

COSMIC SEED BY RONALD BLADEN



ABOUT THE ART AND THE ARTIST

Cosmic Seed, a monumental steel sculpture by Ronald Bladen, is an abstract representation of the shape and the growth force of seeds planted in the Iowa soil. Placed in front of the Wallace Building near the Iowa State Capitol, the sculpture's simple, but evocative geometric form inspires us to realize that all of our lives depend upon agriculture, as it brings forth the food that sustains us all. This reverence for the earth's bounty and agriculture are at the heart of Iowa's culture. The Wallace Building houses offices of Iowa's Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship as well as the Department of Natural Resources, two major aspects of the state's economy.

The building was named in honor of Henry A. Wallace (1888–1965), one of the most significant Iowans of the 20th century. A graduate of Iowa State University, he was influenced by the botanist and agricultural scientist, George Washington Carver (c.1864–1943). Wallace was renowned for his experiments in plant genetics and his land-use policies which emphasized the protection of soils and the protection of the agricultural economy. He was secretary of agriculture (1933–40) during the Great Depression and served as vice-president for Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II (1941–45).

Ronald Bladen (1918–1988) was among the founders of Minimalism, a movement of the 1960s which

uses fundamental, geometric structural elements to encourage viewers to see the beauty in artistic form at its simplest. Known also as Primary Structures, sculptures such as Bladen's *Cosmic Seed* are often on a large scale to enhance awareness of their stark, clean shapes and surfaces. Born in Vancouver, Canada (he became an American citizen in 1951), Bladen studied and worked in California before moving to New York in 1956. By the early 1960s, his sculptures were recognized as important examples of the new style of Minimalism. His work was exhibited internationally, and his sculptures are found in art collections throughout the United States and beyond. His work was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts with three fellowships, awarded in 1967, 1978, and 1986.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is your first impression of this sculpture?

How might you describe this piece to someone who cannot see it? Use as many sensory details as you can.

The statue is meant to abstractly show the idea of the importance of farming in Iowan life and culture. How does this artwork convey this idea?

In keeping with a minimalist viewpoint, how might you have used the idea of a seed to represent agricultural life as a large-scale sculpture?

PRE/POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

My Farm Web, National Agriculture Literacy Curriculum Matrix (K-2) Art, ELA

Using this lesson plan by National Agriculture in the Classroom, students will “use the visual representation of a web to explore the role of agriculture in their daily lives and understand how most of the necessities of life can be traced back to the farm.” Turn this into an art project individualized for each child by taking the “My Farm Web Master” and turning it into a list of items for each student to draw and color themselves, rather than printing off the photos for the children to cut out.

The lesson plan is wide-ranging, with sections on *Background Agricultural Connections*; *Vocabulary*; and *Did you know? (Ag Facts)*. Companion resources are free printables for easy incorporation.

Find lesson plan here: <https://www.agclassroom.org/teacher/matrix/lessonplan.cfm?lpid=8>

Agriculture| Eucatal.com (Pre-K –Lower Elementary) Art, Music, Science

This comprehensive collection of agriculture-themed lessons will provide plenty of art-related activities for the preschool and lower elementary classroom. From utilizing actual farm-grown vegetables like squash and pumpkin seeds to hands-on, practical life-themed activities allowing students to experience the feel of milking a cow, teachers will find joyous lessons weaving farming and agriculture into their classroom.

Collection of lessons here: <https://www.educatall.com/page/704/Agriculture.html>

Abstract Agricultural Art (5–12) ELA, Art

Select an agricultural object that can be abstractly represented. Have students create a small version of this object in a medium of their choice and decide where they would situate this sculpture, either in Des Moines itself or somewhere in Iowa. Just as Ronald Bladen tied his artwork to the Wallace Building, students should select a clear placement of their artwork that ties it to an agriculture theme. Ideas may include the John Deere Agriculture Building on the Iowa State Fairgrounds; the Iowa Barn Foundation headquarters; Iowa Dairy Association building.

Require students to complete a description of their artwork as well as a short (2-3 sentence) history of the site they chose for their sculpture. This can be tied nicely into a regional study of artwork in Des Moines or Iowa in general.

Differentiate this activity for upper elementary/middle school pupils by providing them with a list of buildings/settings from which they can choose, then having the class brain-storm ideas for different agricultural-themed sculptures they could create. Use Annie and Eric, the AE Cow and Calf (in front of the Anderson Erickson Dairy) to illustrate the use of naturalistic, rather than abstracted, forms related to agriculture.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Ronald Bladen Estate

This website holds a biography of the artist, with a selected exhibition history and contact information for the estate.

