



IWPA

Iowa West Public Art

MARK
DI SUVERO
BIG MO

TOM HANAFAN
RIVER'S EDGE PARK
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MARK DI SUVERO BIG MO TOM HANAFAN RIVER’S EDGE PARK

ABOUT THE ARTIST



While working for a cabinetmaker, Mark di Suvero was critically injured in an elevator accident that crushed him and trapped him for an hour. After months in the hospital he was confined to a wheelchair, but began to sculpt again and learned to use an arc welder. Although doctors told him he would never walk again, he trained himself to walk with crutches. While spending a year in a rehabilitation hospital he taught art to the other patients. He says that the sharing of art with others was a “springboard for the spirit” and this became a goal for his artistic practice. During this period of his life he began to use a crane to shape heavy steel girders into monumental sculpture. Despite his physical setbacks, Mark di Suvero has remained a very hands-on sculptor. He cuts and welds the steel and other metals for his sculptures and works with only a few assistants.

In 1986, a group of artists under the leadership of Mark di Suvero founded the Socrates Sculpture Park in New York City on an abandoned riverside landfill. Now it is an internationally-known outdoor museum, a space for artists’ studios, and a city park. In France, he turned a riverboat into La Vie de Formes (The Life of Forms), where artists from all over the world could come to create. His contributions to art and the world have been recognized with awards from prestigious organizations like the International Sculpture Center, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, the Heinz Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2011, [Mark di Suvero received the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama](#).

[Links to all referred works of art, videos, and additional resources are available at iowawestpublicart.org](#)

WORK OF ART

HISTORY OF THE SITE

Mark di Suvero’s sculpture *Big Mo* is located in Tom Hanafan River’s Edge Park in Council Bluffs, Iowa, close to the banks of the Missouri River. The Lewis and Clark trail runs along the Missouri River passing Tom Hanafan River’s Edge Park. On August 3, 1804, the Lewis and Clark expedition had a historic meeting with the native Otoe Indians at a place that Clark named Council Bluff in his journal writings. This was the first official meeting between Western Indians and representatives of the United States government. The present-day city of Council Bluffs was named for this site.

Mark di Suvero’s sculpture is located on the Council Bluffs’ side of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge over the Missouri River. Mark di Suvero says that his work has always responded to bridges. When he moved from China to the United States, one of his first sights was the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, which he said was gorgeous. He saw it as a symbol of the country’s freedom. He says, “Bridges have the symbolic knowledge of being able to reach from one person to another, and from one side to another, which has always fascinated human beings.”

How are his sculptures like the bridges?

Mark di Suvero refers to his works as miniatures, compared to the bridge.

How would you describe the scale of the works in relation to the bridge? To a human being?

MEDIUM, DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

In his book *Dreambook* (University of California Press, 2008), Mark di Suvero says, “One of the basic foundations of human society is the capacity of humans to multiply one person’s efforts by acting together ... Working together, humans build bridges and dams the size of which no single human could ever achieve in one lifetime.”

What structures in your area would have required humans to work together to build?

Mark di Suvero sees his works as symbolic structures created in a human scale. He says, “The interaction of human life with this planet Earth has caused human thoughts to evolve ... symbolic structures as widely different as mathematics, language, religion, and art ... It is through using these symbolic ... [structural systems] that humans are able to cooperate, understand one another, and live and work together.” Mark di Suvero’s works are symbolic sculptures that try to “make a new vision of the human-to-the-human-world relation.”

Although based on ideas where Mark di Suvero sees his works as human scale, “monumental” is a word that is often used to describe his sculptures in terms of size. *Big Mo* is an example of his large-scale work at 75-feet 8-inches high with a base of 22’9” x 32’9” x 21’2”.

Look at Jonathan Borofsky’s *Molecule Man* and Albert Paley’s *Odyssey* on the Iowa West Public Art site. Compare their dimensions to those of *Big Mo*.

Which sculpture is tallest? By how much? By what percentage?

Mark di Suvero uses steel as his art medium. Steel allows him to work at the scale that he wants. Mark di Suvero says, “Steel is an incredibly cooperative substance that’s capable of handling space differently than marble or bronze. You can’t get steel’s cantilevering with stone.”

Read the definition of cantilever (see Vocabulary section) and look at [New Star](#)

What part of the sculpture is cantilevered? Why can’t you cantilever with stone? (Teacher note: If the cantilever is too long, stone will break under its own weight.)

