

# Al Taylor, What Are You Looking At?

That's a very good question. This survey of Al Taylor's work invites us to explore how the artist perceived the world around him. It also challenges our skills of observation, prompting us to look in new ways. This artwork calls for less talk *about* the art and more direct engagement *with* the art. Successful lessons with these works will encourage **active looking** and will likely spark many "aha" moments.

The exhibition is organized in **five sections**:

- **Ten Common Objects**
- **Material Things**
- **Changing the Rules**
- **Measuring**
- **Vision, Time, and Motion**



Important to note is Taylor's embrace of multiple practices, namely **drawing, printmaking, and sculpture**. In this exhibition, we see ideas expressed in all three modes. None was the "ultimate." Drawing and printmaking were not vehicles to the sculpture, nor vice-versa. Taylor experimentally moved back and forth among the media.

**Language** is yet another medium to consider with Taylor's work. Witticism and pun abound in his titles. Taylor's clever wordplay provides a verbal parallel to the visual exercise the artwork provokes. Give your students opportunity to explore works in light of their titles.

As you investigate Taylor's sculpture, use the phrase **available materials**. Taylor observed items of mundane use and re-imagined them for artistic use. Even though broomsticks, pull tabs, and telephone cables aren't traditional art materials, Taylor deliberately employs them in these works of art.

The following pages provide prompts for active looking in this exhibition. Prompts in plain black text are easily adaptable for **students of any age**. Green prompts are more appropriate for **elementary students**, while prompts in rust are more appropriate for **teens or older**. With middle schoolers, try a few rust-colored prompts to challenge them and gauge their aesthetic confidence, then choose prompts that allow them to interact with the art in a way that's most engaging for them. **Do not limit yourself to these works; most of the active looking prompts suggested here will also work well with other works of art in the exhibition, and other artwork you introduce to your classes.**

## About Al Taylor

Born in Springfield, Missouri, Taylor studied painting at the Kansas City Art Institute before moving to New York in 1970, where he lived and worked the rest of his life. As a young artist, Taylor developed his approach to painting while holding a number of jobs, including an assistantship to the influential American artist Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's medium-bending experimentation influenced Taylor, who in his work probed the limits between two- and three-dimensional artwork. In 1985 Taylor stopped painting and began to focus on the complexity of space by making sculptural objects that allowed him to look "into and through things." He sometimes called his sculpture "drawing instruments" as they prompted a give-and-take between drawing and sculpture in his practice.

Throughout his career, Taylor's curiosity was piqued by his travels and exposures to different cultures. A 1980 trip to Uganda, Kenya, and Senegal introduced to him the notion of time's multidimensionality—non-linear time stretched or truncated according to the past, present and future events that define it. The notion of time as a subjective, rather than objective, force was revelatory to the artist. Following trips to Hawaii in 1987 and 1988, Taylor incorporated motifs into his work—such as the everyday and overlooked subjects of his Ten Common (Hawaiian Household) Objects—that reflected a counter to the prevailing paradisiacal view of Hawaii.

## Introducing the Work:

Let your students know that this exhibition asks us a question: *What are you looking at?* Below is a sample introduction; adjust vocabulary for your students.

*Al Taylor's work demands that we look at it, and look at it again. We will need to interact with it—not just talk about it—to appreciate it fully. Today we'll be **actively looking** together to answer the question, "What am I looking at?" We'll also ponder, "What was Al Taylor looking at?"*

*Sometimes it won't be immediately obvious, and often there will be more than one possible answer, and that's when the **fun** starts. The artwork we will see together is both two- and three-dimensional; it represents similar lines and forms across drawing, sculpture, and print. The works of art in this exhibition will allow us to see the world how Al Taylor saw it, which was a very interesting and unique way to see the world, indeed.*

*Al Taylor created devices through which to view the world around him, and he made them out of available, everyday materials. Here's one for you to use today. This is your Al Taylor Investigative Device...everybody take one...I know...It's really just a paper plate, but that's okay. Today we are giving it a new purpose; we are giving it a new life. Look through your device. Move it closer to your face and farther away from your face. Study one object in this gallery with it.*

*For instance, this work...*

And launch interaction with your first work of art.

