



ACTION FIGURES: TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK'S CHARACTER DESIGNS

Recommended for Grades 6-8

Keywords: Graphic Design, Product Design, Comics, Graphic Novels

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OVERVIEW

Action Figures: Trenton Doyle Hancock's Character Designs

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In the entertainment industry, character designers plan the concept, style, and narrative of characters. In this lesson, students will design their own character in the form of an action figure. Students first learn about a universe of characters created by the Houston-based artist Trenton Doyle Hancock. Then, students bring their own character design ideas to life by inventing a character, designing the packaging, and pitching their design to a focus group of peers.

Objectives:

- Students will analyze Trenton Doyle Hancock's *LEGENDS* by describing, interpreting, and evaluating as a work of art.
- Students will create original artworks that are based on observation, original sources, and personal experiences.
- Students will use visual art vocabulary to describe the expressive properties of their work and the work of others.

Essential Questions:

- How can you convey narratives in your work?
- What needs to be considered when creating and designing a character?
- In what ways can you tell an artist's intention by looking at their artwork?

LEARNING STANDARDS

Texas State Standards (TEKS):

Art, Middle School 1, Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 117, Subchapter B, Rule §117.202, (1)D; (4)A,B,D

Art, Middle School 2, Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 117, Subchapter B, Rule §117.203, (1)D; (2)A,B,C

Art, Middle School 3, Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 117, Subchapter B, Rule §117.204, (1)D; (2)A,B,C

Foundations: Observation and Perception: The student develops and expands visual literacy skills using critical thinking, imagination, and the senses to observe and explore the world by learning about, understanding, and applying the elements of art, principles of design, and expressive qualities. The student uses what the student sees, knows, and has experienced as sources for examining, understanding, and creating original artworks.

Creative Expression: The student communicates ideas through original artworks using a variety of media with appropriate skills. The student expresses thoughts and ideas creatively while challenging the imagination, fostering reflective thinking, and developing disciplined effort and progressive problem-solving skills.



Trenton Doyle Hancock, *LEGENDS*, 2015. Location: University of Houston-Downtown

ABOUT TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK

Trenton Doyle Hancock was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1974 and grew up in Paris, Texas. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) from Texas A&M - Commerce, and during his time obtaining his degree worked as a cartoonist for the school newspaper. He then went on to get his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree from Temple University in Philadelphia. Hancock makes artwork in a variety of mediums that are often inspired by graphic novels, comics, and cartoons.

Trenton Doyle Hancock's *LEGENDS* is in the permanent collection of Public Art of the University of Houston System (Public Art UHS) and is on view at the University of Houston—Downtown (UHD). The design connects to the familial and nurturing aspects of UHD. Hancock states: "The tree is a central symbol in my practice... Weaving in and around the branches of the trunk of the tree are colorful bands with the word LEGENDS and is a mantra of power and hope. I chose this word because it resonates triumphantly and speaks to the legacy of the school."³ The artwork is 36 feet tall and is made from colored ink applied to clear acrylic sheets.



LEGENDS is part of a larger narrative that Hancock has created called the Moundverse, in which the half-human, half-plant Mounds battle evil creatures called the Vegans. A packaged action figure of Mound #1, The Legend, shows the first Mound, who has a tree-shaped skeleton and is often symbolized by a tree. Another central figure in the Moundverse is Torpedo Boy, a superhero that the artist first invented at age 10. Torpedo Boy is an alter ego for the artist; Hancock says "Well, he looks like me. He's a black guy. His face is basically my face."⁶ Even though his characters are fictional, the battles in the Moundverse echo the complexity of real-life conflicts: "On the surface, my work is like little boy art—goblins and good and evil. But I think at the heart of the work is that I don't really know what good and evil actually are. It's up to the viewer."⁵



Trenton Doyle Hancock's *LEGENDS* is permanently on view on the 3rd floor of the Welcome Center Building at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD).

Images: Trenton Doyle Hancock and Torpedo Boy at MassMoCA 2019, courtesy of the artist;
Mound #1 the Legend, 2015, 27 x 16 x 16 in via Artsy.net

CLOSE LOOKING: WRITING

Students will be guided through a discussion about the work using the questions listed below. After they have carefully looked at the work, they will write a critique outlining: a description of the artwork, an interpretation of the artist's intent, and an evaluation the success of the artist through a "glow" (something the artist did well) and a "grow" (something the artist could improve).

Objectives:

- Students will analyze an original artwork by describing, interpreting, and evaluating it.
- Students will use visual art vocabulary to describe the expressive properties of their work and the work of others.

