Episode 4: Thinking about Materials

Kaitlin: Hey, what is the most interesting material you have used to make art?

Leighanna: There was this one time I was painting with watercolor and I used salt.


Leighanna: It was used to add texture and interest in this painting.

Kaitlin: Wow. That's such an interesting material to use. I would have never thought to use salt for art. Hi, I'm Kaitlin.

Leighanna: I'm Leighanna.

Elizabeth: I'm Elizabeth.

Kaitlin: And we're museum ambassadors at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.

Materials may not seem like they can play a big role in the purpose of an artwork, but sometimes materials hold a hidden key to its meaning.

Elizabeth: That's so true. The materials used in an artwork is one way to help us learn more about the piece. It can give us clues on the artist's process, techniques and ways of thinking.

Leighanna: Materials help us understand the artist's world. Materials can also spark our understanding of an artwork.

Leighanna: Close your eyes and listen. Imagine yourself going back centuries all the way back to the 19th century in France. You're a guest at Napoleon's palace. You enter a salon, the main reception room, and you see this beautiful bright object. You hear the sound of water pouring. You walk towards it and see a golden urn, just one glance at the object, and it draws you in. You notice the floral details and the bright red color that looks like a gem. Who could imagine such luxury? What is it made of? What does it use for? What can create such a shiny effect on the urn?

When I first look at the object, Biennais’ Hot Water Urn, I see luxury and royalty, the golden color, red carnelian gems and flowery detailing on the urn looks like an object owned by someone wealthy.

As I started looking at the urn, I started to notice more details. The gems stand out as it is the only pop of color. In the middle of the golden urn, there’s a panel with two winged figures that reminds me of Greek mythology pouring water.
Moving down the urn towards the handles, you can see the wing-like detailing. Next to this are the red gems. There are two swans heads where the water comes out of the urn. The **Hot Water Urn** is made of silver, gilt and carnelian. Silver takes a lot of skill and craftsmanship. It was especially valuable in the 19th century and wasn’t an easy material to use.

Martin Chapman: I'm Martin Chapman, curator of European Decorative Arts and Sculpture, and also interim curator of European Art. It's difficult to answer whether it was an easy material to work with because there are two answers here. It's relatively soft as a metal. In fact, so soft that it has to be hardened by alloying, that is mixing it with copper, before it could be used for purposes like this hot water vessel, in other words. And what we see here is the body and the top part of the foot would have been made by hammering it against an anvil or stake until you get the rounded form that you need. This is a term called raising.

Leighanna: Silver-gilt is silver that has been colored gold. In order to achieve its rich golden color, the urn was covered with thin layers of gold to make it look more impressive and valuable.

Martin Chapman: If you want it to look like gold, as in the case of this Hot Water Urn, you would apply a layer of gold that we call gilding, quite simply. But in this generation for making silver look much richer in gold, they invented a technique called *vermeil* and *vermeil* is a technique whereby gold was layered again and again and again on the silver to achieve a depth and a richness that would last.

Leighanna: Carnelian is an orange-red stone used in different types of precious objects, including jewelry, silver and gold. Silver was often used for luxury objects during the empire style, originally created by Napoleon who was a self-proclaimed emperor of France. The empire style is heavily influenced by ancient Greek and Roman classical styles. This can be seen in the vase form, the handles and the massive claw feet and the decoration around the neck of the urn.

Martin Chapman: The massive claw feet and the knot at the top, these were all being made by casting in molds. The beautiful anthemion decoration around the neck of the top would also have been cast separately and then applied. So there are different techniques involved and it would require a certain amount of skill to bring this off as precisely as we see in this **Hot Water Urn**.