*\*\*A note about the "Al Taylor Investigative Devices:" They are simply the small, dessert-size paper plates with the center cut out. They form round, hoop-like viewfinders through which students can study the artwork and each other. The "devices" communicate the idea that we are actively looking in a very tangible, literal way. Encourage students to "zoom in" and "zoom out" with them by moving them closer to and farther away from their faces. Even when not directly mentioned in this guide, use them with these youngest students with any artwork in the exhibition, or other works you may study together in class. When you look at *Milton, Pass the Peas* and/or *Hip Hoes (Pass the Peas)*, point out to students that Al Taylor used the circles in these works of art in the same way.\*\**

## Ten Common (Hawaiian Household) Objects and other works

**Cans & Hoops, 1993**



- **One Word:** Give one word to describe this sculpture. What do you see that makes you say that?
- **Materials:** After students note the coffee cans and hula hoops, solicit their impressions of his chosen materials. Imagine the sculpture in other materials—wood and wire, plaster and bronze, etc. *How do these materials contribute to your impression of the work?* Reassure them that Al Taylor could have used other materials, but he chose these.
- **Ponder purpose:** Why might this sculpture hang from the ceiling instead of rest on a pedestal?
- **Movement:** What motion does this sculpture indicate? *Show me with your arms.* How do you know it moves this way? What details in the work give you that idea?
- **Measuring:** Al Taylor's investigated aspects of the physical world through his work. *If this sculpture is a scientific instrument, what might it measure?* As you accept responses, follow up with, *What do you see that makes you say that?* to encourage closer looking.
- **Add to it:** *If this sculpture had a third hoop, where would it go? Why?*

**Floaters (Beach Bingo), 1998**



- **Looking 5 x 2:** Solicit 5 observations about the work, then five more.
- **Shape:** *Find individual shapes in the sculpture and sketch them separately.*
- **Consider the available materials:** *How many different materials can we find in this sculpture?* These are floats from fishing nets upheld by bamboo garden stakes. They perch atop 16 Formica panels. *How do the materials contribute to the overall impression the sculpture makes? For instance, what if the floats were round? Or what if the stakes were red?*
- **See the unseen:** *Where is the surface of the water? How do you know? What qualities of liquid are captured in this sculpture?*
- **Movement:** *If you were in a boat floating on this water, how would you be moving? How would you feel?*
- **Art as scientific study:** *What aspects of this work resemble a map? What might it be charting?* Compare to an image of a Polynesian stick chart. Your investigation could launch research into ocean currents and tidal patterns.
- **Double meanings:** This isn't the only one of Taylor's works to have a double name—a title followed by another parenthetical title. *How do the two titles work together? While Beach Blanket Bingo was a popular film, how does the title change when we remove the Blanket and are left with only Beach Bingo?*

continued—

## ***Ten Common (Hawaiian Household) Objects and other works***

### ***Ten Common (Hawaiian Household) Objects, 1989***



- **Consider available materials:** These works explore common, everyday objects such as a flip flop, a broom handle, a plastic water bottle, a flypaper ribbon, a mosquito coil. Gather one or more of these objects in your classroom. Ask, *How could these inspire art?* Almost any response will connect to the exhibition somewhere, if not here. From everyday objects Taylor collected forms to represent in his work; he studied how they created shadows, considered how they would translate in two dimensions, and even made many of his sculptures out of them.
- **Object Hunt:** Allow pairs or trios of students to find an object in the collection of etchings. Ask: *How did you recognize it? What aspects of this object did Al Taylor depict?*
- **Consider Process:** Point out to students a study/etching pair. Compare/Contrast the two works by asking *How are they alike?* and soliciting responses, following with *How are they different?* Facilitate students' arriving at their own conclusion as to the relationship between the study and the etching.
- **Consider Medium:** Study the etchings and ponder how they were made. Observe the quality of the lines and imagine what tools might make such marks. Show an etched metal plate. Create your own prints using Styrofoam or linoleum plates.
- **Try it:** Study one object from the box and choose a form or line from it to sketch. Ask: *What about the object captured your eye? How is your perception of it alike/different from Al Taylor's?*
- **Connect to the exhibition as a whole:** *Our curator describes this grouping as a sort of "glossary of terms" for the entire exhibition. What is a "glossary?" How can pictures be a glossary? If these etchings are a glossary, what "terms" should we be looking for in the rest of the exhibition? Or, if you have already looked at several, ask, What terms from this glossary have we seen in the exhibition?*

