



# **ART GUIDES FOR EDUCATORS:**

**PHILIP C. CURTIS**



Curtis, Philip C., *Entrance with Light Bulb* (detail).  
1984.417 Oil on panel.

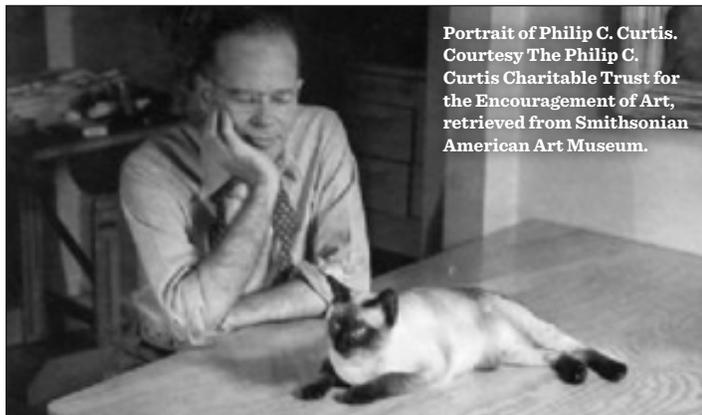
# ART GUIDES FOR EDUCATORS: PHILLIP C. CURTIS

## MEET THE ARTIST

Philip C. Curtis was born the son of a lawyer in Jackson, Michigan, in 1907. He was raised in a well-educated Midwestern family and attended Albion College, receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1930. Curtis then enrolled in the University of Michigan Law School, but soon realized he preferred studying art, and so instead enrolled in the School of Fine Arts, at Yale University, where he graduated in 1935. Like many artists during the Great Depression, Curtis worked through the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Art Project in New York. During this time, Curtis was exposed to the important artists and styles of the day.

The WPA transferred Curtis to Phoenix where he established the Phoenix Art Center (now the Phoenix Art Museum). He later served as the director of the new museum. Following his success in Phoenix, Curtis was sent by the WPA to start an art center in Des Moines. Curtis entered the museum studies program at Harvard, but his studies were interrupted by World War II.

Curtis returned to Arizona after the war where he settled in Scottsdale in a converted stable now known as the Cattle Tracks Arts Compound. His studio windows provided a view of the desert landscape. This view strongly influenced Curtis' style and is often seen as a backdrop in his work. From the late 1940s until his death, Curtis continued to paint. His work has been celebrated through solo exhibitions, multiple awards, and a permanent exhibition at the Phoenix Art Museum in the Ulman Center Gallery.



Portrait of Philip C. Curtis. Courtesy The Philip C. Curtis Charitable Trust for the Encouragement of Art, retrieved from Smithsonian American Art Museum.

## CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Surrealism was an artistic, intellectual, and literary movement that began in Paris in the early 20th century. Surrealist artists and writers sought to channel the unconscious as a means to unlock the power of the imagination. While Philip C. Curtis' paintings are considered to be surrealist in their style, their content is far different than that of Salvador Dali, and other well-known surrealist artists. Curtis' style can also be described "magical realism," and features dream-like scenes. Most of Curtis' art includes people—often doll-like actors, set amongst almost theatrical staging. *Entrance with Light Bulb* is unusual in that the artist chose not to include any people. The

artist enjoyed created vivid scenes that inspired imagination, but he rarely explained his intended narrative, choosing instead to leave the story up to the viewer.

## LOOK CLOSELY

### Questions to start a conversation:

- What is the subject of this painting/sculpture? Is it realistic or is it abstract?
- Why do you think an artist would choose this subject?
- How do your eyes travel around this painting/sculpture? What did you see first? Was it an object or a color that attracted your attention? Where did your eyes go next?
- From the viewer's perspective, do the doors lead inside or outside?
- What is the setting on the viewer's side of the doors?
- What is the setting on the other side of the doors? Are they leading to one place or different places?
- What in the painting gives you clues about the environment(s) outside the doors?
- Are the doors attached to an architectural structure of some sort?
- How is the light bulb connected? How is it powered?
- How does this painting make you feel? Why does it make you feel that way?

