

MIFFY FOUNTAIN BY TOM SACHS



PHOTO: BEN EASTER

ARTWORK BIO

Miffy is a cute little bunny who is the star of an internationally renowned series of children's books that follow her innocent adventures. Drawn with simple lines and flat, bright colors, she has become an icon of childhood, with almost 40 Miffy books translated into over 50 languages. Miffy is also a merchandising giant, with her features found on dozens of commercial objects. The contemporary American artist Tom Sachs adapts the sweet and guileless bunny in his *Miffy Fountain* in which she cries a fountain of tears which fall into a pool surrounding her. Transformed from the pages of a children's book into a three-dimensional, monumental sculpture, Miffy was constructed with foamcore and glue which was then cast into bronze and painted white.

ARTIST BIO

Sculptor Tom Sachs is best known for reinterpreting modern icons and commenting on consumerist and capitalist culture. Sachs engineers materials of all sorts in his works, often leaving evidence of his construction process, as he does in *Miffy Fountain*, where the seams of the original foamcore sections are maintained in the bronze. The artist is interested in subverting the slick anonymity of many manufactured objects by purposely revealing how his objects are fabricated, as he explained: "I want

labor to be the point, because everything in our lives is miraculously made with no idea of how it's done....I wanted a transparency of construction.”*

*www.artnet.com/artists/tom-sachs/2

Sachs furthered his repertoire with a Nike sneaker collaboration, releasing the NikeCraft Mars Yard sneaker in 2012. Sachs' work can be viewed in traveling exhibitions across the world, and in the collections of museums such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and Paris' Centre Georges Pompidou s.

Dick Bruna (1927–2017) is the Dutch author and illustrator who created Miffy in a story he devised for his young son after seeing a small rabbit in a garden. The first Miffy book appeared in 1955, and it quickly became a popular series, due in part to its childlike simplicity and benign content. Bruna always drew Miffy in the same way, using just two dots for her eyes and two crossed lines for her mouth, but he managed to convey a range of emotions through these simple marks. He was the author of other children's books with characters similar to Miffy.

PRE/POST ACTIVITIES

MEET MIFFY

(K-12) Art, ELA, Technology

Author Dick Bruna published several illustrated books about Miffy and her family and friends. Explore several titles and ask students to complete their own Miffy illustrated book. Challenge older students to translate Miffy into a new art style, such as comic book/manga, or computer animation.

- Create a new layer to this activity by having students integrate Miffy's previous travels around the world, inventing a story about how Miffy got to Iowa.
- Find helpful comic book links in the Internet Resources, below.

MIFFY FOUNTAIN IN PROPORTION

(5–12) Art, Math

Weave math into your art classroom by challenging students to find proportions of *Miffy Fountain* in smaller scales; ask students to find 3 proportions which they can draw to scale. Suggestions might include a miniature; a small (to fit on an 8x10 paper); and a very large (on butcher paper).

RECREATE MIFFY

(3-12) Art, Technology

Part of the appeal of both the character itself and Sachs' *Miffy Fountain* is the cuteness and simplicity. Excite students by presenting the opportunity to recreate their own *Miffy* in a variety of media. Adapt the media and difficulty of this task for each age group: clay; Plaster of Paris, 3D computer graphics, foamcore, and wood carving are some ideas. Further this challenge by requiring older students to create a short stop-motion film with their physical Miffy representation.

POP CULTURE IN ART

(9-12) Art, ELA, 21st Century Skills

This activity would be an excellent transition to or inclusion in to an Andy Warhol study, or a unit in

which commercialized pop culture is featured in high art.

Lead high schoolers in a discussion: ask them to think about how this sculpture re-contextualizes and shifts [Miffy] to a higher level by being recast in bronze.

- What statement might the artist be making about commercialism in art?
- What other famous artists might come to mind who used commercialism to make high art (most famous example: Andy Warhol)?
- Challenge high schoolers to choose a popular item/character from pop culture and find ways to “shift [them] to a higher level”. Or, ask them to identify couture or luxury businesses which design items (clothing, jewelry, accessories, etc.) that use popular products as their inspiration.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is your first impression of this sculpture?

