



DANGOS



BRONZE HEAD, DETAIL



TILE-COVERED WALL



TRIANGULAR DANGO



BRONZE HEADS

IOWA WEST PUBLIC ART

Iowa West Public Art

JUN KANEKO  
MID-AMERICA CENTER  
RHYTHM

IOWAWESTPUBLICART.ORG



# JUN KANEKO MID-AMERICA CENTER RHYTHM

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jun Kaneko was born in Nagoya, Japan, in 1942. He grew up in Japan during World War II and studied painting there. Jun Kaneko knew he wanted to be an artist by the age of 19. He worked in his studio during the day and went to high school in the evening. His first painting teacher, Satoshi Ogawa, allowed him to paint and draw whatever he wanted and then gave him feedback. Jun Kaneko thinks it is important to be spontaneous in the way he works. He often starts with one idea and changes it to something entirely different by the time he is finished. The process of making the work gives him new ideas.



Jun Kaneko moved to California in 1963 and established his current studio in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1990. He has become one of the most famous ceramic artists today. He is known all over the world for his large scale ceramic sculptures although he has worked in many different media, such as drawings, bronze casting and glass, and even set designs and costumes for the Opera Omaha production of

*Madama Butterfly* in 2006. His best known works are his large-scale abstract ceramic sculptures that he hand builds in clay and covers with surface patterns that include dots, spirals, stripes, zigzags and squiggles. His work is in more than 50 different museums, and he has created more than 30 public art works in the United States and Japan. *Rhythm*, the sculpture garden at the Mid-America Center, is the largest installation of his career.

Jun Kaneko advises students who want to be artists, "The most important thing is your own personal interest in doing art. Be aware that it is very hard work."

## HISTORY OF THE SITE

Jun Kaneko's *Rhythm* stands near the main entrance of the Mid-America Center. This Council Bluffs, Iowa, arena is an entertainment and convention center. The sculpture garden wraps around the side of the arena. Jun Kaneko's installation welcomes the public in a visually exciting and colorful way.

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### MEDIUM AND DESCRIPTION

Jun Kaneko is primarily a ceramic artist. Ceramics are pottery and other objects made from clay and hardened by heat. The ceramic pieces in the sculpture garden are all built by hand and fired twice in the Kaneko studio large kiln. *Rhythm* is the largest single installation of Jun Kaneko's works anywhere in the world. It includes 21 works in a 408 foot-long space. There are three bronze heads, 11 ceramic pods which the artist calls "dangos," five triangular dangos, and two tile-covered walls. Visitors can walk among the sculptures on a 22,500 square foot, elaborately-patterned granite walkway.

As visitors approach from the south they encounter the first of the two walls, which is 19 feet tall and is covered with black and white tiles forming stripes. The attached stainless steel poles are painted in primary colors and create a cubic shape. The 11 organic-shaped columnar dangos are clustered in a circle sitting on black stone bases. These elongated, egg-shaped forms are covered in a variety of patterns and colors and weigh 1,500 pounds each. The second wall, which is 26 feet tall, is covered with shiny, dark blue tiles which reflect the light. The primary-colored poles create rectangular shapes on either side of the wall. The visitor next encounters the five ceramic wedges. These triangular forms, like the pod-shaped dangos, are each decorated with different designs and colors and sit on similar black rectangular bases. They are arranged in a slightly curved line next to the building. At the western entrance to the arena are three giant bronze heads arranged in a row facing north. The 6-foot high heads weigh 1,600 pounds each, and are covered in alternating silver and black geometric shapes and sit on silver table-like bases. As the visitors move through the sculpture garden, which is longer than a football field, they walk on a granite pavement which the artist has designed in alternating patterns of black and white stripes.

### INTERPRETATION

Among the works that comprise *Rhythm* are three bronze heads. [Look at these heads and the following works at iowawestpublicart.org:](#)

Jun Kaneko 2003 ceramic heads

Olmec Head (This large stone head was made by the Olmec culture of Mexico between 1200-900 BCE, probably to represent a king.)

Constantin Brancusi, *Mademoiselle Pogany*; two versions in bronze and marble

Roman funerary portrait, *Portrait of a Boy*, Faiyum, Egypt (This painted encaustic portrait on wood was made in Egypt during ancient Roman times in the 2nd Century. It was made to be put over the head of the deceased.)

Paul Klee, *Senecio*

Easter Island Moai (These giant heads were probably built by Polynesian people who lived on the tiny South Pacific Island about 800 years ago.)

Arrange these works in order from most realistic to most abstract.

Do they all look like human figures? Why or why not?

Look at Jun Kaneko's two ceramic heads. How are they different? Which looks more real? Why? What features or details do you need to make you see an object as a human head?

