

Mary Nohl (1914-2001)



Mary Nohl refused to be confined by artistic categorization. She was a painter, sculptor, ceramicist, printmaker, potter, woodcarver, writer, illustrator, and jeweler who described herself as simply “a woman who likes tools.” Nohl was also an environment builder who altered her lakefront home by filling every room and a large part of the yard with her works of art. Nohl often made her own rules; whether it was melting down her mother’s sterling silver to make jewelry or walking along the shore of Lake Michigan looking for **flotsam** to build driftwood figures, she was interested in everything and how it could be used in her creations as materials or inspiration.

Travel was an integral part of her life. Nohl learned as a girl that travel was an opportunity for her to explore the **visual culture** of other places and she sketched and wrote about regional styles where ever she went. What influenced her the most, however, was the immense lake just outside her door. Nohl envisioned a fantasy world beneath the waves, where creatures lived funny and interesting lives. A cast of characters emerged in her paintings, sculptures, and in the **bas-relief wooden friezes** that enveloped her small home. The environment Nohl made was highly expressive of both her artistic character and that of her lakeshore cottage and yard.

Living alone, Mary was often perceived as introverted, but actually led a very sociable life. She held memberships at various art-based and social clubs—among them the Milwaukee Potter’s Guild, Chi Omega Sorority, Optimists Club, and the Walrus Club—and she frequently hosted guests in her home.

The home and yard of Mary Nohl is now cared for by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and named a Milwaukee County Landmark. The Arts Center houses over thirty-five hundred Nohl works in addition to her archives.

Flotsam

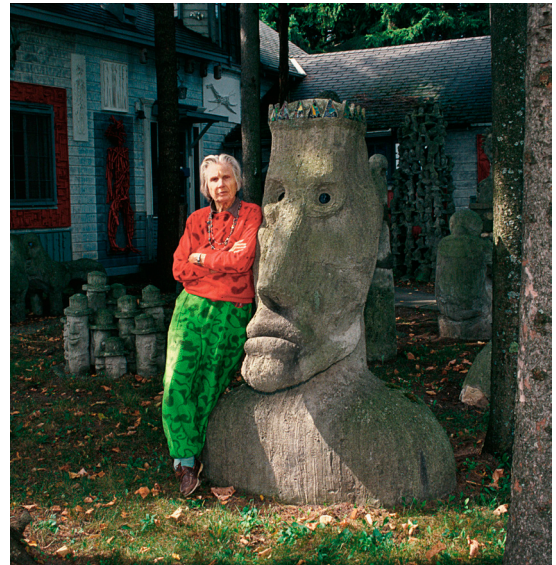
Materials, man-made and natural, found floating on a body of water. Flotsam such as driftwood is often found washed ashore.

Visual Culture

Any imagery that we find in our environments, for example advertisements, artwork, clothing, architecture, signage, and symbols. Visual culture can be discussed both as a specific representation of a place or group of people or as a global idea.

Bas-relief Wooden Friezes

Bas-relief (pronounced bah-relief) is when the design elements such as figures and other design elements in a sculpture are slightly more raised than the surface. A frieze is an architectural element, typically attached at the top of building or near the ceiling.



Artist Overview



John Michael Kohler Arts Center

(Top) Mary Nohl at her Lake Cottage (Fox Point, WI), 1994. Photo: Ron Byers.

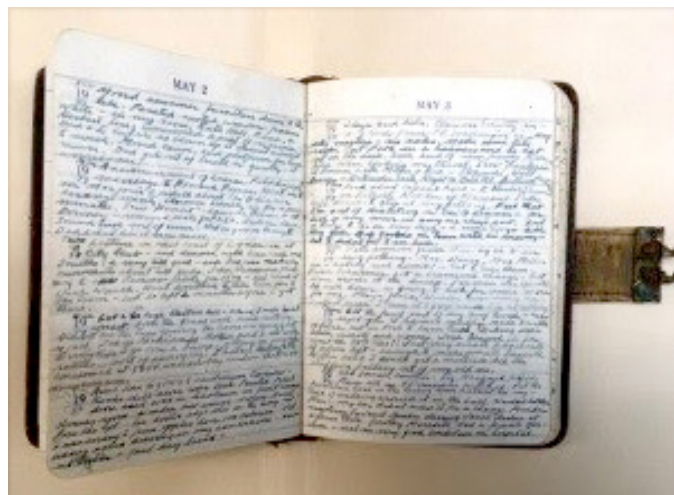
(Bottom) Mary Nohl Art Environment (site view, Fox Point, WI), c. 1960–2001. John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, gift of Kohler Foundation Inc.

Daily Journaling

Mary Nohl had daily routines for her everyday habits such as creating art, exercising, and searching for treasures by the lake.

One important part of her routine was writing an entry in her five-year diary. A five-year diary has one page for each day of the year, and five small places for an entry on each page. If you write in a five-year diary everyday for five years, each page will show you what you did on that same day over five different years!

Because the spaces were so small, Mary used very tiny handwriting to add as many details as she could. Here is an example of her entry from September 29, 1972.



“Bowled first time – 132. My new bowling shoes are helping me. Got a nice “Nohl Trees” letter from Sandy (Alexander) Nohl Platts with a lot of proudly ... - From New Mexico. If I send them on to ... will probably keep them – and I don’t want to Xerox – though I caved at library. My desk gets covered with little scraps of paper ... with notes to myself – each of which goes in basket when finished.”

Discuss with a friend or write about the following ideas

- Why do artists reflect in journals?
- What are different ways that you can journal daily or weekly?
- How can you make a journal personally meaningful?

Try it!

Keep your own journal for a full week using the journal template. You can use drawings or words to record what happens each day.

For K-12 Educators: Suggested National Standard Connection / Visual Arts Creating 2.3

Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Enduring Understanding: People create and interact with objects, places, and design that define, shape, enhance, and empower their lives.

Essential Question: How do objects, places, and design shape lives and communities? How do artists and designers determine goals for designing or redesigning objects, places, or systems? How do artists and designers create works of art or design that effectively communicate?

This activity is part of a lesson written by Kris Lockhart as part of JMKAC’s Teacher Fellowship Program. Find the full lesson at jmkac.org.