

PUBLIC ART
FOUNDATION
GREATER
DES MOINES

CRUSOE UMBRELLA

Artist

Name

Claes Oldenburg

Lifespan

born Sweden, 1929

Nationality

American

Information

Art Type

Sculpture, Site Specific

Materials

Cor-Ten Steel, Painted with
Polyurethane Enamel

Status

Permanent

Year Completed

1979

Credit

Commissioned by Civic Center of
Greater Des Moines

Information Resources

View PDF

Location

Latitude & Longitude

41.587411,- 93.621402

Location Description

Other Public Art Downtown

Cowles Common: Southwest
corner of Locust and 3rd Streets,
Des Moines

Get Directions

Lesson Plan

Grades

6-8, 9-12

Interdisciplinary Connections

STEAM

Downloadable PDF

Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation
Educational and Family Resource

Crusoe Umbrella

Artwork bio

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, partners in love and art, were inspired with the idea of creating a public work of art after visiting Bruggen's father, who began growing a long beard. This beard reminded them of the castaway character, Robinson Crusoe, from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel. Upon visiting Nollen Plaza (now Cowles Commons), the pair imagined a Cor-Ten steel umbrella in the space, which included a waterfall and large pool at the time.

"The playful and sketch-like sculpture is inspired by an illustration from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel Robinson Crusoe, in which a castaway, stranded on a desert island for 28 years, builds a makeshift umbrella out of natural materials to remind him of the civilization that he was torn from."

Also, during a lecture Oldenburg talked about his interest in the Travelers Insurance sign of an umbrella that looms over downtown Des Moines a few blocks from Cowles Common.

This artwork was installed and inaugurated in late November, 1979.

-adapted from <https://dsmpublicartfoundation.org/public-artwork/crusoe-umbrella/>

Artist Bio

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen collaborated on their art since meeting in 1976 and marrying the following year. With more than 40 sculptures around the world in the U.S., Asia, and Europe, their unique creations of large-scale "ordinary" objects have drawn delight from thousands. Oldenburg was a leader of the Pop Art movement in the 1960s, creating performance art and drawings through the early 1970s. The pair decided to concentrate on public art commissions in 1978 and have been designing these installations ever since. Van Bruggen was an accomplished art historian and curator before committing to making public art with her husband; she died in 2009.

Pre/Post-Visit Activities

(6-12 ELA) READ Robinson Crusoe

In anticipation of your visit and to put Crusoe Umbrella in context, read the novel [Robinson Crusoe](#), by Daniel Defoe. Younger students or struggling readers can read adapted novels to serve their reading levels:

- [Saviour, adapted by: Daniel Defoe Perotta. Robinson Crusoe, Illustrated Classics. Sandy Creek, 2013.](#) Saviour Perotta, Robinson Crusoe: An Abridged Classic (QEB Classic Collection Series), London: QEB Publishing, 2014.
- [Malvina G. Vogel, The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe. New York: Baronet Books, 1992.](#)
 - THE ART OF STEEL

Students will be fascinated while watching two different videos showing the process of turning steel and other metals into artwork. Viewing these videos will help students get a "making of" feeling, which will be appreciated when visiting the steel sculpture in person:

- (6 mins. 31 second) Watch an Artist Turn Scrap Metal Into Animal Sculptures. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD_Ty23PgKc. 17 Jan, 2017.
- (7 mins. 10 seconds) Northwest Profiles: Painting with Fire (metal art). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIF11fqIBBs>. 29, Nov., 2011. "Travel to Coeur d'Alene Idaho and meet Mike Schneider a 'metal artist' who melds grinding and heating techniques with his imagination to create jaw dropping three dimensional art forms."

(6-12, Art) MODEL ART

Since working with steel in the classroom is unlikely, have students make a clay version of the Crusoe Umbrella, either directly modeling or using it as a starting point for their own umbrella sculpture. Take it further and select another Oldenburg-van Bruggen sculpture, or have students select an additional "everyday object" to create a miniature artwork.

- Pose a challenge lifted from Robinson Crusoe: lead students on a nature walk, asking them to select materials from the outdoors just as the title character does. Challenge students to make umbrellas entirely out of these materials (allowing for glue), or require they utilize these materials with their clay.

(12) SPEAK WITH A LOCAL ARTIST

Local artist James Bearden (<https://www.jamesbeardensculpture.com/>) has been creating sculptural art for over a decade; his work has been featured in several galleries around the state and nationally. Bearden has been included in DSM Magazine, Interior Design Magazine, and

Introspective Magazine.

