MOCA HEROES

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MAYA LIN

The Making of an Artist

Are You an Artist?

The Challenge of a Lifetime

Photo Credit: Ron Blunt, courtesy SAAM

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The Making of an Artist

Maya Lin at her home in 1981

Photo credit: Teresa Zabala/The New York Times

Close your eyes and picture an artwork. Do you see a painting? A drawing? How about a sculpture? A building? Is it made of paper, clay, metal, or glass? Or even plants? Big or small, art can be many things. It can also be found everywhere. Everything around us, whether you realize it or not, has been touched by an artist. Designers begin by doodling in sketchbooks. Sculptors play with mud in their backyards. And most architects can probably name a favorite building, or point to a childhood Lego creation.

Known for her winning design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., Maya Ying Lin was all of the above: not only did she grow up to be a great artist, but Maya is also a world-famous architect and sculptor.

An artist is someone who makes art, and who's better at that than a child? Artists have all sorts of reasons for making art. Some draw to express feelings, while others paint. Some artists build to answer questions while others sculpt to ask questions. Even with all these differences, one thing stays the same: all artists start out as children!

GLOSSARY

Sculpture: a type of art made by shaping 3-D objects or materials. A person who makes sculptures is called a sculptor.
Doodling: drawing for fun!
Architect: a person who designs buildings
Vietnam Veterans Memorial:
a memorial designed to remember and respect those who fought and lost their lives, or went missing, during the Vietnam War

MAYA SAYS

"I was making things my whole childhood and I still am."

Are You an Artist?

NO

Are you sure? Try drawing something you see here!

YES

Go ahead! Create something here!

I'm not sure

That's ok! Try drawing yourself here!

See?! You Are an Artist!

A Playground in Nature

Photo Credit: Maya Lin Studio

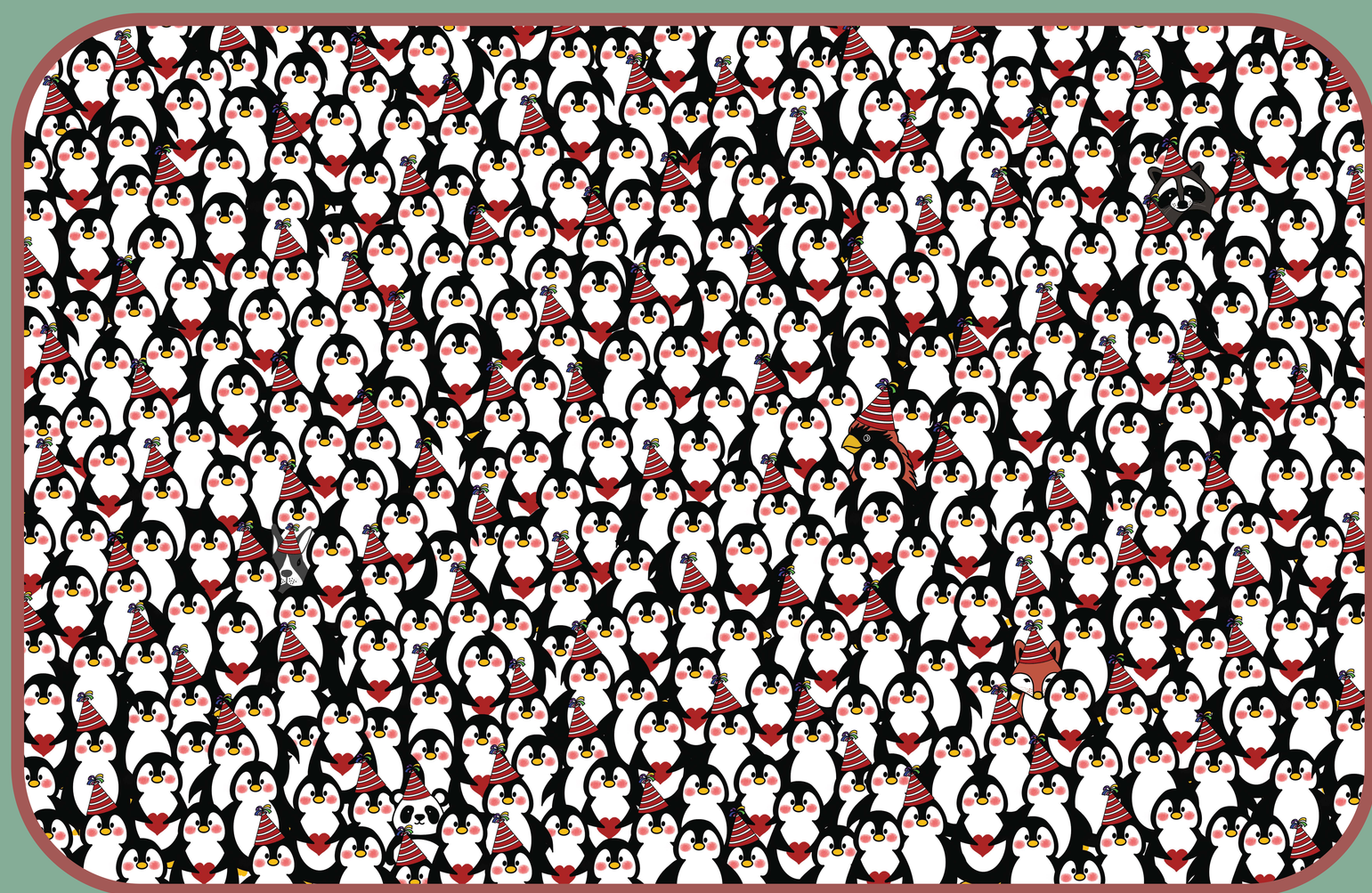
Maya, 4 years old, on the playground. She loved to play, whether at a playground, in a park, or simply among nature.