## Material Things

**Untitled: (Hanging Puddle), 1991**



- **What's going on in this sculpture?** Utilize Visual Thinking Strategies to facilitate your students' interaction with the work.
- **Sketch it, and sketch it again:** Ask your students to sketch this sculpture. *How is it different in two dimensions? How is it the same?* Once students learn the title, direct them to sketch it as it would look if it were on the ground. *How do the first and second sketches compare?*
- **Describe it:** List ten adjectives to describe this sculpture. Look back at your list and circle the three best describing words. Then, draw a line in your list where the adjectives stopped coming naturally and got a bit more difficult to generate. Share your three circled words with a partner or the whole group. Share your first word after the line.
- **Consider the title:** *How does the sculpture look different to you knowing the title? Can a puddle be hung? Is a puddle usually two- or three-dimensional? Is this puddle two- or three-dimensional?*
- **Liquid vs. Solid:** *Here Al Taylor has depicted a liquid with a solid. What qualities does this sculpture share with a liquid puddle?*
- **Light and Shadow:** *How does the shadow impact our perception of the sculpture? What if the light source were over here?*
- **Outside the frame:** *Puddles usually rest on the ground. As you observe this sculpture, which way is up? Which way is down? How do you know?*
- **Try it:** With a small group of peers, observe an actual puddle. Sketch it. Create a hanging version of it with string and bits of wood.

**Pet Stain Removal Device, 1989**



**Untitled (Pet Stain Removal Device), 1989-1991**

- **The unpleasant truth:** Stains are part of life for pet owners, yet few of us contemplate their qualities as Al Taylor did. How they are created, what they look like, and how to remove them were all ideas Taylor investigated in his artwork, both two- and three-dimensionally. *What qualities of the stain does this device take into account? What qualities does it ignore? How can you tell?*
- **Act it out:** *How does this removal device work? If it is a moving tool, how does it move? How would you operate it? What would it do next? Show us.*
- **What happens next?** *Imagine this work of art as a frozen moment in time, like one frame in a film or one image in a flip book. What will the next moment look like? How do you know?*
- **Evaluate the device:** *Would it work? Is it effective for its task? How so? How not?*
- **Compare depictions:** *Which depiction of a pet stain removal device do you like best? Why?*
- **Invent your own device:** *What would your own pet stain removal device look like? Or invent a device to perform another less-than-desirable task for you. Sketch a design of your device.*
- **Connect to other works you've seen:** What aspects of Taylor's work do we see culminating in the Pet Stain Removal Device? Give your students time to find commonalities between this work and ones you've previously seen.



## Changing the Rules

**Milton, Pass the Peas,**  
1992



**Hip Hose (Pass the Peas),**  
1992

**The Peabody Group #32,**  
1992



- **Eye Travel:** Fix your eye on one of the circles attached to the wire. Starting there, trace the wire with your eye, following it as though the circle is moving on a track. Which direction did you move? Was the movement fast or slow? Did you get lost? Take a wrong turn? Trace your eye travel in the air with your arm. Compare your route to someone else's.
- **Ponder the title:** Why does someone usually say, "Pass the peas?" How do we see movement in this work of art? Where are the peas? In what direction are they moving? What do you see that makes you say that?
- **Consider materials:** What is this made of? As students recognize the available materials, let them know that this was common for Taylor, and to be on the lookout for more available materials as you examine his work.
- **Flatten it:** How is this sculpture like a 2-dimensional drawing? Find a print or drawing that reminds you of the sculpture. How are they alike to you? How are they different? Which is more three-dimensional? What do you see that makes you say that?
- **Look through it:** Taylor viewed his sculptures as "drawing instruments," tools or frames he could look through to see the world. Note the circular "viewfinders" along the wire. Here are some like it. (Pass out rings from plastic bottles, or use the AID.) Study something in this gallery through your "pea." How does your view change? Move it closer to and away from your eye. How does your perception of your subject change? Sketch it.
- **Connect to music:** James Brown and the JB's used the phrase "pass the peas" to describe how their improvisation moved through the band with each musician taking his turn playing solo. Look for relationships between this work of art and music. If this work of art were a song, what would it sound like? What do you see that makes you say that?
- **Milton:** Milton Ernest Rauschenberg, better known as Robert Rauschenberg, was Al Taylor's friend and mentor. In what ways is this sculpture a nod to him? What qualities of Rauschenberg's work do we find here?