Mark di Suvero says, “I buy my steel like artists buy white paper ... I’ll give [steel suppliers] specs for steel plates and I-beams, and they truck them up to my studio.” To manipulate and shape the steel he uses a crane that he says is “my paintbrush.” Mark di Suvero says, “By going to a steel symposium ... I learned that I needed a welder, torch, grinders, hammers, chippers, a wire brush and a crane to hang steel so gravity could cold bend it.” He bought his first crane in 1967.

Mark di Suvero uses different kinds of steel for his sculptures.

Look at the following sculptures: Mark di Suvero, *Beethoven’s Quartet*; Albert Paley, *Odyssey*

Point out where you see different materials on these two sculptures. In *Beethoven’s Quartet* there are three types of steel: Cor-Ten steel, steel and stainless steel.

Albert Paley’s *Odyssey* also makes use of three kinds of material: bronze that turns a green color, Cor-Ten steel which develops a rust color, and stainless steel which remains silver and reflects the sunlight.

Look at: Mark di Suvero, *Old Buddy*
What kinds of materials do you think he used in *Old Buddy*? What parts look similar to *Big Mo*? In both these works Mark di Suvero painted some of the steel parts. What color would you call this?

He uses this red-orange color in many of his works and refers to it as “Spacetime Orange.” This color has often been compared to the color of the Golden Gate Bridge that impressed Mark di Suvero when he first came to the United States. He says, “It was like a rainbow, a bridge coming to the New World, starting a new life.”

Watch the video: Mark di Suvero, *Path to Steel*
Mark di Suvero says, “I work with my hands. They’ve allowed me to build my dreams.” He is a very hands-on artist; he is involved in every part of the process of making the sculpture.

Watch the video: Mark di Suvero, *At Work in the Steelyard*
Mark di Suvero says that making art gives him joy. What do you do that gives you joy? What kinds of tools did you see Mark di Suvero using in the video?

Mark di Suvero does not make detailed models or blueprints for his works. He makes quick, gestural drawings that are the seeds, or beginnings, of his sculptures and then improvises with the cranes. He says, “I do a whole bunch of drawings as I’m working, but I don’t do an exact rendered drawing - I don’t do blueprints. The best drawing I will do is on the [steel] plate that I will cut out and bend. By turning a piece over with the crane, suddenly I see it would go better that way. I do the drawings so that I can remember what I saw in the vision of what the piece could be.”

How do Mark di Suvero’s sculptures compare to his drawings?

Look at: Mark di Suvero, *drawing*
How is Mark di Suvero’s drawing like his sculpture? How is it different?

Before creating *Big Mo*, Mark di Suvero made a number of drawings to suggest shapes he might want to use, but he made a number of changes as he created the piece. He originally created *Big Mo* without the moving pieces on top. As he looked at it from a distance he felt it was not complete and needed something more. That was when he added the moving pieces on top that rotate in opposite directions.

Watch the video: Mark di Suvero, *Iroquois*
What do you think you might feel if you could move around and through the sculpture *Iroquois*?

Look at the following works: *Old Glory*, *Beethoven’s Quartet*
Video: *Beethoven’s Quartet: A Closer View*

To what do you think the titles refer? How does the look of the sculptures connect to these references in the titles? The title *Old Glory* refers to the American flag. In what ways might the sculpture be like the flag? *Beethoven’s Quartet* refers to a piece of music by Ludwig van Beethoven. What did you hear when you watched the video?

Mark di Suvero often includes movement in his pieces. He says, “You have to understand that the whole world is moving. The world is spinning, and the spinning world is going around the sun, and the sun is moving. Once we understand that, we have to join in the motion.”

Watch the video: *Dreamcatcher*
(Teachers note: keep video repeating while asking questions)

Some interpretations compare the lines of the sculpture *Dreamcatcher* to navigational tools and the movement of the sculpture in the wind to sailing or flight.

What do you see in the sculpture that makes these references?

Similar references have been seen in *Big Mo*.

What does the title, *Big Mo*, refer to? What might the moving parts on the sculpture make reference to?

The two kinetic pieces on the top move in the wind and rotate in opposite directions. This is the same movement that radar equipment has on a large boat.

