



El Anatsui (Ghanaian, active in Nigeria, b. 1944), [*Danu*](#) (detail), 2006, aluminum, copper wire, J. David and Lara Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2006.35

El Anatsui, *Danu*

Key Idea

Sustainability often deals with the waste that we generate. El Anatsui has transformed discarded bottle tops to create works of art filled with cultural and historical significance.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Closely examine *Danu* by El Anatsui
2. Explain El Anatsui's process
3. Consider how waste relates to sustainability
4. Work individually and in groups on a learning activity

Lesson

1. Choose a close-looking prompt (from the introduction page) to encourage students to study the artwork.
2. Next, provide the class with some background information using the "About the Artist" and "About the Artwork" sections below.
3. Engage the class in conversation using the discussion questions.
4. Follow up the class discussion with a learning activity.

LEARN

About the Artist

El Anatsui is a Ghanaian artist who lives and works in Nigeria. El Anatsui creates works of art from many different types of found materials including wood, clay, metal, and discarded liquor bottle tops. El Anatsui is best known for his work creating "cloths" made from flattened liquor bottle tops, woven together with copper wire. He initially discovered the materials for this technique when he found a bag of liquor-bottle tops sitting in a bush. He fabricates sculptures with a team of assistants to create works that do not have a fixed shape and can be draped and displayed in a variety of different ways.

About the Artwork

Danu measures around 7 feet tall and 11 1/2 feet wide and is made up of thousands of aluminum screw-top bottle caps that have been flattened, folded, and joined together by copper wire. El Anatsui considers his process a "transformation" rather than simply a recycling of materials. His material of choice highlights issues with waste and global consumerism and is a link to European and African histories as alcohol was first brought to Africa by Europeans as a trade item during the earliest contact among the groups. Initially, El Anatsui gathered his materials from piles of waste around his village, but now he purchases the discarded bottle tops mostly from local manufacturers. Of the bottle caps, El Anatsui says that "artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up."

DISCUSS

1. What materials do you notice? What colors do you see? What patterns? Does the artwork remind you of anything?
2. How does *Danu* relate to sustainability? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. El Anatsui uses bottle tops to create works of art because of their connection to his home environment. If you could select one material to represent your home, what would you choose?
4. El Anatsui describes his process as a "transformation" of materials. A transformation is the act of making a thorough or dramatic change in the form, appearance, or character of an object. In what ways did El Anatsui transform the bottle tops?

CONNECT IDEAS

Make It!

Transformation—To encourage students to think like an artist, ask them to select one discarded material that their environment “throws up.” Then, ask students to collect that material and brainstorm a list of ways the material could “transform.” Tell students that the definition of transformation is to make a thorough or dramatic change in the form, appearance, or character of an object. Once they have generated a list of possible transformations, ask the students to select one process and carry out the transformation. Take time to reflect on the process and how it relates to the work of El Anatsui.

Map It!

Trash Investigation—To encourage students to develop investigation skills, ask them to discover where trash and recycling go after they are placed in the bins. Students can draw a flow chart to show where the objects go and what happens to them. After they have completed this activity, ask students to reflect on how this activity relates to sustainability.

GO FURTHER

Video

[Video](https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/el-anatsui-studio-process-short/) showing El Anatsui’s process, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/el-anatsui-studio-process-short/>

Books

One Plastic Bag by Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of Gambia

Rainbow Weaver/Tejedora del Arcoiris by Linda Elovitz Marshall

Teaching Resources and Lesson Plans

The Quest for Less: Activities and Resources for Teaching K-8, <https://www.epa.gov/students/quest-less-activities-and-resources-teaching-k-8>

Keeping It in The Loop: A Recycling Activity and Learning Guide for Educators and Students,

<https://dnr.wi.gov/files/pdf/pubs/wa/wa1526.pdf>

STANDARDS

Art and Design

3-5 A.A.R.8.i: Interpret: Use details, subject matter, and context to interpret an artwork’s mood or meaning.

3-5: A.A.R.7.i: Analyze: Compare and contrast how the use of media can influence ideas

Environmental Literacy and Sustainability

3-5: ELS.EX3.C.i Describe how cultures relate to their environments.