Born on October 5, 1959, Maya never thought art would be her life's work. As a child, she loved animals and dreamed of being a veterinarian. Her love for animals and nature goes all the way back to her childhood in the green hills of Athens, Ohio. Maya and her brother, Tan, often played in the woods near their home. They explored the hills and streams and found a playground in nature.

Maya had few friends and liked to stay close to home. She spent hours alone in her backyard, where she made up her own world and waited quietly for animals to appear.

Spot It!

Find the wildlife (raccoon, rabbit, panda, fox and red cardinal) hidden in this drawing!



MAYA SAYS

"I would feed all the raccoons. I would feed the birds. The birds had me well-trained. The red cardinals would come to the window and chirp knowing it was dinnertime, and I'd always be feeding them."

Now You Try!

What are some animals you see near your home? Draw them!

FUN FACT

Maya's first pet was a parakeet! Her first parakeet was named Ling Ling and her second was named Perky.

GLOSSARY

Veterinarian: a doctor who takes care of animals

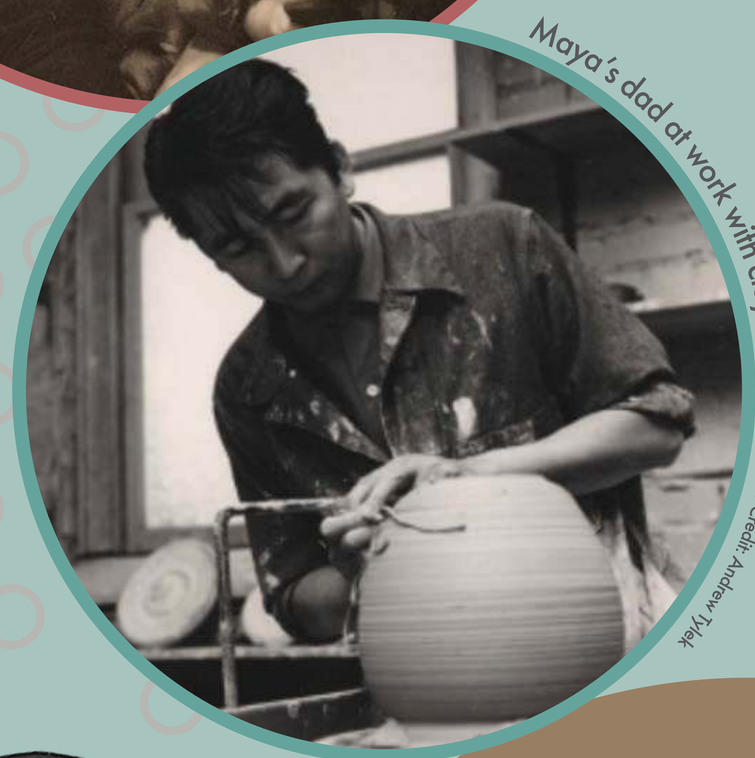
A Family of Artists

MAYA'S PARENTS WERE ARTISTS TOO!

Maya grew up watching her father shape lumps of clay into pottery as her mother turned words into poems. They taught her how to think with her hands and her mind. Inspired by her father's clay pieces, Maya built teeny-tiny houses and small villages out of paper and scraps. She made things all the time.

Maya (bottom right), 1 year old, with her parents and her brother, Tan

Photo Credit: Maya Lin Studio



Maya's dad at work with clay

Photo Credit: Andrew Tyler

GLOSSARY

Pottery: objects made out of clay, which is a material that comes from the earth. Bowls, dishes, and pots are good examples of pottery!

What is CLAY?

Clay is a special kind of material made of broken-down rock from the earth. Over time, bits of earth are carried from one place to another by water and get stuck together in areas where the water slows down to a trickle. While the bits of earth travel with the water, they pick up all sorts of stuff and by the time we buy a box of clay from the pottery store, the clay has been collected and prepared for us to use. All of the tiny rocks and lumps have been removed and some materials like sand, are sometimes added to create the perfect workable clay.

MAYA SAYS

"Our house was full of my father's pottery ...we ate out of his bowls."

Have you ever played with clay before? How did it feel in your hands?

PLAY with CLAY

01 Roll the clay into a ball, then a log.

02 Make the clay as flat as you can.

03 Find something near you with an interesting texture (a fork, a coin, a piece of string) and press it into the clay.

04 Try making a small bowl! Roll the clay into a ball, then press your thumb into the middle of it. This will be the center of the bowl!

