



## STEPHEN BURKS TEACHER RESOURCE

“Hands have power. Hands have imaginative power. Hands have communal power. Hands have political power. And hands have economic power. Even today, the hand is capable of doing things that machines cannot. My work is about finding opportunities for innovation in the space between handcraft and industry while hopefully extending craft traditions into the future.”

### EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

*Stephen Burks: Shelter in Place* explores ideas concerning domesticity—namely asking how we can design our interiors to enable joyful living while empowering creativity. In the wake of several recent global crises, designers have responded by redefining our relationship to our homes, including challenging the modernist trope of better living through design. For nearly twenty years, Stephen Burks and his studio Stephen Burks Man Made (formerly Readymade Projects) have been proponents of a pluralistic vision of design that is inclusive of all cultural perspectives. As an African American designer, Burks has forged a unique path by embracing the challenge to advocate for hand production as a strategy for innovation within industrial production, which has become a hallmark of his practice.

This exhibition brings together several facets of Burks’s workshop-based design practice, including key prototypes, design products, and craft-related experiments, as well as a speculative project called *Shelter in Place* that emerged out of questions around creative agency and ideas of radical home making during the global pandemic lockdown. These objects are brought into dialogue through an analysis of Burks’s design practice, highlighting different ways of approaching his work (using the metaphor of weaving, craft as collaboration, or the power of experimentation, for example). Burks’s open-ended, holistic approach to creativity across the disciplines of art, architecture, and design—reminiscent of the Bauhaus school, which was founded on an integration of all the arts—reflects a collective spirit that is the hallmark of a generation of contemporary designers who embrace the role as a conscious collaborator through which ideas are shared.

This teacher resource can be used to prepare students for their visit to the exhibition and as a lesson guide to engage them with Burks’s work.

### ARTIST BIO

Stephen Burks (American, born 1969) is one of the most recognized American industrial designers of his generation. Independently and through association with various nonprofits, he has worked as a product development consultant in close collaboration with artisans and craftspeople throughout the globe. His Brooklyn-based studio, Stephen Burks Man Made, is deeply invested in the transformative power of craft techniques that challenge the limits of new technologies within industrial production. Their projects include furniture, installations, lighting, packaging, and product design for some of the world’s leading design-driven brands. Burks studied architecture at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) and product design at Illinois Institute of Technology’s Institute of Design. He is the recipient of several awards, including being the only African American to win the Smithsonian Cooper Hewitt National Design Award in Product Design. In 2019, he became the first Harvard Loeb Fellow in product design and was recently adjunct assistant professor of architecture at Columbia University’s GSAPP.

### ART-MAKING PROCESS

When we talk about Burks’s process, it’s useful to note that as a designer, he works primarily in the world of drawings, renderings, and small maquettes. These informative resources serve as a roadmap for prototyping, with the hope that a final product will successfully be translated from the original concept. During this pivotal stage, Burks works closely with various artisans and manufacturers to bring his designs to fruition. Unique to Burks’s practice is the emphasis on collaboration with craftspeople from various regions and traditions around the world to create a dialogue between

craft-based art and mass-produced industry. While not a weaver himself, he collaborates with skilled weavers from communities whose craftsmanship he admires and in doing so is able to elevate their craft to a global audience while also interpreting it in new and modernist ways.

## **THEMES**

### Craft as Community

- In a field that has historically been framed around White European aesthetics, Burks acknowledges how as a Black American he has been marginalized as “other” within the design industry and the impact that this has had on his career compared to his White peers. Using his identity and experiences to inform his approach, he thus advocates that issues of equity and diversity within design must be approached by “includ[ing] everyone in the conversation and not just allow[ing] the existing structure to attempt to redefine itself.” True to these words, his work is dedicated to including everyone in the process, particularly by empowering artisans of color from various regions of the world who bring his designs to fruition.