Estimated Length: 15 minutes (5 minutes group discussion; 10 minutes writing)

Method:

1. Show Trenton Doyle Hancock's *LEGENDS* to students. Give students a minute to silently look at the artwork, either as an image in the classroom or onsite at the University of Houston-Downtown.
2. Ask students to share their observations. Use open-ended questions to spark conversation about the artwork, such as:
 - What do you notice?
 - What symbols do you see in this artwork? What might they represent?
 - What words come to mind when you look at this art piece?
 - What emotions does this artwork make you feel?
 - What does it remind you of?
3. After about 5 minutes of discussion, students are given 10 minutes to write a critique using the Written Critique Worksheet provided.
4. Introduce the art-making activity, explaining that students will be creating their own action figures inspired by *LEGENDS*.

ACTIVITY: ART-MAKING

Students will create an action figure and a narrative to go along with it. They will design all aspects of the action figure design, including the packaging. Students will then participate in a Focus Group of the products as if they were going to be mass produced.

Objectives:

- Students will create original artworks that are based on observation, original sources, and personal experiences.
- Students will use visual art vocabulary to describe the expressive properties of their work and the work of others.

Estimated Length: two class periods (1-2 hours)

Materials Needed:

- Card stock (2 sheets per student)
- Clear cellophane
- Glue (any type, e.g. glue stick, liquid glue, etc.)
- Scissors
- Sketch paper or sketchbook
- Pencils
- Colored pencils
- Colored felt (optional)

Method:

1. Ask students: If you were to create your own character and turn it into an action figure, what would they be like? Allow them time to creatively consider:
 - How would they look?
 - What qualities/powers would they possess?
 - What symbols will you use to portray these qualities/powers?
2. Instruct students to use sketch paper or their sketchbooks to sketch 2-3 ideas for their action figure and packaging. Encourage students to circle or note their favorite ideas.
3. Ask students to use one of their two sheets of card stock to create a color drawing of their character. Then, instruct students to draw tabs on the sides of their character (these will be used to attach the character to the packaging) and cut it out with tabs attached.
4. Instruct students to cut a hole in the center of their second sheet of card stock. It should be large enough that their character design would be visible through the hole.
5. Instruct students to create a packaging design on the rest of their second sheet of card stock to accompany their character. Designs can include elements of the action figure's environment, backstory, or symbols of their qualities/powers.
6. Instruct students to flip over their background, then use a small piece of cellophane to cover the back side of the hole in the cardstock. Then, ask students to affix the tabs on

their cut-out character to the back side of the cardstock, ensuring that the correct side faces forward. Flip over to see the full design!

7. Reflection/Share: Companies often conduct focus groups before launching a product to see how the general public will interpret and enjoy them. By doing a focus group with a small group of peers, students gain practice both critiquing designs and having their own designs critiqued. Separate the class into small groups of 3-5 and ask each student to briefly introduce their action figure to the group. The rest of the group can respond to one or more of the following questions:
 - What do you notice?
 - What does it remind you of?
 - What symbols do you see in this artwork? What might they represent?
 - What words came to mind when you look at this design?
 - What emotions do you feel when you look at this design?
 - Does it remind you of other characters you have seen? What elements are unique?
 - What story does this design tell? How does it tell that story visually?

Lesson Adaptations or Extensions:

For a greater 3-D effect, use a repurposed box or a box-folding template to create the packaging around the character. Take inspiration from Trenton Doyle Hancock's *Mound #1: The Legend* design and consider cutting additional holes in the box or folding the box into a dynamic shape.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Artwork Page: publicartuhs.org/artwork/legends

Principles of Design: contrast, balance, emphasis, proportion, hierarchy, repetition, rhythm, pattern, white space, movement, variety, and unity

Bibliography and Sources:

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Glossary:

Character Design	The process in which an artist or designer creates a character from scratch, including the concept, style, and artwork.
Elements of Art	Color, Form, Line, Shape, Space, Texture, and Value
Figure	A model of a bodily form.
Focus Group	A group interview with a small number of people who have been selected to provide feedback on an idea, campaign, product, or design.
Model	A representation of something, often on a smaller scale.
Narrative	A story or a spoken or written account of events.

Principles of Design contrast, balance, emphasis, proportion, hierarchy, repetition, rhythm, pattern, white space, movement, variety, and unity

Symbol Something visible like a sign or logo that represents something invisible.

WORKSHEET: WRITTEN CRITIQUE

Name: _____

Class Period: _____

Date: _____

Title of Artwork: _____

Artist's Name: _____

Year Created: _____

Description of the artwork: _____

Interpretation of the artwork: _____

1 Glow (something the artist did well): _____

1 Grow (something the artist could improve): _____