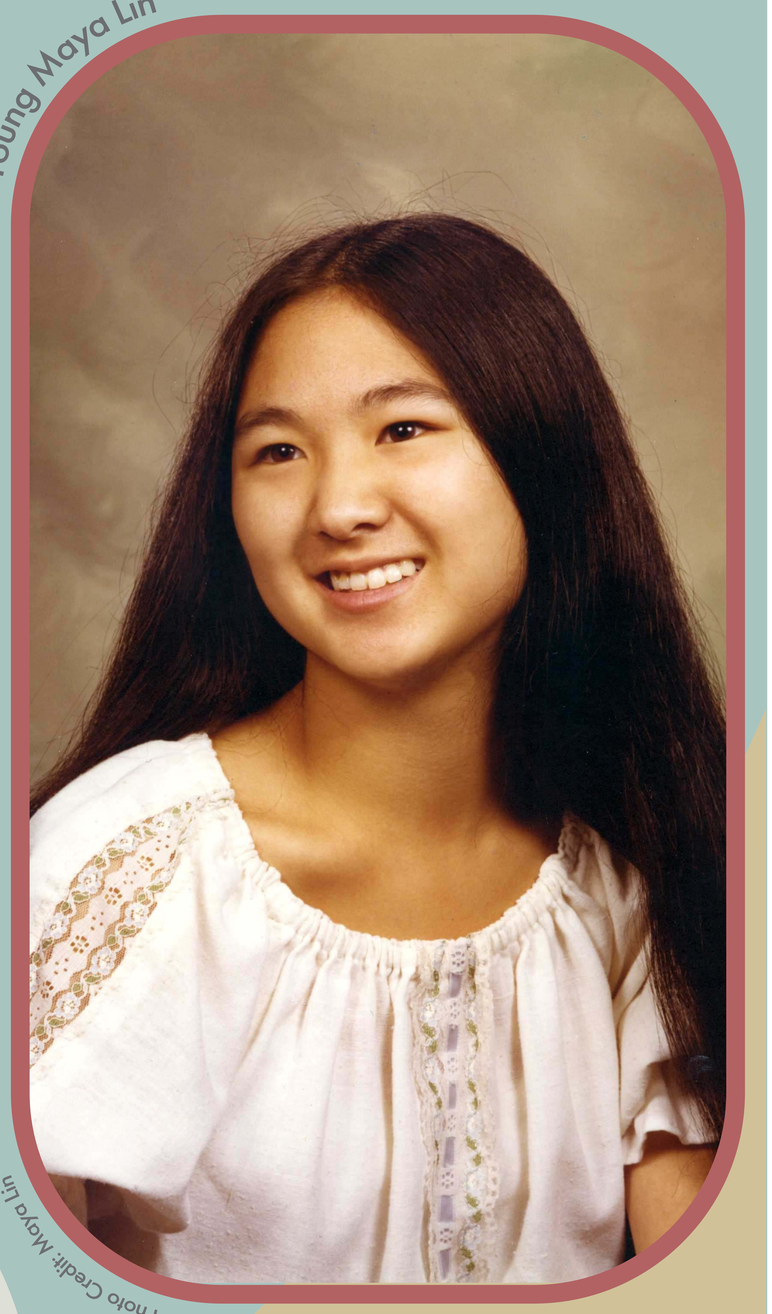
05 Now pinch the circular edges, lightly, again and again, until your clay starts to look like a bowl.

Pre-College Schooling

Between playing in the woods and working in her father's workshop, Maya read and studied a lot. Even though Maya's parents were both professors, they never forced her and her brother to read or study. The kids enjoyed doing it on their own! Books were everywhere in the house, so it was clear to Maya and Tan that education was important and that studying mattered.

Instead of spending time with friends, Maya enjoyed hanging out with her teachers. There was one chemistry teacher in particular who stayed after school and did fun experiments with Maya and her friend.

UPSIDE DOWN ANSWER:
Nature + Her father's pottery work



Young Maya Lin

Photo Credit: Maya Lin

MAYA SAYS

"I read like a demon... That's what I pretty much focused on if I wasn't making something, which I was mostly doing."

FUN FACT

Maya's favorite subject in school was math. While she had no problem getting straight A's in most classes, Maya hated gym class and failed it.

FUN FACT

Maya loved books! When she wasn't making things, she would be reading. Maya's childhood favorites were often science fiction and fantasy series and novels, including J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In high school, Maya felt that she was different. She didn't fit in. Unlike the girls in her school, Maya wore no makeup and didn't date. She let her hair grow long, until it was down to her knees! However, Maya was, in other ways, like a regular high school student. She wore jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers, like a lot of the other kids. She also worked at a local McDonald's. That was the only place around her town where a kid could get a job.

Check Your Understanding

Pick TWO things from Maya's childhood that helped shape her life as an artist:

- ★ Nature
- ★ Writing poetry
- ★ Playing the piano
- ★ Her father's pottery work

What is your favorite book? Can you share what it is about in less than 10 words?

Maya's Time at Yale

By her senior year, Maya couldn't wait to go to college. She applied to Yale University thinking she wouldn't get in. According to her, no one else from her high school had ever gone there! When she was accepted and started school, Maya quickly learned that Yale was the first place other than home that made her feel comfortable and happy.