In a break from the traditional mold of design production, and the pyramidal hierarchy inherent to it, Burks views the artisan makers of his designs as his collaborators. By compensating them fairly, giving them the agency to contribute their expertise to the ideation process, and finding ways for makers to individualize a piece while still following the overall design specifications, Burks and his teams of artists make culturally significant items that are both mass produced (industry) and one of a kind (craft). Burks pushes the consumer to see the physical handprint of the artist in his works and to be reminded of the community of people who worked together to create it.

### The “Majority World”

- Learning from other cultures is what primarily informs the way that Burks approaches design. Through visiting and working with communities all over the globe—places such as the Philippines, Senegal, and South Africa—Burks has been able to learn about various craft traditions that in turn have enabled him to both envision a visually more diverse future and be a better advocate for cultural inclusion without exploitation. By leveraging his own success as a designer to provide a platform for voices from “the majority world,” Burks uses this global perspective to contend with the European-dominated tradition of design and to push for a more equitable, pluralistic vision within his field.

### Weaving as Metaphor

- Although Burks is not a weaver, he has embraced learning from artisans and forging a new craft-based aesthetic that merges industry and hand techniques. Through his collaborations with highly skilled weavers from the Philippines, Senegal, and beyond, he is interested in using weaving in his designs in a way that pushes the limitations of materials and traditions. His innovative approach was a particular asset to his recent mentorship of students at Kentucky’s Berea College, where he served as a design consultant for their Student Craft programs. In encouraging an experimental approach that honors traditional craft (for Berea College, traditional Appalachian craft) and that envisions a progressive, cross-cultural future for it, Burks acknowledges how technology distances us from our hands while also making the world more accessible for everyone—he uses his work to find a successful middle ground.

### Shelter in Place

- While this exhibition surveys Burks’s works broadly, there is also a specific focus on work designed during and after the COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders of 2020. This collection reflects how interior design became a coping mechanism for many people as they were forced to withdraw from their communities to their own private, domestic spaces. During this time of global reset, people took agency over their spaces and began to assess and innovate. For Burks and his family, designing objects to maximize comfortability and privacy became a top

priority—from the *Support* prototypes, with the function of supporting one’s phone while lounging, to the *Private Seat* prototype, with the function of providing a stylish barrier around one’s chair. This period of creation was a time for Burks to work expansively and imaginatively, without clients and briefs to influence the trajectory of his vision.

### Power of Experimentation

- Experimentation is a process inherent to all forms of art and particularly design; in this exhibition, Burks’s own experimentations are displayed to illustrate the process by which ideas grow, change, and sometimes fail through the various stages of brainstorm. For Burks, experimenting, particularly with the help of craft-based artisans, is a process driven by asking questions. How can we test the scope of what is possible, of both our materials and our world, without discovering new ways to do things? This is particularly how Burks melds industry and craft—by asking questions of traditional craft-based arts and applying them in new and peculiar ways. When one idea fails, it inherently fuels the next; in this way, Burks removes some of the mystique of how designs come to be and encourages us to embrace the unknown.

### Sustainability in Design

- Another key element within the context of Burks’s work is sustainability in design. Consumers are now more conscious than ever of the need for sustainably made products; this makes it increasingly important to pay special attention to how designers create products materially in a conscientious way with an eye toward our planet’s future. Working with culturally diverse communities has only served to help Burks in expanding his perspective and pursuing these goals; he has noted that outside of the Western world, many people are already in the practice of continually recycling old objects and materials into new utility. As such, Burks questions why we can’t incorporate this level of mindfulness in an industry-aligned practice, and he uses his designs to be more intentional in discussing key issues such as environmentalism.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Use these questions as appropriate to the age level of your students to help discuss the works of Stephen Burks.