Leighanna: Used as luxury items for decor, urns made during this time period were designed for their unique forms as well as their function. The urn, made by Biennais, was probably made for Pauline Bonaparte, Napoleon’s sister. It was used on special occasions such as tea time with important guests. Pauline Bonaparte was known as the most beautiful among Napoleon’s sisters. As a sister to the emperor, Pauline lived a very luxurious royal life, enjoying the finer things. They were known to be close and he indulged her with gifts. She had a flirtatious personality and took pride in her appearance. She was born during a time of economic hardship in France. In order to uphold their prestige and dispel any ideas of instability, the Bonaparte family had expensive things made, even when it might not have made sense to.
Martin Chapman: Produced at a moment when France was nearly bankrupt, but for the imperial family, it was important to carry power and prestige forward, even though France was in a very difficult financial state about 1809. Napoleon was making sure that members of his family had the most prestigious examples of French luxury workwears to act as propaganda.

Elisabeth: It is 1895 and you're in Northern California. You come across a young woman who is sitting still and very focused. She is weaving a basket. She uses the three rod coiling technique, which takes a lot of time making intricate stitches. You see her using branches and roots from native plants. While weaving, she adds many colorful and patterned feathers. She has chosen short, red feathers from acorn woodpeckers, along with yellow feathers. On the rim of the basket, black feathers stick up with clamshells all around. These clamshells are used as currency in the Pomo culture. All the intricate details show how much thought and care she has put into her work.

After interviewing Sherrie Smith-Ferri, who is Pomo from her father's side and grew up in Sonoma County, I learned about how essential these baskets were for the Pomo People.

Sherrie Smith-Ferri: I talked about starting life in a basket. So you spent a lot of your time in a cradle basket when you were in a baby basket when you were born. It was kind of like a baby backpack today. Parents would hang things from the top of the basket. They were sort of like crib toys that you have today, baby mobiles. So part of their job was to help a baby learn to focus his eyes, to sort of keep it entertained. But the other thing that parents thought is something that the baby was looking at all the time. It was around the baby all the time and would have some influence on what the baby became, what sort of traits they developed, the course of their life in some ways. So one of the things that was often hung in girls' baby baskets was a little tiny basket to help them become good basket makers.

Elisabeth: Baskets of all kinds were a part of people's everyday life. Sherrie later explains that baskets are much harder to weave today because of the changes in the environment. Most birds whose feathers were used are much fewer in number now, and thus, are protected, making them illegal to kill. Pomo basket weavers today use different types of feathers. Traditionally, in the Pomo tribe, the baskets would be destroyed after the maker or its owner died.

Sherrie Smith-Ferri: The idea of giving a basket that was particularly beautiful and valued knowing it was going to be destroyed, given to a family is just sort of signaling their sorrow at the loss of this person from the community.

Elisabeth: In the early 1900s, Native people, especially women weren't allowed to work many jobs. To be able to obtain essentials, the women of the Pomo tribe would make baskets to sell to local stores. Men would also make baskets to use for hunting. In fact, men would gather all the feathers and clamshell beads needed to decorate the basket. The process of basket-making starts with the gathering of the materials.
Sherrie Smith-Ferri: The type of growth that you need for basketry is non-native growth. So what you have to do is find those plants and work with them for several years, usually, to get them to produce that kind of growth.

Elisabeth: The women will find an area looking specifically for strong roots and branches. She will then alter the plants by cutting them or digging around to produce long, straight roots and shoots that are needed for basket making.

Sherrie Smith-Ferri: Plants that are tended by basket makers and are used by basket makers are much healthier and happier than plants just like grow on their own.

Elisabeth: Sherrie then explains that because of how much work basket makers put into tending their plants, other basket makers shouldn't mess with areas that aren't theirs. After gardening, the basket weaver will harvest the plants. The roots would then be dried completely for at least a year to make sure that no shrinkage occurs. She will then begin weaving; the last step to a very long process that takes years. Each Pomo basket maker would make their own designs.

Sherrie Smith-Ferri: When you sit down to weave your basket, you have to be able to see that basket completed in your mind. You have to know exactly what it is you're going to have your basket do before you... how you want it to look before you sit down and start to weave. You have to be able to break that completed whole down into its component parts and see how you would go about putting it together.

