern
- 6) Finish your design:
 - ✦ Color it, using colored pencils or paint
 - ✦ Enrich the surface, gluing materials on top of the design
- 7) Display your finished work by affixing it to the furniture element you selected:
 - ✦ Drawer front
 - ✦ Cabinet door
 - ✦ Chair rail
 - ✦ Table top

VI. Discussion Questions

- 1) Describe the floral motifs created by the French designer and by the Greenes. Which most closely resemble natural forms? Which include repetition and balance? Which follow an asymmetrical design?

California Standards: Grade 1, 1.1 and 1.3, Grade 2, 1.1 and 1.3, Grade 9, proficient, 2.4

- 2) How are the *Writing Table* and *Thorsen House Dining Room Ensemble* similar? How are they different? Consider materials, techniques, and use of natural forms as decoration.

California Standards: Grade 3, 1.4, and Grade 9, advanced, 1.4

- 3) Did the French designer and the Greenes effectively use the elements of art in their designs? Did they successfully solve their design problems (creating a floral motif to decorate furniture)?

California Standards: Grade K, 2.1 and 2.3, Grade 1, 2.1, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, Grade 7, 2.3, and Grades 9-12, proficient, 2.1 and 2.4

- 4) Who were Charles and Henry Greene? How did their residence in Pasadena influence their style of architecture and furniture design?

California Standards: Grade 2, 5.4, Grade 3, 3.2, Grade 4, 5.4, Grade 7, 5.4, Grade 9-advanced, 1.8

- 5) Make an inventory of desks, tables, and/or chairs at school. Which do you find the most beautiful? Why? Which do you find the most functional? Did you discover any that were both beautiful and functional?

California Standards: K, 3.1, Grade 1, 3.1, Grade 5, 5.3

- 6) When is a furniture design successful? Develop and use specific criteria as individuals or in groups to assess and critique works of art. Using student projects and or the highlighted museum examples of the *Writing Table* and *Thorsen House Dining Room Ensemble*, explore the artistic and functional elements that contribute to the success of the furniture.

California Standards: Grade 6, 4.3

VOCABULARY

Abstract	<i>artwork in which the subject matter is stated in a brief, simplified manner. Little or not attempt is made to represent images realistically, and objects are often simplified or distorted.*</i>
Asymmetry	<i>a balance of parts on opposite sides of a perceived midline, giving the appearance of equal visual weight*</i>
Balance	<i>the way in which the elements in visual arts are arranged to create a feeling of equilibrium in a work of art. The three types of balance are symmetry, asymmetry, and radial.*</i>
Backrest	<i>the upper part of a chair, often joined between the two uprights, which provides a place to rest the upper back and shoulders</i>
Cabinetmaker	<i>a person who makes furniture</i>
Inlay	<i>a woodworking technique that sets materials (wood and other materials like metal and stone) into a groove channeled into the surface of wood</i>
Marquetry	<i>a woodworking technique that combines many small pieces of wood into a decorative design</i>
Repetition	<i>in the visual arts, the repeated use of one or more elements to create a pattern</i>
Sideboard	<i>a piece of furniture used in a dining room and typically featuring drawers in the middle section and doors to either side</i>
Veneer	<i>a thin piece of wood, usually of special beauty or rarity, attached to a material of lesser value</i>
Woodworker	<i>a person who makes a variety of forms, from floors to individual pieces of furniture, using wood as the chief material</i>
Writing Table	<i>a piece of furniture designed primarily for writing. Unlike a modern desk, which may have large file drawers attached and built-ins placed on the surface, a writing desk typically has only a flat surface and shallow drawers directly below.</i>

* Definitions from the California Standards