- What materials do you see in Stephen Burks’s objects? How are they used? How do you think they were made?
- Stephen Burks is quoted as saying, “Even today, the hand is capable of doing things that machines cannot.” What are some things that come to your mind that are better done by hand?
- In reference to his work *The Others*, a series of lanterns made in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, Burks asks us to contemplate the following: “We all came from someplace else once. There was a time when we were each *the other*.” When have you felt like you were an “other”?
- How is working collaboratively with a community powerful? What would collaborating with the communities around you look like? Do you have any ideas?
- Ask students to respond to the following Burks quote: “If I was seen as different, then how could I use that to my advantage, and how could my work proudly speak for the language of this difference from my own point of view, not theirs?”

## **CONNECTION TO THE CLASSROOM**

### **Paper Cup Weaving**

**Grades:** K–5, 6–8

**Topic/Theme(s):** Design, weaving, fiber arts

**Lesson Overview:** Paper cup weaving

**Objective:** Students will understand the basic mechanics of weaving. Through choosing their own yarn color and experimenting with color, pattern, and repetition, they will better understand how the weavers that Burks works with have the agency to be creative when interpreting his designs.

**Materials:**

- Yarn

- Scissors
- Paper cups
- Marker
- Tape

**Procedures:**

1. Prepare materials
  - a. Use marker to outline where you will use scissors to cut vertical strips (warps) into your cup; there should be an odd number of strips.
  - b. Cut down the side of the cup at each mark. Avoid cutting through the entire side of the cup; leave a little bit of space uncut at the base. Aim for seven to nine warps in each cup, depending on the cup size.
2. Set students up with cups, yarn, and a single tab of tape.
3. Have a demo cup ready to show students how they will weave their yarn through the warps of the cup. To start, students will
  - a. tape the end of their yarn to the bottom of the cup,
  - b. begin weaving their yarn in between the warps in the cup, focusing on the under/over motion, and
  - c. continually push their woven yarn down toward the bottom of the cup, making the weaving tight enough to completely conceal the cup underneath.
4. Emphasize to the students the importance of yarn tension (not too tight and not too loose), and help them to find hand positions and motions that work best for them.
5. Once students have woven their entire cup, they should alert their teacher and receive assistance in cutting their yarn and tucking the tail into the inside of the cup. The tail can either be tied off or secured with glue.
6. **Extension:** For more advanced students, allow them to change yarn colors throughout their weaving! They will cut the yarn they're weaving, tie the new piece of yarn to the same string, and resume weaving. Challenge them to create patterns, rhythm, and temperature (cool or warm tones).

**Assessment:**

- Students will present their works to each other, either as a class or in small groups. They will discuss what they had difficulty with, what they enjoyed, what they'd like to try next, and what they will use their cups for.

## Product Design Challenge

**Grades:** 6–8, 9–12

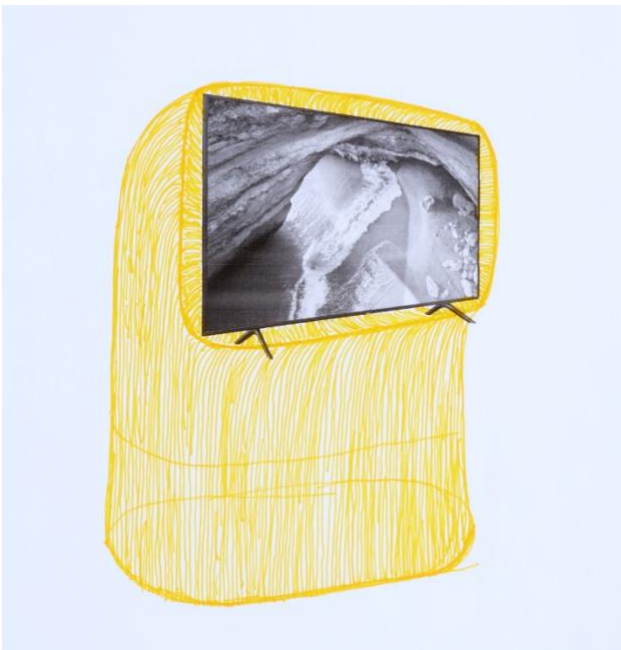
**Topics/Theme(s):** Design, sustainability, recycling, weaving, fiber arts