Elisabeth: A lot of designs would be based on elements of nature around them. These baskets were made for gathering and preparing food, but on special occasions, to be gifted for weddings or deaths. The baskets would be decorated with feathers and clamshells to show care and dedication in their work. Many different types of feathers were used to decorate gift baskets like that of the Western Meadowlark from Lake County, California. These birds lived alone in open grasslands in low height grasses, making them easy to spot. In the winter, the metal larks also scavenged in small groups in agricultural fields where they could be caught by the men of Pomo. Meadowlark feathers had pattern brown and black underparts. The women took their small patches of yellow feathers off the skin carefully to keep them in the same direction and then would weave them into baskets using this sedge root and willow branch. The women would also add clamshells to embellish and to add value. Even though they weren't fully aware, these birds, through their feathers, would be passed through generations.

Kaitlin: In front of you is a complex and almost intimidating piece of artwork called, Blood and Meat: Survival for the World, made by Thornton Dial. He was born in Alabama in 1928 and he experienced poverty and racism throughout his life. This was during the time when Jim Crow laws existed and African-American families experienced discrimination and struggled with debt because of exploitation in the sharecropping system.
Now, the first things you may notice while looking at this piece are the colors or the faces, but how about the materials the work is made from? As you look at this piece of artwork for longer and longer, you start to notice that it is made out of carpet rope, wires, paints, and more. These items commonly found at home were used to create this piece of art. Other interesting materials that could be found at Thornton Dial's studio included twisted metal, plastic toys, animal bones, and paints. It doesn't sound like a typical art studio, right? You probably expect paints and canvases everywhere, but Dial's studio was rather unique. A majority of the materials he used were gathered and recycled objects from other people.

Thornton Dial's inspiration for his different artworks came from thinking about life. While making Blood and Meat, Dial chose specific materials to represent different ideas. Try identifying some of the hidden ideas Dial incorporated into this piece.

The carpet rope symbolizes historical in Dial's childhood growing up in poverty. It can be found right in the middle of the assemblage with a big tear in the middle revealing a hidden face underneath. The black, red, white, and yellow paints present an image of a moving tiger across the whole painting. If you can't really see it, try taking a step back, closing your eyes and taking a second to clear your mind, and then opening them revealing this hidden symbol. The nooses signify lynching and slavery, and they can be found tied together with other materials covered in paint. Lastly, the painted faces in the lower left-hand corner, upper right-hand corner and all throughout this piece represent those of curious civil rights activists like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Emmett Till and John F. Kennedy. Thornton Dial incorporated these faces because he wanted to remind us about the issues they fought for: a fight that continues to this day.

He's considered by some as an outsider artist because he had actually never attended an art school and was self-taught. However, this does not diminish the value or power that his art holds.

Interviewer: So when people call you folk art, they try to put you in a category.
Thornton Dial: Right.
Interviewer: There are some people in the art world say that's racist. It's art.
Thornton Dial: Right.
Interviewer: What do you think?
Thornton Dial: Well, I think it's art too because actually, I think all art is art.

Kaitlin: When asked about his process for making art, Dial stated that, "I mostly pick up stuff. I start on a picture when I get a whole lot of stuff together, and then I look at this piece and think about life." It is interesting to know how Thornton Dial used common materials around him to form such empowering messages in his artwork. The view of the blood that was splattered everywhere, the ropes that almost look like animal bones and the uniqueness of this artwork adds a dramatic feeling that makes me want to continue to search for more details.

In talking to the museum's head conservator, Jane, one of the first things she noticed when seeing Blood and Meat, was how much tension and pain could be seen through the colors and
physicality. With so many layers of different materials and dried paint, no one can really identify each and every material that Dial used in this piece. It is important to look at this artwork in real life and be in its presence to truly see how rich and full each layer is.

Kaitlin: Although each object we discussed today is made of different materials, they all tell a story. The material of an object can lead us to understand the artwork and find its many meanings.

Leighanna: Each artist had an idea of what they wanted to tell their audience and with the help of their materials, they were able to convey that message.

Elizabeth: The next time you see a work of art, pay attention to all the materials that artists have used and think about what it's trying to tell you.