Imagine yourself walking around and through *Big Mo*.
What would you see as you looked through parts of the sculpture? Do the shapes make you think of anything related to the river or the history of the site (Lewis and Clark)? How does the movement relate to the location of the sculpture? What would you feel as you moved through the sculpture? As you looked up at the top of the sculpture?

VOCABULARY

Abstraction – freedom from representational qualities in art, not representing any object in the physical world
Balance – an even distribution of weight enabling something to remain upright and steady
Cantilever – a long projecting beam or girder fixed only at one end, used chiefly in bridge construction

Center of Gravity – the point at which the distribution of weight of an object is balanced
Geometric – characterized by regular lines and shapes
Gesture – a movement of part of the body to express an idea or meaning
Kinetic – relating to motion
Medium (plural: media) – the material or form used by an artist
Mobile – a structure that is suspended so as to turn freely in the air
Monumental – great in importance, extent or size
Organic – characterized by irregular shapes that seem to resemble or suggest forms found in nature
Scale – the relative size of something
STEAM – the integration of the arts with STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics)

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

EXPLORE BIG IDEAS:

Artists create sculptures using structural principles.

Connect with Other Art, Artists and Cultures

Watch the first 11 minutes and 25 seconds (Day 1) of the video: *In the Steel: A Portrait of Mark di Suvero*
What did you find most interesting in this video?
What is Mark di Suvero’s art medium?
What kinds of tools does he use?
What other kinds of jobs use these tools?
What other school subjects besides art would help Mark di Suvero build his sculptures?

Teachers today stress the importance of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Many educators believe that art and design are naturally connected to these subjects. Since early times, artists have used STEM principles to create their works. The addition of art creates the term STEAM as an important focus for learning.

Watch the following video: *Building the Great Pyramid*
What medium was used by the artist/engineer who organized the building of the Great Pyramid? What tools did the builders use?

From ancient times and across the world, people have used STEAM principles to build innovative works of art and culture.

Look at the following works and identify the materials (medium) used: *Stonehenge*, England; *Pyramid of the Sun*, Mexico; *Coliseum*, Rome, Italy; *Eiffel Tower*, Paris, France; *Burj Khalifa*, Dubai

As they were building, what difficulties do you think the artists/engineers had to overcome? Do you think Mark di Suvero encounters any of these difficulties in building his sculptures?

Watch the short time-lapse video: *Mark di Suvero at Crissy Field* and look at Mark di Suvero’s sculptures: *Mother Peace*; *Huru*.

In the longer video, Mark di Suvero talked about the importance of the center of gravity of the work to balance the different parts. Notice that in *Mother Peace* one heavy girder sticks out at the top with nothing underneath it. How does Mark di Suvero balance the weight of that girder that is cantilevered?

In *Huru* a large heavy piece moves on top of a thin rod.

How is that piece held up and balanced?

In teams of two, try balancing a ruler horizontally on a single finger.

At what inch mark does the ruler balance? This is its center of gravity.

Cut a 12-inch piece of string and tie a loop in one end that will slide easily onto the ruler. Now tie the other end around a pencil or pen. Working together, hold the ruler horizontally and adjust the pencil so that it hangs down horizontally.

Now balance the ruler again on your finger with the pencil hanging down.

Did the center of gravity change? Why?

Try moving the string with the hanging pencil to a different place on the ruler and checking the center of gravity again.

Where do you think the centers of gravity might be in di Suvero’s sculptures?

Some other artists who also use STEAM principles in their art works are Ed Carpenter and Brower Hatcher.

Ed Carpenter, who works with architects and engineers to build his sculptures, combines art, science, and nature through the canted light poles in his Broadway Viaduct *Gateway* in Council Bluffs.

Look at the following work: *TECOTOSH*, Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science, Portland State University

TECOTOSH, at Portland State University, was designed for the courtyard in front of the Engineering building. As Ed Carpenter worked with an engineer to build the piece, he realized that it demonstrated the four basic forces that structural engineers deal with: tension, compression, torsion and shear. The name of the piece is made up of the first two letters of each of these terms.

Brower Hatcher’s *Wellspring* and *Oculus* in Bayliss Park, Council Bluffs, are prime examples of an artist’s use of both ancient and futuristic engineering. *Oculus* refers to ancient Roman engineering through its use of the dome and columns. *Wellspring* looks more futuristic with its two cones, one inside the other, topped with four tiers of rings. They are both made of stainless steel rods forming geometric webs.