Look again at all of the heads. Which are two-dimensional and which are three-dimensional? Does this make a difference when deciding which are most realistic?

Now compare the heads, dangos and wedges from *Rhythm*. Consider both the objects and their decoration. Where do you see abstract shapes? Where do you see realistic shapes? Where do you see geometric shapes? Organic shapes? Solid forms? Open space?

What kinds of objects can you think of that are made of clay? How big are they? Jun Kaneko's pod dangos are 7½ feet tall and the triangular dangos are 7 feet tall, and they both stand on bases that are three feet high. How tall are the dangos with their bases? How do these compare to how tall you are?

Jun Kaneko's dangos weigh 1,500 pounds each. Approximately how much do you weigh? How many students in your class would it take to reach the weight of a dango? Have you ever made anything from clay? What problems might you encounter if you tried to make something this big from clay?

Jun Kaneko's ceramic pieces are hollow and must be built of thin slabs of clay. These objects were fired in a kiln to harden them. How big would the kiln have to be?

[Watch the audio slide show available at iowawestpublicart.org.](#)

In the slide show, Jun Kaneko's dangos were compared to sumo wrestlers wearing kimonos.

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What do you think was meant by this comparison? How are the dangos like a sumo wrestler? How are they like a kimono?

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**Abstraction – freedom from representational qualities in art, not representing any object in the physical world**

**Bird's eye (aerial) view – seen from above, as by a bird in flight**

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**Scale – the relative size of something**

**Texture – the quality of the surface of a work of art which can be perceived by touch or a visual design which represents a tactile quality**

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**Unity – repetition of motif, shape, pattern or size or harmony of color, texture or material**

**Variety – variations on a theme or strong contrasts in a design**

## CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

### EXPLORE BIG IDEAS:

Artists repeat shapes to experiment with form.

#### Connect With Other Art, Artists And Cultures

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What geometric shapes do you see? What organic shapes appear? What colors does he use? What shapes do you see that are repeated to form patterns? How are the patterns affected by color?

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What shapes, colors, and patterns are the same as what you saw in his drawings and paintings?

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Jun Kaneko says about his drawing and painting, "It sharpens my intuitive reactions to what I'm doing and allows me the freedom to be spontaneous. What I see is what I've got."

How do you think the steps Jun Kaneko must take to decorate a ceramic dango are different from those he must take to make a drawing or painting? Which would be faster? Which would you use to plan out your ideas?

Where do you see similar shapes, colors and patterns in *Rhythm*? How does Jun Kaneko create a sense of unity in all his work? How does he create a sense of variety? Why do you think Jun Kaneko titled this sculpture garden *Rhythm*? What characteristics of the sculpture garden could you compare to rhythm in music?

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The Navajo people of the southwestern United States have been weaving dresses, blankets and rugs from wool since the Spanish introduced sheep into the region in the 1500s. Traditionally weaving was the task of women who created clothing for their families. Even though women created different types of patterns many repeating shapes and colors continue to be used.

What repeating shapes do you see? Are they geometric or organic? What repeating colors do you see? How do the patterns change to create different designs? What features create unity among all these weavings? What features create variety?

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What repeating shapes do you see? Are they geometric or organic? What repeating colors do you see? How do the patterns change to create different designs? What features create unity among all these glass pieces? What features create variety?

How do the Navajo weavers, Dale Chihuly, and Jun Kaneko, who all work in different art media, use similar design methods to create their forms?

#### Experiment With Art Making

Using clay or air-dry modeling medium, roll out a ½-inch slab to create a large square. Measure to divide and cut the square into four smaller squares. Using a variety of tools create texture and pattern on the squares.

How will you create a sense of unity among these four squares? How will you create variety?

Will you use geometric or organic shapes, or both? When the clay has hardened, add color. (Color can be added with glaze if the tiles are to be fired or can be added more simply with paint.) How will the color affect your patterns? Will it create unity or variety? If your tiles were going to be part of an installation, how would you arrange the squares? (This art making exercise could also be done by drawing on paper rather than using clay.)

### EXPLORE BIG IDEAS:

Artists shape large-scale spaces for people to experience.

#### Connect With Other Art, Artists And Cultures

When artists shape large spaces with their art they must consider the environment around their artwork and how people will respond to it. Jun Kaneko says that environment is a big part of the artistic process of making public art.

[Go to iowawestpublicart.org to view Kaneko on Park Avenue.](#)

Look at the four photographs of the three large heads on Park Avenue in New York City

[Link to the short video about Kaneko and his work at iowawestpublicart.org.](#) When installing these 8½-foot heads in the middle of New York City Kaneko considered the movement of people and traffic and the different directions from which they could be seen.

How do the heads relate to their environment? Do you see anything around them that looks similar to the shapes or details of the heads? How might they look to you if you were driving by in a car? Would they look different if you were walking down the street?

