

CONSTRUCTION BY IVAN CHERMAYEFF



ABOUT THE ART & ARTIST

Construction is a billboard-sized painted-steel sculpture commissioned in 1971 for the grounds of the American Enterprise Group, Inc., an insurance company founded in Des Moines in 1929 and housed in a building designed in 1965 by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. In harmony with the Modernist style of this major architectural monument, *Construction* displays geometric clarity and vivid colors in an abstract design. The composition creates a rhythmic effect by placing vertical steel beams of approximately the same length placed in varying up-and-down relationships against an open network of horizontal and vertical black supports. Using bright, strong colors that advance visually and darker, more subdued colors that seem to recede, the artist creates a balanced but vivid composition that both echoes and enhances the structure of the nearby building.

Ivan Chermayeff (1932 – 2017) is among the giants of modern graphic design. Born in London, he came to America with his family from Europe in the early days of World War II. He attended Harvard University, the Institute of Design in Chicago, and graduated from Yale University in 1955. By the late 1950s, he and his business partner, Tom Geismar had revolutionized graphic design by their minimalist, but easily understandable logos and branding images. Among the iconic and enduring symbols attributed to Chermayeff are those for National Geographic, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), the Museum of

Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institution (which presented him with the National Design Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2014), and dozens of other immediately recognizable logos for corporations and institutions. Chermayeff's *Construction* reflects the influence of his father, Serge Chermayeff (1900 – 1996), an important architect and educator, who helped to establish the modernist International Style in the United States. Typical of Modern artists and designers, Ivan Chermayeff sought to refine his designs to the most fundamental, simple elements that could still convey meaning and beauty. He was also known for his collages, in which he used fragments of colored paper, some with printed images, to create new compositions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How would you describe this artwork to someone who can't see it?

What does this artwork make you feel? Think of its composition and height.

How do you think the work's name, *Construction*, represents the sculpture and where it was placed?

What do you like about this sculpture?

PRE/POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Guess the Logo Game (6-12) Art

Project slides with images of common logos, brands, and trademarks that Ivan Chermayeff and his partners designed. Have students write down their guesses for each logo, revealing each answer after the last slide is shown; students can tally up how many they have won for fun. Afterwards, discuss any common themes or favorite artistic representations from the various designs.

Use the firm's website to find many of these logos for your slideshow:

<http://www.cghnyc.com/>

Fishy Facts Video: Relate Arts to the Artist (PreK –Elementary) Art, Technology, ELA

Play for the students a video (available in the Grandma Anii series) created from Chermayeff's 1994 book, *Fishy Facts*. Let students know that Chermayeff was the illustrator and lead author after introducing him and announcing your trip to *Construction*. Ask students what they notice about his artwork, explaining that abstraction in art is derived from focusing on only the most essential aspects of forms found in nature. Also explain his technique of collage in which Chermayeff used cut and torn papers to create his design. Use this discussion to connect to the design of *Construction*: a variety of colors, with all the colors a single shade with no gradations; the use of manufactured steel beams that he did not design or fabricate but which he "found" and then incorporated into his art; in his collages

for Fishy Facts, Chermayeff did not hand-draw any of his images but instead collaged them from a numerous pieces; similarly, in Construction, he did not model or carve his sculpture, but assembled it from already-existing materials.

Find video on YouTube: Grandma Annii. [Fishy Facts by Ivan Chermayeff](#). Chermayeff. (5 mins., 15 secs.)

Collage a Logo (4-12) Art

“Collages are just new connections of visual things,” Chermayeff has said, with collage a foundation and staple of his creative process, especially clearly seen in his published children’s literature. The technique of collage aids his creative process in that all the unrelated pieces of paper open his mind to the power of abstraction to convey information in a purely visual way, without using words or natural forms. As the artist does when he begins his design process, provide students with lots of colored paper, pencils and pens, sketch paper, etc. and task them with collaging together materials to create a new logo for a company of their choice. Open the activity for additional collages of the student’s choice.

For upper middle school and high school, use this article as an introduction to the activity: Penn State University Press. [Ivan Chermayeff on How He Designs a Logo](#), AIGA, the professional association for design (formerly known as the American Institute of Graphic Design).

VISUAL MEDIA RESOURCES

[InspirADCion - Ivan Chermayeff](#). (04 Dec., 2017)

The One Club for Creativity (12 minutes 9 seconds).

A short film centered on the artist, profiling his background and showcasing his most famous works as well as personal photos. Chermayeff delivers his own story, and students will appreciate getting to know his life and creative process prior to visiting *Construction*.

[Ivan Chermayeff + Tom Geismar | 1979 AIGA Medalists](#). (13 Dec, 2017)

AIGA Design. (3 minutes 10 seconds).

Partially supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, this profile of the prolific graphic design team presents anecdotes of many logo creations and the design process. Against a backdrop of photos and interview bites, the video is great for upper middle and high school students.