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

### ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

#### Read & Connect

Read *Doors in the Air* by David Weale. This early-elementary, rhyming picture book tells the story of a young boy who travels through magically doorways to travel to imaginary places. What connections can be found between the book and Curtis' work?

#### WRITING PROMPTS:

- Imagine you are given the option of traveling through one of the doorways in the painting, which door do you choose? Why?
- Write a letter to a friend, describing an imaginary journey through one of the doorways. Include detailed description of what they see, smell, hear, feel, and do while they were exploring.

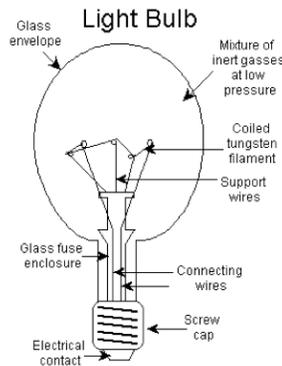
## SCIENCE

### How Light Bulbs Work

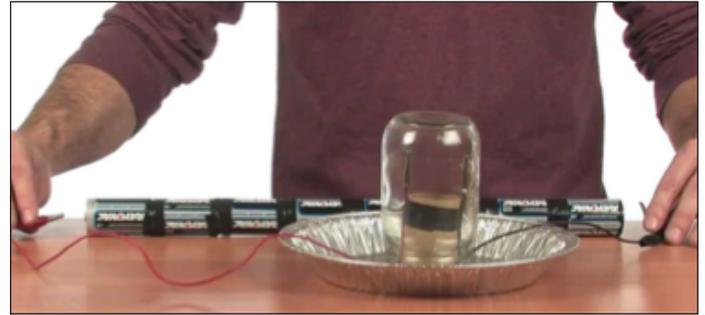
- Discuss: Before the invention of the light bulb, people used a variety of different ways to light their way at night. Have students brainstorm ways their lives would be different, without electric lights. In 1879, Thomas Edison perfected a practical electric light bulb that was both bright and safe.
- Show student the *Science Kids* video, "How Incandescent Light Bulbs Work" <http://www.sciencekids.co.nz/videos/engineering/lightbulbs.html>.
- Have students carefully examine a clear light bulb (alternatively, have students look at the light bulb figure). Discuss the parts of the light bulb, and what the purpose is for each element.

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- **Coiled tungsten filament:** The metal wires that glow brightly when electricity flows through them
- **Connecting wires:** The wires that carry electricity from the bulb's electrical contact to the filament
- **Electrical contacts:** The metallic base of the bulb which connects to the electrical contacts of the lamp when the bulb is in the lamp
- **Glass envelope:** The thin layer of glass that surrounds the light bulb mechanism and the inert gases
- **Glass fuse enclosure:** Glass that insulates the bulb's fuses - located in the stem of the bulb
- **Mixture of inert gases at low pressures:** The bulb is filled with inert (non-reactive) gases
- **Screw cap:** The threaded base of the bulb that secures it to a lamp
- **Support wires:** Wires that physically hold up the filament



## HOW DOES THIS WORK?



<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/inventors/page/i/incandescentbulb.shtml>

When you touch the free ends of the alligator clips to your battery pack, you form a complete circuit. This means electricity flows freely through the entire apparatus that you have just built, channeling it through the graphite-based mechanical pencil refill that you've connected by the alligator clips. The flowing electricity heats the pencil refill to a high temperature, causing it to glow and give off smoke. *Warning: The pencil refill will be hot and could result in fire if not watched closely.* (Adapted from <http://www.stevespanglerscience.com/lab/experiments/build-a-light-bulb-circuit-science>).