Jun Kaneko says that the environment in which a sculpture is placed can create both possibilities and problems. Do you see anything in the environment on Park Avenue that might create problems for the artist? What interesting possibilities might the artist find in this environment?

Look again at *Rhythm*. Jun Kaneko says that he studies a site many times to decide how the artworks will fit into the environment. For the sculpture garden he not only designed the sculptures but he also considered how the viewer would move in the environment. Jun Kaneko feels that the space in between the art works becomes an important element in the whole design.

Looking at the photographs of the sculpture garden, imagine that you can fly over it like a bird. Can you imagine the spaces between the sculptures? How are the different sculpture groups arranged? Make a sketch from a bird's eye view of the garden including the walls, dangos and heads. As you make your drawing what questions do you have about the arrangement of the objects?

When Jun Kaneko placed his sculptures along Park Avenue in New York, he had to work with the existing streetscape. When he was selected to create Rhythm he had to start with an empty space along the side of the building. What kinds of decisions do you think he had to make to design all the parts of the sculpture garden?

When artists create large spaces for the public they have to consider what kinds of experiences people will have in these spaces. Some spaces that artists have created in recent years that people have enjoyed are:

Maya Lin's *Wave Fields* (three sites)  
Christo and Jeanne Claude's *Gates* in Central Park in New York City  
Jaume Plensa's *Crown Fountain* in Chicago

[Use the links available at iowawestpublicart.org to watch short videos that show people experiencing these public art spaces.](#) How did people react to each of these public art spaces? What kind of a mood or feeling did these people experience in these spaces? What did the artists' create in each of these spaces to encourage people to respond? How would you describe each of these art places to a friend who has never seen them?

[Now look at Andrew Leicester's Cincinnati Gateway and a series of Japanese Zen Gardens using the links on iowawestpublicart.org.](#)

Imagine you are in each of these spaces. What kind of a mood or feeling would you experience? What features of these spaces made you experience them in different ways?

Some public art spaces are meant to make you feel excited and encourage you to move whereas others calm you down and allow you to think quietly. Look at the five spaces you have been discussing. Which ones would make you feel more active and which ones would make you feel calmer?

Now consider *Rhythm*. Would being in this space encourage you to be more active or more calm? Why?

Jun Kaneko draws upon his own Japanese heritage in his designs. What do you see in *Rhythm* that is similar to the Japanese Zen gardens?

Jun Kaneko says that he hopes that *Rhythm* encourages people's imaginations and keeps their attention. If you were in the sculpture garden what might you imagine? What are the features that draw your attention? Why?

#### Experiment With Art Making

Working in small groups, pick a site in your community to create a public art space.

What is the environment (landscape, streetscape) like now around your site?

Thinking of the kinds of public art you have just explored, what kind of art will you add to the site to make it a place people will want to come? What do you want people to experience in this space and what feelings do you want them to have? How will your art works create these moods and experiences for people?

Create either a drawing or a paper maquette (small sculpture) of your public art space. If you choose to make a drawing you may draw your space as if you were standing on the ground looking at it or from a bird's eye view.

Write an artist's statement describing your space and how you want people to experience it.

### CONNECT WITH OTHER SUBJECTS

The above activities and discussions address the following subject areas:

Social Science: environments eliciting feelings and moods

Science: clay and glaze properties

Math: weight, size, pattern and shape

Social Studies: Japanese, Olmec, Roman, Easter Island and Navajo cultures

Language Arts: written responses

### WHAT IS IWPA?

Iowa West Public Art (IWPA) is an initiative of the Iowa West Foundation that started in 2004. IWPA is guided by a community-driven Public Art Master Plan, which selected over fifty public art sites in the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa. IWPA's vision for the year 2015 is a community with a national and international reputation for high quality art that attracts visitors from all over the world and fuels economic development. Learn more at [www.iowawestpublicart.org](http://www.iowawestpublicart.org).

Curriculum author credits: Center for Innovation in Arts Education, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Shari Hofschire, Dr. Joanne Sowell





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The above activities and discussions address the following subject areas:

Social Science: environments eliciting feelings and moods

Science: clay and glaze properties

Math: weight, size, pattern and shape

Social Studies: Japanese, Olmec, Roman, Easter Island and Navajo cultures

Language Arts: written responses

## WHAT IS IWPA?

Iowa West Public Art (IWPA) is an initiative of the Iowa West Foundation that started in 2004. IWPA is guided by a community-driven Public Art Master Plan, which selected over fifty public art sites in the City of Council Bluffs, Iowa. IWPA's vision for the year 2015 is a community with a national and international reputation for high quality art that attracts visitors from all over the world and fuels economic development. Learn more at [www.iowawestpublicart.org](http://www.iowawestpublicart.org).

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