- **One Word:** Ask your students to give one word to describe the artwork.
- **Colors/Shapes/Lines:** Describe the elements of the work in detail, starting with color, then shape, then line.
- **Consider process:** How might someone make a work of art with these qualities? What tools might be necessary, or not? Let students know that Al Taylor dripped various liquid tints and tilted the paper to manipulate their movement. Try it out! Using liquid watercolor or ink, drip the color onto the paper and tilt it to make the liquid move. Experiment with papers of different absorbencies.
- **Have fun with the title:** *The Peabody Group* is a series of 41 drawings. Ask: As we study this one, what various meanings could Peabody indicate?
- **Time lapse:** Note the times indicated in the work. Who might visit next? Where would he/she leave a mark? What would it look like?
- **Translate to Three Dimensions:** If this work were hanging, like the Hanging Puddle, or Pea Passing Device, which elements would be in front? Which would be behind? How do you know?

## Measuring

6-8-9, 1988



9-8-6, 1988

X-Ray Tube, 1995



X-Ray Tube, 1995

- **Numeral Hunt:** Tell the students that this sculpture is made of numerals, the characters we use to express quantity. Can they find any? Which ones?
- **Think dimensionally:** Ask, *Is this work of art two- or three-dimensional?* And follow up with, *What do you see that makes you say that?*
- **Compare two works**—6-8-9 and 9-8-6—and look for ways they are similar and different. *What can we learn from one that we can't from the other? And vice versa? Which do you like better? Why?*
- **Build a sculpture:** Working in pairs or trios, **prompt students to recreate one numeral from the sculpture with their Al Taylor Investigative Devices**, or prompt them to form numerals or other forms with rings you provide. Via what mechanism could you install the rings to hold them exactly where you want them to be? Al Taylor mounted his to a broomstick.
- **Remember it:** *Taylor explored rings in many of his works. Let's keep an eye out for them as we look at other works.*

- **Creative questions:** *Before sharing anything aloud, write down three questions you have about this artwork. Share your questions with a partner, then choose one of your and your partner's questions to pose to the group. Avoid the temptation to answer their questions immediately; let students look for answers in the work. Look for commonalities among the questions.*
- **Look Inside:** X-ray devices reveal the inside of things. They let us see what we otherwise couldn't. *What does this x-ray tube let us see? How?* Compare to actual x-ray images. Such study could launch a strong exploration of positive and negative space.
- **Creating three dimensions:** The drawing is flat, yet it shows us a three-dimensional object. *How has Al Taylor accomplished this? Try it on our sketch paper.* Once students have made their sketches, encourage them to compare the lines in their drawing, Al Taylor's drawing, and the sculpture.
- **Compare:** Invite students to study the drawings and the sculpture. What insight do they gain from each? What are the strengths and weakness of each technique in capturing the x-ray tube? How are the white lines similar and different among the works?
- **Re-create it in a new medium:** holding their Al Taylor Investigation Devices or with hoops you provide, allow students to work together as a group to create a new x-ray tube. Can it become a more permanent installation by suspending the hoops from the ceiling? Or mounting them on a support structure?



## Vision, Time, and Motion

**Untitled (Latin Study),  
1985**



**Untitled: Latin Study (III),  
1984**

- **What happens next?** *Imagine this work of art as a frozen moment in time, like one frame in a film or one image in a flip book. What will the next moment look like? How do you know?*
- **Movement:** *The work of art isn't moving, or is it? Move your body like the work of art. Show me with your hands or arms how it moves. How do you know it's moving that way? What aspects of the work indicate movement to you?* Follow up with *What do you see that makes you say that?* to keep conversation tied to details in the work.
- **Connect to other works:** *Find another work of art that indicates motion to you. How is it alike/different from this one? How does the artist show motion in this new work?*
- **Compare to an Armillary Sphere:** *One author has suggested that this grouping of Taylor's work, these Latin Studies, were inspired by the Armillary Sphere. Allow students to look at one, to hold it. It has been used for centuries to chart the movement of objects in the sky. It's a moving sky-map of sorts. How is the object in this work of art like an armillary sphere? How is it different? What other works in this gallery have similar qualities?*
- **Consider light and shadow in a flat work:** *Where is the light source in this work of art? How can you tell? If someone is holding a flashlight in it, where is he/she standing? If the shadows were to continue on the wall, outside the frame, where would they go? What would happen to them if the flashlight moved? What do you see that makes you say that?*
- **Try it:** Let your students direct you in shining a flashlight on the armillary sphere, casting shadows on a blank section of wall. Let them tell you where to stand and how to position the light. Move. Watch the shadows. Sketch the shadows. Ask: *How is our experiment like the movement of the stars and planets in space? Would Al Taylor like our experiment? Why? Why not?*