As you look at the artists’ websites, work in small groups to identify the STEAM subjects the artists had to use and make a list of problems the artists would have had to solve. Be sure to notice the maps and diagrams included in the drawings.

Do you think Mark di Suvero encounters any of these difficulties in building his sculptures?

Experiment with Art Making

Each student will create a flat piece of a sculpture out of poster board. Three-quarters of the students should create straight pieces. They can make them any width or length but no less than 12 inches. They can be bent at an angle (like a V or an L). One-quarter of the students should create curved pieces. They should be no less than 6 inches.

Once students have individually created their pieces, put them in groups of five with four students who have straight pieces and one who has a curved piece.

In your groups use your pieces to create a sculpture using paper punches and brads to attach the pieces.

As you put your sculptures together you will need to problem solve:
Where will the center of gravity of your sculpture be?
Will you have a cantilevered piece like Mark di Suvero’s *New Star*?
Will you have to modify any of your individual pieces to create your sculpture?
Will you have to add any extra pieces to achieve either balance or artistic design?

When you have finished your piece, identify the most difficult engineering problem you encountered while designing your piece.

EXPLORE BIG IDEAS:

Artists create motion in their art works.

Connect with Other Art, Artists and Cultures

Often artists create a sense of implied motion in their art, even when it doesn’t actually move.

Look at the following works: Mark di Suvero, *drawing 1* and *drawing 2*; Franz Kline, *Figure Eight*

How are these works alike?

Point out places where you see implied motion in these works.

Do you think the artists’ gestures were fast or slow?

Stand up and use your body to imitate some of the gestures the artists might have made in creating these works.

Franz Kline created his painting in 1952 and was part of a group of artists called the Abstract Expressionists. They were also called “action painters” because the paintings were so gestural and implied the actions of the artists as they made them. Mark di Suvero has often been called an Abstract Expressionist sculptor.

Look at the following short videos: *Beethoven’s Quartet. A Closer View: Play Art* by Mark di Suvero (al di la); *Shang: Dreamcatcher* by Mark di Suvero; *Big Mo*

Mark di Suvero uses many different kinds and speeds of movement in his sculptures. Sometimes pieces hang from the sculpture and move in the wind. Other times pieces mounted on a central pole turn or bob in the wind. Sometimes parts of the sculptures swing or rock gently back and forth.

Identify the kinds of movements you saw in the five videos.

There are different ways that artists can make sculptures move.

Watch the following videos about 6 different artists who use actual motion in their art: *Alexander Calder*; *George Rickey: An Evolution*; *Alice Aycock Kinetic Sculptures* (watch the first 2 minutes 21 seconds); *Anthony Howe’s Otherworldly Kinetic Sculptures. Powered by Wind*; *Reuben Margolin: On Kinetic Art* (watch 7 minutes, from 5:25 to 12:23); *Theo Jansen’s Wind-Powered Sculptures*; *Theo Jansen: My Creations a New Form of Life* (watch the first 3 minutes 40 seconds).

What makes the different sculptures move? Which are powered by nature and which are powered by machines? How much of each sculpture moves? How would you compare the speeds at which the different sculptures move? What different materials do the artists’ use to make their sculptures? Which sculptures make use of geometric shapes and which use organic shapes? Are there any that use both? Which sculptures are made to look like forms from nature? Which are made to look like actual creatures?

Alexander Calder first experimented with kinetic art in the 1920s. Alexander Calder’s mobiles were early examples of the use of wind-driven motion in sculpture. Both artists saw a connection between the motion and time expressed in their sculpture and Einstein’s theory of relativity and space-time. Mark di Suvero’s studio is called Spacetime.

Go back and ask the same questions you answered above about Mark di Suvero’s *Big Mo*.

Experiment with Art Making

In your groups from the last lesson add some kinetic element(s) to the sculpture you created to make it move.

What kind of movement are you going to use? Think back to the artists you have seen for some inspiration.

What will power the movement? Will you have to modify the design of your original sculpture in order to add a moving piece? Will you use organic or geometric shapes? Will you make reference to some element of nature?

After you have finished your kinetic sculpture, consider the following questions:

What will you title your finished sculpture? Will you make any references like Mark di Suvero does? If you could build your design on a large scale, what materials would you use? How fast would your kinetic element(s) move?

Write an artists’ statement using the above ideas to accompany the display of your sculpture and explain it to your classmates and other students, teachers and parents.

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 50 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.

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