How well does this sculpture fit into its surroundings near the library – would you have placed it anywhere else?

What message was the artist trying to communicate with this sculpture?

The artist used bronze to elevate the idea of Miffy as high art. What other media could be used for a large sculpture of a popular icon, to shift the character to a “higher level”?

LITERATURE RESOURCES

Miffy series, Dick Bruna

The adorable character of Miffy, along with many of her friends, is featured in nearly 40 books by author Dick Bruna. Be sure to explore Miffy’s wide range of adventures, available in over 50 languages.

Osterwold, T. (2015). *Pop art*. Köln: Taschen.

For exploration of other pop art, this anthology will come in as a useful resource. Though *Miffy Fountain* is not necessarily “pop art,” it does provide an example of a popular icon elevated to a high-art level, as was the intention of artist Tom Sachs. Featured in this book is artist **Claes Oldenburg**, whose sculptures are on permanent display in Des Moines (**Crusoe Umbrella** and **Plantoir**).

Celant, G., Gladwell, M., & Prada, M. (2006). **Tom Sachs**. Fondazione Prada.

Older students and adults will appreciate this comprehensive overview of Tom Sachs’ work up through his solo exhibition at the Fondazione Prada, Milan. The book “illustrates the prolific and innovative nature of Sachs’s career, highlighting his fascination with weapons, conformity, cultural imperialism and craft.”

INTERNET RESOURCES

<https://www.tomsachs.org/>

The artist’s own website provides photographs of all past works; an annotated, selected exhibition history; a store; and even links to his short artistic movies he makes. Students of all ages

will be interested in exploring his past works, including *Crying Hello Kitty* (2008, Paris).

Eccleshare, J. (2017, February 17). **Dick Bruna obituary**. *The Guardian Online*.

This obituary of Miffy creator Dick Bruna provides an accessible commentary on the author's achievements. The article outlines the creation of Miffy and a description of her character by the author.

<https://www.miffy.com/>

This adorably whimsical website is Miffy's own! Students of all ages will enjoy exploring deceptively simple tasks in the style of the Miffy books. A full "about" section is included, as are games; an online, narrated book; and videos. Though the website is geared towards children in its simplicity, adults and older children will find joy in these connections.

Harrod, H. (2017, February 17). **Miffy creator Dick Bruna: 'Hello Kitty is a copy of Miffy. I don't like that at all'**. The Telegraph Online.

This fascinating 2008 interview with Dick Bruna describes how he created the "£150 million rabbit", along with sharing his fondness for the additional characters in his universe. Bruna also touches on his distaste for the Hello Kitty Japanese cartoon, who, he felt, looks just a bit too similar to his own Miffy character.

Andy Warhol| American Painter, The Art Story: Modern Art insight. TheArtStory.org.

When discussing commercialized art/pop culture in art with high schoolers, this resource may come in handy: it includes Andy Warhol's key ideas, his "most important art," and influences and connections to other artists.

Comics, Cartooning, Manga and Graphic Novels, Art Inspired Wiki: Frank Curkovic

This "wiki" provides plenty of links, activities, articles, and more for arts curriculum. Several options are available regarding comic books, manga, and graphic novels. Use these links if you'd like to provide this option for the activity, *Meet Miffy*.

STAMP YOUR CULTURAL PASSPORT

Local: Des Moines features several other public art sculptures in the John and Mary Pappajohn Sculpture Park as well as around town (meet several on the **Art Route**). There are currently 36 permanent sculptures made of bronze, just like *Miffy Fountain*. See photos and locations of these sculptures by using [this link](#).

National: **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**

Two of Tom Sachs' works are featured in the museum's permanent collection: *Knoll loveseat and end table* (1996) and *Model Thirty Six* (2014).

International: **Miffy Museum**

Visit the Miffy Museum in Utrecht, Netherlands. This all-ages museum also features Dick Bruna's lesser known works. While there, visit Dick Bruna's studio, preserved and maintained, just across the street.