FUN FACT

Maya's love for animals followed her from her backyard to college. At first, she hoped to study animal science and behavior. But when her advisor told her students in the program had to do surgery on live animals, Maya knew it wasn't for her.

Since she was strongest in math and science in high school, Maya thought she would study those subjects at Yale. She decided to be an architect because she thought it would let her use mathematical thinking. But after a few years, she realized that she actually thought more like an artist. Lucky for her, architecture, which used both math and art to create buildings, turned out to be the best of both worlds.

Photo Credit: Michael Katakis

Maya with her black cat at Yale

FUN FACT

Maya studied both architecture and sculpture at Yale! Her professors wanted her to focus on one. They said that was the correct way. But Maya chose instead to follow her heart and do both!

MAYA SAYS

"...I think like an artist. And even though I build buildings and I pursue my architecture, I pursue it as an artist."

Studying Abroad

Photo Credit: Wiola Starczewska

The Assistens Cemetery in Nørrebro Copenhagen, Denmark

During her junior year, Maya studied abroad in Denmark. While wandering through the city, Maya noticed a park that was also a cemetery. She liked the way the cemetery was included in the community, instead of being apart from the city— it was something people could walk through. It got her thinking about how architecture and everyday design affect people, and how these forms of art reflect our feelings about life and death.

Maya's time in Denmark gave her a new interest in funereal architecture. Back at Yale, she worked with other classmates to design cemeteries and memorials in class. Then, one of her classmates heard about a competition to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The class liked the idea so much that they decided to use the competition as their final project.

A Park of the Future!

GLOSSARY

Cemetery: another word for graveyard
Funereal architecture: buildings and structures that are related to death. The word funereal describes things related to funerals.
Memorial: something built to honor or remind people of a person or event

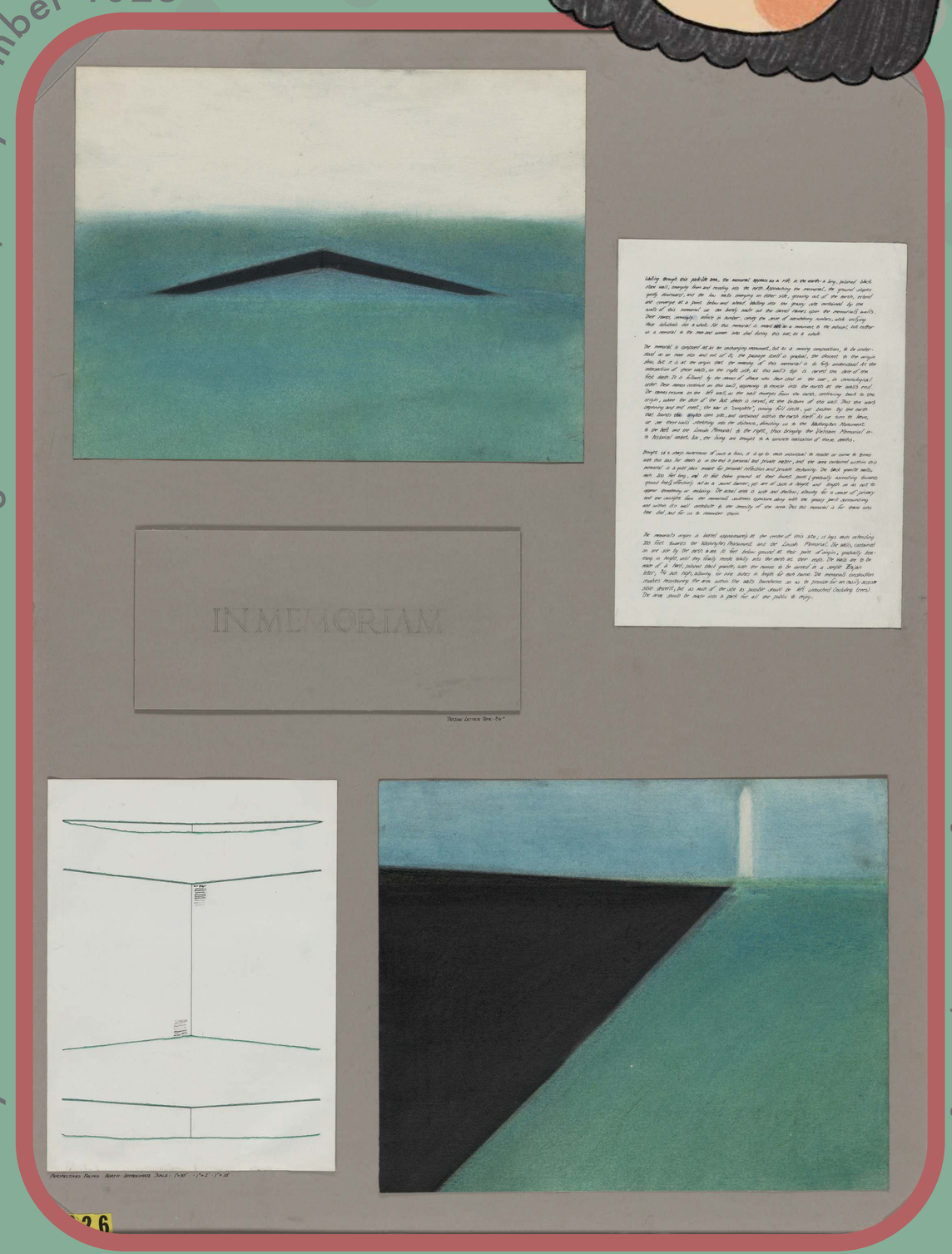
If you were designing a multi-use park, what would you include? Draw the things you'd like to see in your park or choose the items from below by circling them and sketching them in your park!