**Lesson Overview:** Design rendering

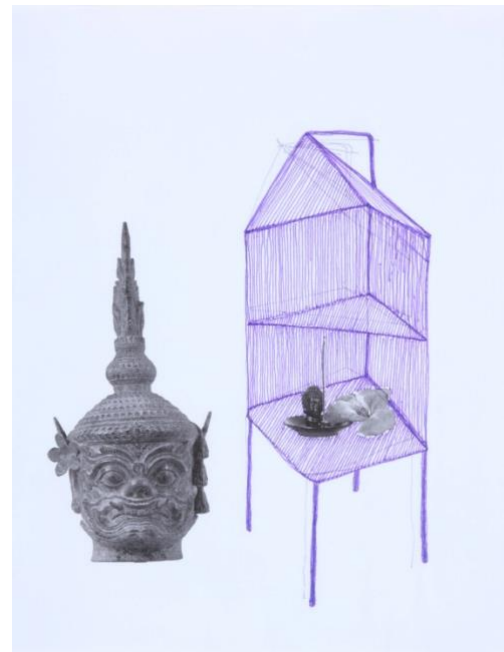
**Objective:** Students will use Stephen Burks’s design approach as inspiration in their own product design challenge. Using a combination of drawing and collaging of found images, students will think critically about how to redesign an existing product to be both functional and expressive. Students should consider how they can use their design to highlight real-world problems or address everyday needs (like Burks’s *Shelter in Place* prototypes).

### **Materials:**

- Stephen Burks Key Images PPT
- Magazines
- Sketch paper
- Tagboard
- Colored markers
- Colored pencils
- Glue
- Scissors



Stephen Burks, Stephen Burks Man Made, *Woven TV* rendering, 2020, *Shelter in Place* project, replica of original work on paper, collection of the designer. © Stephen Burks. Photo by Mike Jensen.



Stephen Burks, Stephen Burks Man Made, *Spirit House* rendering, 2021, *Shelter in Place* project, replica of original work on paper, collection of the designer. © Stephen Burks. Photo by Mike Jensen.

### **Procedures:**

1. Show students the following video of Stephen Burks talking about his practice: <https://youtu.be/jt1sFNTwAfg>. Highlight the way that artists use recycled materials in their craft (particularly at 10:00–13:30).
  - a. Have students discuss or write a warmup response to the following:  
**When designing, Stephen Burks likes to “think about the space around the object and not just the function itself” and to “design a point of view and not just respond to a brief.” What does this mean? How can this be an inspiring way to create art?**
2. Using the Stephen Burks Key Images PPT as a resource, lead a discussion with students about Stephen Burks and his work. A great object to use to talk about sustainability is the *Dala* Stool (slide nine), which is made from recycled food packaging.

3. Using slides ten and eleven from the Stephen Burks Key Images PPT as reference, introduce the assignment: **Students will find and cut out products from available magazines and brainstorm a way to integrate the product as part of a new design.**
  - a. Students should ask such questions as, What would make this item more interesting to look at or help it match the overall aesthetic of my dream home? How can I incorporate a part of my personality into an object's design? How can I make this object more useful or more imaginative?
  - b. Students should start with a brainstorm sketch on sketch paper. After fully fleshing out their idea(s), their final rendering should include a magazine cutout of their choice pasted to a sheet of tagboard with their concept drawn over and around it. Depending on student preference, this can be done collaboratively or individually.
4. **Adaptations/Extensions:**
  - a. For students who might be overwhelmed by looking through a magazine and selecting an idea to work with, try passing out pre-cut images from magazines for students to then focus on and reinterpret.
  - b. If students finish earlier than expected, instruct them to individually or collaboratively redesign a whole collection of items around a central theme.
  - c. For advanced or high school-aged students, inspire them to think more in depth about weaving. Ask them to research different styles of weaving used around the world. They can choose a specific weaving style to focus on and brainstorm ways to implement this style of weaving into their design, as Burks does.