**Untitled (formerly titled  
Stir), 1988**



- **Visual Thinking Strategies:** *What is going on in this sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?*
- **Movement:** *What motion does this sculpture indicate? Show me with your arms. How do you know it moves this way? What details in the work give you that idea?*
- **Consider medium:** *Do you recognize the material in this sculpture? What does it look like or remind you of? Allow students to pass around a sample broomstick piece.*
- **Consider title:** *While this work is now untitled, Al Taylor once referred to it as Stir. What is being stirred? Who is doing the stirring? Where is the stirring happening? Let the work inspire a fictional story. Why might Al Taylor have removed the title?*
- **Depict action:** *To stir is a commonplace, household action. Allow students to brainstorm other everyday actions—sweep, zip, brush, draw—and encourage them to depict them in a two- or three-dimensional work of art.*

## Al Taylor's Printmaking Processes

Al Taylor experimented with many types of printmaking, in each case taking advantage of the particular method's characteristics in order to achieve his desired effect. He most often used various intaglio techniques.

In intaglio, an image is printed from ink in lines and crevices etched into the surface of a plate. Most intaglio techniques take advantage of the chemical reaction between a metal plate and liquid acid. When exposed to acid, the surface of the metal plate dissolves. An artist can control which portions of the plate dissolve by covering areas of the surface with an acid-resistant substance. Taylor embraced the element of chance inherent in this chemically aided process.

**Lithography** is a form of printmaking based on the chemical repulsion of oil and water and is able to produce fine degrees of shading and tiny details. The artist treats the surface of a porous plate, usually limestone or a metal plate, such that certain areas hold water and repel oil-based ink while others hold oil-based ink and repel water. The print surface is saturated with water and then rolled with ink, which adheres only to the treated areas. A sheet of dry paper is then pressed onto the plate to pick up the design.

### Intaglio

In intaglio, prints are made from ink that lies below the surface of the plate. In order to create an impression, the ink must be pushed into the recessed areas that form the image. The artist covers the whole plate is covered with a layer of printing ink and wiped with a rough cloth to simultaneously push ink into the recessed areas and remove it from the surface. The plate is then run through a press with a piece of dampened paper, which transfers the ink to the paper. The process may be repeated to create multiple editions of a print.

### Drypoint

Unlike most intaglio techniques, drypoint does not require acid or ground. The artist incises lines directly into the surface of the plate using a sharp tool. Small metal burrs caused by the incising action pick up ink during the printing process, giving drypoint lines a softer appearance than etched lines.

### Etching

The artist covers the entire plate with an acid-resistant ground and then draws with a needle tool to remove portions of the ground. The plate is immersed in an acid bath, and the acid "bites" the exposed metal. The longer a line is exposed to acid, the darker it appears in the final print.

### Aquatint

Aquatint allows the artist to create areas of tone in the final print by baking a layer of powdered rosin onto the plate. The acid bath dissolves the area around the rosin particles and leaves a grainy, toned surface.

### Step-Bite

Step-bite allows the artist to create different levels of tone across the composition. After preparing the plate for aquatint, the artist paints areas that will remain white in the final print with an acid-resistant stop-out on the surface of the plate. The plate is then submerged in acid multiple times. Between each acid bath, the artist paints stop-out over new areas to create gradations of tone across the plate. The shade of each area depends on how long it is exposed to the acid.

### Spit Bite

After preparing the plate for an aquatint, the artist paints with a diluted acid directly onto the plate. The name for this technique comes from the traditional practice of mixing acid with saliva, though gum arabic can also be used.

**Open-Bite**

Large open areas of the metal plate are exposed to an acid bath, which produces a mottled texture on the resulting print.

**Sugar-Lift**

This approach requires several layers of preparation. First, the plate is prepared with aquatint rosin. The artist paints a syrupy substance over the areas to be etched and then coats the whole plate with an acid-resistant ground. When placed in water, the syrup "lifts" from under the ground, exposing areas of the prepared surface. The plate is then placed in an acid bath, where the acid "bites" the exposed plate, creating richly toned sections in the final print.

**Monotype**

A monotype is a unique print made by painting or drawing with printer's ink on an untreated plate. Because nothing permanent has been done to alter the plate, the image can be printed only once.

**Photogravure**

Photogravure is a technique through which a photographic image can be reproduced on a copper plate. A positive transparency of the source image is transferred to an aquatint-treated plate using a photosensitive coating.