

Martin Puryear

American, born 1941

Old Mole

1985

Red cedar

5 feet 1 inches × 5 feet 1 inches × 2 feet 10 inches (154.9 × 154.9 × 86.4 cm)

Purchased with gifts (by exchange) of Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White, and Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. G. Chaplin, and with funds contributed by Marion Boulton Stroud, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kardon, Gisela and Dennis Alter, and Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd, 1986-70-1

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Let's Look

What do you notice about the shape and texture of this sculpture? What does it remind you of?

Read the measurements of the sculpture and compare its height to your own. What might it feel like to stand next to it?

Read the title of the work. What new thoughts do you have?

About the Sculpture

This large sculpture—about five feet high and five feet wide—is made of red cedar slats that Martin Puryear wove together in a crisscross fashion. Its shape is strange yet familiar, emerging from the ground in a wide cylinder and forming a point at its tip. The sculpture is **abstract**, but its title, *Old Mole*, suggests an association with the small, tunneling animal. Perhaps the base reminds us of a body or torso, and the upper portion of a head and pointy nose. Looking closely, we can see evidence of how Puryear made the sculpture: pencil markings, tacks that hold the slats together, and indentations left by clamps. With no specific front or back, we are encouraged to walk around the sculpture, noticing the intricate overlapping of the wooden slats and peeking into the small holes they create.

Having studied building and woodworking techniques in Sierra Leone (where he served in the Peace Corps), Sweden, and Japan, where he traveled shortly before making this work, Puryear used techniques such as bending wood and basket weaving to create *Old Mole*. The natural world, from which he has often drawn inspiration for his work, is one of his lifelong interests. However, the artist intends for his sculptures to speak for themselves, and we as viewers are invited to make our own interpretations.

About Martin Puryear

Martin Puryear has worked with his hands and his ideas from an early age. Reflecting on his childhood, he said, "If I became interested in archery, I made the bows and arrows; if I became interested in music, I made the guitar."⁷ He studied art in Sweden and at Yale University, but also honed his woodworking skills by learning from builders and craftspeople all over the world, from Europe to Asia and Africa. With strong interests in culture, history, and nature, Puryear creates abstracted sculptures that draw from his life experiences and connect with our own. One of his large-scale projects, *Pavilion in the Trees* (1992), is in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. It features a wooden walkway and an observation deck that is twenty-four feet off the ground, where visitors can relax and contemplate nature.

Curriculum Connections

Art

Forms and Shapes (adaptable for all grades)

Compare and contrast the forms and shapes in Martin Puryear's *Old Mole* with those in other works of art featured in this resource, such as the jar by David Drake and the **geometric** shapes in Aaron Douglas's *Birds in Flight*. How are they similar or different?

Inspired by Nature (adaptable for all grades)

Puryear is inspired by the natural world. Think of an animal or plant that you like and use it as the inspiration for an abstract work of art. Start by observing it in real life or in a photograph and make sketches. Use these drawings to create a three-dimensional object that captures the main characteristics of your chosen plant or animal.

Language Arts

Descriptive Words (adaptable for all grades)

Brainstorm a list of words to describe the color, texture, size, and shape of *Old Mole*. Next, brainstorm all of the things the sculpture reminds you of. Where have you seen something similar? Using this word bank, create poems, either individually or collaboratively, describing the sculpture.

Social Studies

Woodworking Traditions (middle and high school)

Choose a woodworking technique that Puryear uses in his work, such as carving, bending, joining, or basket weaving. Investigate the history of the technique and how it is practiced in different parts of the world. How have people adapted it to fit their purposes?

A PowerPoint slideshow with all of the resource images can be found on the enclosed CD.

⁷ Neal Berenza, *Martin Puryear* (New York: Thames and Hudson in association with the Art Institute of Chicago, 1991), 14.