[SVA Subway Series Hall of Fame: Ivan Chermayeff](#). (12 Dec., 2017)

School of Visual Arts. (2 minutes 34 seconds).

In this short video presented by the School of Visual Arts, Chermayeff’s daughter describes her father and shares anecdotes against a visual backdrop of the artist putting together a collage. His work and legacy is remembered here; this video would be a nice introduction in the classroom.

INTERNET RESOURCES

<http://www.cghnyc.com/>

The website for graphic design firm *Chermayeff & Geiser & Haviv* posts many of the brands, logos, and

trademarks designed by the firm through the years. Use this website to create your slideshow for the guessing game in Pre/Post-Visit Activities, and explore the 3-D sculptures the firm has designed around the nation.

Fox, Margalit. [Ivan Chermayeff, 85, Eminent Designer of Familiar Logos, Dies.](#) *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 4 Dec. 2017.

The New York Times obituary for Ivan Chermayeff offers a look at the artist's full life, taking readers through his most-recognized works and providing quotes from Chermayeff himself.

[Ivan Chermayeff Interview: Iconic Logo Designer Dies Aged 85.](#) *Designboom | Architecture & Design Magazine*, 4 Dec. 2017.

The website *designboom* reprints an engaging and charming interview with Ivan Chermayeff. Read the stories behind many of his most recognizable logos, and get to know the artist as a person. Included is also a 3-part video interview with Chermayeff. Readability is easy enough to be used in middle and high school classes.

Dunne, Carey. [7 Questions for Logo Design Legend Ivan Chermayeff.](#) *Co.Design*, 28 Apr. 2017.

This short interview for Co.Design has the artist talking about "difficult clients, graphic design's boom, and his fear of painting." An eye-opening short read that high schoolers will enjoy.

PUBLISHED LITERATURE BY THE ARTIST

Chermayeff, Ivan, et al. [Identify: Basic Principles of Identity Design in the Iconic Trademarks of Chermayeff & Geismar.](#) *HOW Publishing*, 2011.

Partners Chermayeff and Geismar along with rising designer and third partner Sagi Haviv take readers through the history and creative process of many of their most famous trademark designs. Over 55 years of work are showcased here, integrating technological changes while maintaining their signature and sought-after design simplicity.

Chermayeff, Ivan. [Suspects, Smokers, Soldiers and Salesladies: Collages by Ivan Chermayeff.](#) *Lars Müller*, 2001.

This quirky and colorful book will provide delight to all ages who enjoy interpreting meaning in art. Chermayeff provides hundreds of collages depicting everyday objects exhibiting unique human emotions.

"Facts" series

This animal series by Ivan Chermayeff, Catherine Chermayeff, and Nan F. Richardson will bring joy and knowledge to young children 2-6 years old. The illustrations are instructive examples of the relationship between collage and abstraction.

[Scaly Facts](#)

[Fishy Facts](#) (View a YouTube narration in Pre/Post-Visit Activities)

[Furry Facts](#)

[Feathery Facts](#)

Warburg, Sandol Stoddard, Ivan Chermayeff (designer and illustrator),
The Thinking Book. Ammo Books, 2015.

This playful reissue edition of a story about a little boy who dreams up all sorts of fantasies was designed and illustrated by Ivan Chermayeff. The book champions the creative process encouraged by Chermayeff in his classes at the School of Visual Arts in New York: allowing the world to “distract” us into more innovative ways of thinking. Parents, teachers and children will enjoy the story’s prose and engaging illustrations.

STAMP YOUR NATIONAL CULTURAL PASSPORT:

“The Red 9”

This landmark building marker of a 9-foot high number 9, painted bright red, can be seen in New York City, in front of the Solow Building at 9 W 57th St. One of the earliest buildings in the city to employ a sloping façade (to accommodate zoning requirements), 9 West 57th was the target of critics who felt the position of the building, set back slightly from the street, and the slope gave too distracting a view of the blank walls of adjacent buildings. Chermayeff’s massive number 9 restored a visual balance between the building and its surroundings. Like the American Enterprise corporate headquarters in Des Moines, the New York building was also designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

Mobil O Sculptures

The logo for Mobil Oil (now ExxonMobil) was dominated by the bright red O in the otherwise blue letters of the company name. That distinctive red O was adapted for corporate sculptures found at the former headquarters of Mobil at Fairfax, Virginia; it was elaborated further when the O was repeated in a stack nine times to form a 32-foot high sculpture at a research center in Princeton, New Jersey.

STAMP YOUR INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL PASSPORT

De La Warr Pavilion

Located at Bexhill on Sea, East Sussex, England, the pavilion was designed in 1935 by Ivan Chermayeff’s father, Serge Chermayeff, with the German architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887 – 1953). Renovated in 2005 as exhibition space in a contemporary arts center, the building is an example of the Modern style whose unadorned shapes and geometric simplicity inspired Ivan Chermayeff’s art.

Document compiled by Dorit Azoulay Naylor