The Challenge of a Lifetime

Like with every contest, there were rules. Maya had to design something that: 1) had the names of every American who died or went missing in Vietnam during the war, 2) made no political statement about the war, 3) blended in with its surroundings, and 4) was thoughtful. She started by asking herself: What is a memorial? What should a memorial do? And most importantly, why this memorial?

For inspiration, she studied pictures of older war memorials and visited the place in Washington D.C. where the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would be built. It was in a beautiful park on the Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Maya's design idea came to her then and there.

Maya imagined the memorial as having two walkways that slanted down beneath the ground to form the letter "V." Alongside the walkways would be walls made of polished black granite, which would be shiny enough to reflect the images of nearby monuments, trees, grass, and visitors. More than 58,000 names would be carved into the hard granite to remember the soldiers who lost their lives while fighting in the war.



Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial design submission, entry number 1026

Image Credit: Library of Congress

When she returned to Yale, Maya quickly sketched her design and made her first model out of mashed potatoes in the cafeteria! Then, like she did when she was a child, Maya shaped her second model with clay.

Now You Try!

Sketch your own ideas for a memorial. The memorial can be to honor yourself, your school, your community, or an event that happened in the past. Write an explanation of what the memorial means to you and why you designed it that way.

GLOSSARY

Polished: rubbed until it's shiny
Granite: a kind of rock that is hard and often used to build things
Monuments: a structure that, like a memorial, is built to honor or remind people of a person or event. Monuments are kinds of memorials. They can be anything from a statue to a whole building.
Model: in architecture, a model is a small, 3-D version of a design

Maya Wins !!!