<http://lorettahoward.com/artists/bladen>

The Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, NY, represents the artist's estate, and its web page for Bladen lists many of his exhibitions and collections which include his work, along with numerous photographs of his work, including many of his paintings.

<https://wallace.org/who-are-the-wallaces/henry-a-wallace/>

If you are using *Cosmic Seed* to connect art with famous Iowan history, this profile of Henry A. Wallace is hosted on The Wallace Centers of Iowa website. Find a biography of the former Vice President, photographs from his lifetime, and even original report cards from his attendance in West Des Moines Public Schools! A selected bibliography is included for those who would like to continue studying Wallace. Explore the website further to discover Locally-Sourced Dining; Community-Building & Educational Programs; Food Production Processes & Activities; and Agri-Tourism Programs, Historic Tours & Archives.

Farming Art. Fine Art America.

Elementary-aged children will be interested in viewing any of the 55,000 Farming Art pieces of art in varying mediums: paintings, photos, illustrations, digital art, and mixed media. This collection of artwork is available for purchase directly on the website; educators may wish to use any of these works to highlight agriculture in art.

American Gothic House Center | The Painting

Connect to another famous artwork featuring Iowan artist Grant Wood: *American Gothic* (1930) is viewed as a positive statement on rural American values. Visit the hyperlink to read explanations of motifs found within this classic American painting.

PRINT AND ONLINE LITERATURE RESOURCES:

Baldwin, N. (1980, April 12). 'Cosmic Seed' takes root at last in Des Moines.

The Des Moines Register, p. 3.

Access the original article presenting *Cosmic Seed's* inauguration from the Saturday, April 12, 1980 edition of *The Des Moines Register*. Learn about "everything that possibly could go wrong with a commissioned piece: misunderstandings, disagreements, and costs", which will no doubt fascinate young adults. Bladen's dissatisfaction with the proximity of his sculpture to the Wallace Building and the delays in finding a steel fabricator are among the problems discussed in this "behind-the-scene" account of this commission.

http://www.artdealmagazine.com/Artdeal_Magazine/Ronald_Bladen.html

Online magazine *Artdeal* profiles Ronald Bladen by friend Larry Deyab. The article's author recounts his memories of the artist, illustrating Bladen's history with photographs of his art as well as behind-the-scenes photos, and giving the stories behind them. Deyab finishes with his recollection of Ronald Bladen's last days before his death from cancer in 1988. This touching tribute is accessible enough for high school students and would be an interesting accompaniment to the viewing of *Cosmic Seed*.

Jacobi, F., & Bladen, R. (2007). **Ronald Bladen, Skulptur, sculpture** (German and English Edition). Köln: König.

This full-color hardcover book showcases works from the Marzona Collection, including many early Ronald Bladen sculptures. Documenting the 2008 exhibition in Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, the Marzona Collection featured wooden sculptural originals that were eventually taken apart and put in cold storage, hidden from the public thereafter.

Culver, J. C., & Hyde, J. (2001). **American dreamer: The life and times of Henry A. Wallace.** New York: Norton.

This 656-page, well-researched tome of Henry A. Wallace's life will take readers through his achievements as politician, agriculturalist, economist, author, and businessman. 32 black and white photographs are included to round out this generous biography.

STAMP YOUR NATIONAL CULTURAL PASSPORT

Ronald Bladen had permanent sculptural pieces commissioned across the United States:

Untitled (Three Elements)

Visit the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, NY to see this large, three-part sculpture. With a focus on geometric forms, this piece was originally made of wood and refabricated with steel in order to withstand outdoor weather conditions.

Sonar Tide

Dedicated in 1983, this piece sits outside of the Civic Center in Peoria, IL. The open curve is representative of the artist's first thoughts of the city. View a short video about this piece at the link above, provided by the Peoria *Journal Star*.

Black Lightning

On view at the Seattle Center, this 1981 "commanding" artwork was a collaboration between the Seattle Center and the Seattle Arts Commission. *Black Lightning* showcases the striking geometrical lines favored by the artist, on view near the base of the Space Needle.

Oracle's Vision

One of his more controversial commissions, this sculpture for Springfield, Ohio's modern City Hall building had plenty of people talking upon its unveiling in October 1981. Installed near the new City Hall, which was designed in a minimalist style, Bladen's sculpture in that same style became the target of public controversy. The hyperlinked article from the Springfield *News-Sun* goes into further detail of the strong public reaction and attempts to move *Oracle's Vision*.

Document compiled by Dorit Azoulay Naylor