**Assessment:**

- **Presentation/Critique.** Students will present their works to the class for critique. They will be able to explain how they designed their object, what materials they used and why, and how their design makes a real-world statement.

**RESOURCES**

- [Stephen Burks: Shelter in Place Catalogue](#)
- [Stephen Burks is Working Hard to Diversify the Design World](#) (Article)
- [Opening the Doors of Design](#) (Article)
- [Design in Dialogue #14](#) (Interview)
- [Design in Mind: Stephen Burks](#) (Podcast)

# GEORGIA STANDARDS

## Visual Arts

### Elementary (K-5)

VAK-5.CR.1 Engage in the creative process to generate and visualize ideas by using subject matter and symbols to communicate meaning.

VAK-5.CR.2 Create works of art based on selected themes.

VAK-5.CR.3 Understand and apply media, techniques, and processes of two-dimensional art.

VAK-5.CR.4 Understand and apply media, techniques, and processes of three-dimensional art.

VAK-5.RE.1 Discuss personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy.

VAK-5.CN.1 Investigate and discover the personal relationships of artists to community, culture, and the world through making and studying art.

VAK-5.CN.2 Integrate information from other disciplines to enhance the understanding and production of works of art.

VAK-5.CN.3 Develop life skills through the study and production of art (e.g., collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

### Middle (6-8)

VA6-8.CR.1 Visualize and generate ideas for creating works of art.

VA6-8.CR.2 Choose from a range of materials and/or methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices to plan and create works of art.

VA6-8.CR.3 Engage in an array of processes, media, techniques, and/or technology through experimentation, practice, and persistence.

VA6-8.CR.4 Incorporate formal and informal components to create works of art.

VA6-8.CR.5 Reflect on, revise, and refine works of art considering relevant traditional and contemporary practices as well as artistic ideation.

VA6-8.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world.

VA6-8.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.

VA6-8.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of art.

VA6-8.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

### High School (9-12)

#### **Applied Design**

VAHSAD.CR.1 Visualize and generate ideas for creating applied design art products and/or designs.

VAHSAD.CR.2 Choose from a range of materials and methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices to plan and create applied design art products and designs.

VAHSAD.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal applied design art products and/or designs in relationship to community, culture and the world.

VAHSAD.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of applied design art products and/or designs (e.g. collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

VAHSAD.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

#### **Art History**

VAHSAH.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to see how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

#### **Fibers**

VAHSFI.CR.1 Visualize and generate ideas for creating works of art.

VAHSFI.CR.2 Choose from a range of materials and methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices to plan and create works of art.

VAHSFI.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world.

VAHSFI.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.

VAHSFI.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

### **Visual Arts Comprehensive**

VAHSVA.CR.1 Visualize and generate ideas for creating works of art.

VAHSVA.CR.2 Choose from a range of materials and methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices to plan and create works of art.

VAHSVA.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world.

VAHSVA.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.

VAHSVA.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of art (e.g., collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

VAHSVA.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

## **Social Studies**

### **Middle School (6-8)**

SS7G4 Analyze the diverse cultural characteristics of the people who live in Africa.

SS7G12 Analyze the diverse cultural characteristics of the people who live in Southern and Eastern Asia.

### **High School (9-12)**

#### **Sociology**

SSSocC2 Evaluate how cultures evolve over time.

#### **World Geography**

SSWG2 Evaluate how the physical and human characteristics of places and regions are connected to human identities and cultures.

## **Science**

### **Elementary (K-5)**

SKP1. Obtain, evaluate, and communicate information to describe objects in terms of the materials they are made of and their physical attributes