## BUILD A LIGHT BULB

*Warning: Adult supervision required*

### Materials

- Eight D-sized batteries
- Mason jar or other clear glass
- Mechanical pencil refills
- Two sets of small alligator clips
- Electrical tape
- Pie pan
- Scissors
- Toilet paper tube

### Instructions

1. Using electrical tape, attach eight D-sized batteries together, end-to-end, with the positive ends connected to the negative ends.
2. Use scissors to cut a toilet paper tube to a height that will fit comfortably (leave plenty of room) inside of a mason jar or other clear glass.
3. Tape one positive and one negative alligator clip to one end of the toilet paper tube. Make sure the clip is facing up, away from the rest of the toilet paper tube.
4. Tape the tube with the clips attached to a pie pan so that it stands upright, with the clips facing up.
5. Carefully clip a mechanical pencil refill between the two alligator clips. The pencil refill needs to be in one piece, so be gentle.
6. Place a mason jar or clear glass over the top of the toilet paper tube stand.
7. Touch the other positive and negative ends of the alligator clips to the ends of your super battery.
8. Give the circuit a moment to circulate the electricity and the pencil refill begins to glow.

## ART STARTS

### SURREAL DOORS

The Surrealists often worked with found materials and used these as their foundation for creating new and imaginative objects. Many Surrealist artists, especially in the 1930s, began arranging objects in combinations that challenged reason and summoned subconscious thoughts. The most easily obtained materials were found objects, or items found at little or no cost. Show students examples of Surrealist art made from found objects such as Salvador Dalí's *Lobster Telephone*. An image of his work can be found here: <http://nga.gov.au/international/catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=2607&ViewID=2&GalID=ALL>.

### Materials

- White drawing paper
- Pencils
- Magazines
- Scissors
- Glue or glue sticks
- Fine point black markers
- Colored pencils

### Instructions

1. Students look through magazines and find one or more images of doors or doorways.
2. Cut out picture(s) and glue to the write paper.
3. Using the door(s) as the foundation, transform it into something new. Remind students that the goal is to create a creative piece of art, in the Surrealist style. Their door drawings should not be limited by the constraints of logic or reality.

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## PICTURE CONSEQUENCES: A COMMUNITY DRAWING GAME

Heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, the Surrealists popularized a new type of creative expressions, called automatism, or automatic writing, where the imaginative, unconscious mind could escape the constraints of reality. One form of this subconscious creative expression was a circle game called “Picture Consequences” (sometimes also called “Exquisite Corpse”) where a group of people cooperatively write a story or draw a person or creature.

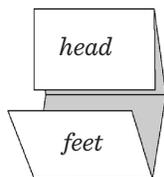
In this process, a figure is drawn in portions, with the paper folded after each portion and passed to the next artist so that they cannot see the earlier portions. At the end, the paper is unfolded and the completed figure is revealed.

### Materials

- 6” x 18” white drawing paper
- Pencils
- Fine point black markers
- Colored pencils

### Instructions

1. Have students each fold a 6” x 18” white paper into four equal parts, leaving the paper folded (see figure).
2. Students each draw the head of a person or creature in the first section (so that the finished drawing will be vertically positioned), making the drawing fill that section as much as possible.
3. Students first draw in pencil and then outline the drawings with a permanent black marker. Color can be added with color pencil at this time or later when the figure is complete. Have students to write their names in pencil on the back of each section as they work.
4. Next, have students refold the drawing so that the head is not visible (bend it back) and pass it to the next person to their left (they will take one from the person on their right).
5. In the second section, students draw a torso of a person or creature, without looking at the previous drawing (the head).
6. Students continue in this method, drawing legs in the third section and feet in the last.
7. When the final section is complete, students open the drawing to see the completed figure. Display the artworks alongside a written explanation of the process.



## LEARN MORE

The Art Story, Surrealism <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-surrealism.htm>

e-how, Light Bulb Facts for Kids  
[http://www.ehow.com/facts\\_5561995\\_information-light-bulbs-kids.html](http://www.ehow.com/facts_5561995_information-light-bulbs-kids.html)

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Surrealism, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/surr/hd\\_surr.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/surr/hd_surr.htm)

Phoenix Art Museum e-gallery, Permalink to object  
[http://egallery.phxart.org/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:11941](http://egallery.phxart.org/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:11941)

David Weale, Doors in the Air (2012). Orca Book Publishers.

Wonderopolis, What Makes a Light Bulb Light Up? <http://wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-makes-a-light-bulb-light-up/>

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