(6-12) REAL STEEL DISCOVERIES

Learn more about working with steel by touring or inviting into your classroom a local steel/ metal fabrication business:

- [Cox Design & Metal Fabrication](#) (Altoona, IA)

Specializing in stainless steel and aluminum since 1987, this company designs manufacturing equipment, metal signage, and interactive displays – just to name a few of their undertakings!

- [Des Moines Steel: The Real Steel Guys](#) (Des Moines, IA)

Open since 1991, The Real Steel Guys have worked with everyone from large manufactures to hobbyists and artists. Their website includes a robust [Steel Glossary](#) and [Fun Facts!](#)

Discussion Questions

- What are your first thoughts about this sculpture?
- Why do you think Crusoe Umbrella is located in Cowles Commons? Can you find a connection between Crusoe Umbrella and Swirl?
- How would you describe this artwork to a person who can't see it? What sensory details would you use?
- If your class has read Robinson Crusoe, how do you think this represents the umbrella Crusoe made in the novel?

Literature

- Hochdoerfer, Achim and Buchloh, Benjamin. [Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties](#). Prestel, 2012.

This publication explores Oldenburg's career from the late 1950s to 1970, highlighting the installations *The Street* and *The Store* with accompanying performances, and the public art sculptures of everyday objects beginning in the 1960s. Younger students will enjoy looking through photos; older students may enjoy also reading accompanying text.

- Oldenburg, Claes and Celant, Germano. [Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology, 2nd Edition](#). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1991.

Oldenburg's sculptures, performances and drawings are featured in this comprehensive anthology of his works. This out-of-print text is still available on Amazon (linked here); jointly published by the Guggenheim and National Gallery of Art to accompany a thorough retrospective of his entire career. Oldenburg's own writing is included along with unpublished photographs. (10-12th grades for reading level, but younger students will be drawn to photos).

- Mallette, Catherine. [Ironwork Today 4: Inside and Out](#). Schiffer Publishing, 2014.

Over 90 blacksmith-artists' works are featured in detailed color throughout this book of art in metal. Pieces are accompanied by the artists' own discussion; the 4th in an ongoing series can be used as a reference guide and as inspiration.

Internet Resources

- [oldenburgvanbruggen.com](#)

The artists' official website hosts a very thorough catalog of every large-scale project created with histories and images. Biographies, selected publications and writings are also linked on this easy-to-navigate website.

- [The Art Story|Modern Art Insight: Claes Oldenburg](#)

Find information on artists and movements using this website, as well as timelines and an updated blog. Claes Oldenburg has a nice, thorough profile here, where his "Most Important Art" is highlighted, along with his influences and connections. This is a wonderfully organized resource for any artist study.

- Kennedy, R. (2017, October 16). [Claes Oldenburg Is \(Still\) Changing What Art Looks Like](#). The New York Times Style Magazine.

This recent NY Times Style Magazine profile on Claes Oldenburg digs into both early and latter points of his career. Personal anecdotes are shared throughout the article, as well as a description of his upcoming private commission and gallery showing in New York City.

- National Gallery of Art Audio Interview, [Conversations with Artists: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen](#)

"Germano Celant, organizing curator of the travelling exhibition *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, on view at the Gallery from February 12 to May 7, 1995, joins the artists in this lecture. In this recording from March 5, 1995, the trio discuss the art in the exhibition—the first survey of their art since 1969—and how it offers a sense of interaction unlike anything else in a museum."

Art Activities

Stamp Your Local(ish) Cultural Passport

- **Pappajohn Sculpture Park** (Des Moines, IA) is home to several large-scale statues made of steel and other metal artworks.
 - **T8** and **Nomade** are both made from stainless steel.
- **Torn Notebook** in the University of Nebraska's Madden Garden (Lincoln, NE) is another sculpture by Oldenburg and Van Bruggen, installed in 1996.
 - Check out "*7 Big Facts about Torn Garden*":
<http://news.unl.edu/newsrooms/today/article/7-big-facts-about-torn-notebook/>

Stamp your National Cultural Passport

Visit additional large-scale art pieces of everyday objects by Oldenburg-van Bruggen around the country, like **Flashlight** (University of Nevada, Las Vegas); **Clothespin** (Philadelphia); and even a **Knife Slicing Through Wall** (Los Angeles, CA).

- **See more Oldenburg -van Bruggen sculptures in California:**
<http://www.weirdnv.com/map.php?location=303>
- **"The Back Story of Flashlight":** <https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/back-story-flashlight>
- **Learn more about Clothespin:** <http://www.associationforpublicart.org/artwork/clothespin/>

View all Oldenburg-van Bruggen national and international artworks with information and location in the artists' [Chronology of Large-Scale Projects](#).



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The educational resources are designed to deepen and enhance the experiences and understanding of public art in Greater Des Moines. These resources are intended for families and educators to adapt to the needs of their individual children and/or classes.