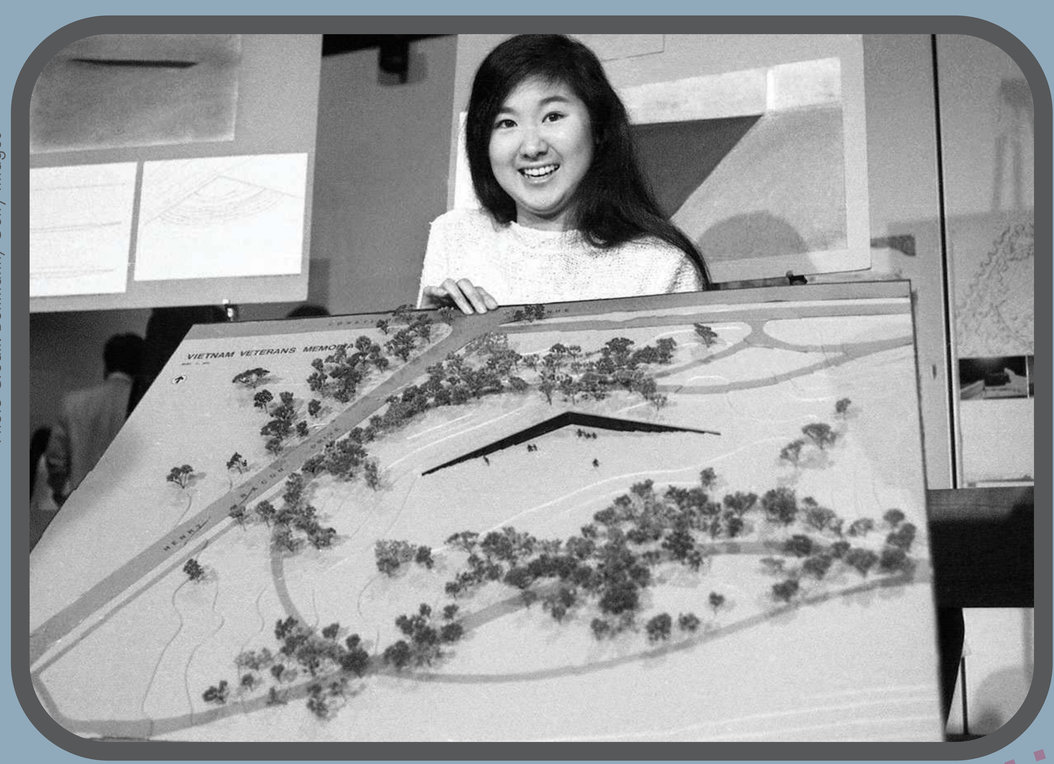


Photo Credit: Bettmann/Getty Images

Maya Lin displays her model at a press conference held by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in Washington, D.C., 1981.

Maya liked her design so much that she decided to enter it into the actual competition for fun. Her design was very different from the kind that most people sent in. It was also different from most war memorials. Usually, there is a statue of a hero leading an army with symbols representing peace and death. Maya's design did not look like that, and it certainly stood out to the judges. With support from her professor, what began as a final project for her class on funerary architecture turned into the winning design of the competition. Of the 1,421 designs to be judged without names by a panel of eight artists and designers, the panel chose entry 1026—Maya's design. Maya won!

MAYA SAYS

"I created a series of simple drawings. The drawings were in soft pastels, very mysterious, very painterly, and not at all [like regular] architectural drawings. One of the comments made by a juror was 'He must really know what he is doing to dare to do something so naive.'"

The judges loved Maya's design. They loved that it made people think and reflect, and they loved how it fit in with its environment. Its granite walls stood in silence and offered people a moment of peace. After all, Maya wanted the memorial to be a place for visitors to remember and heal. But some people did not like Maya's design. These critics thought that it focused on death and defeat instead of the soldiers' sacrifices. Others complained that because Maya was a young Asian American woman, she should not be the one to design the memorial.

Here's what the judges had to say about Maya's design:

"It is uniquely horizontal, entering the earth rather than piercing the sky. This is very much a memorial of our own times, one that could not have been achieved in another time or place."

"Of all the proposals submitted, this most clearly meets the spirit and formal requirements of the program. It is contemplative and reflective. It is superbly harmonious with its site and yet frees the visitors from the noise and traffic of the surrounding city."

FUN FACT

Maya's professor at the time gave her an A- for her work. Maya and her professor were the only ones in the class who submitted their entries.

GLOSSARY

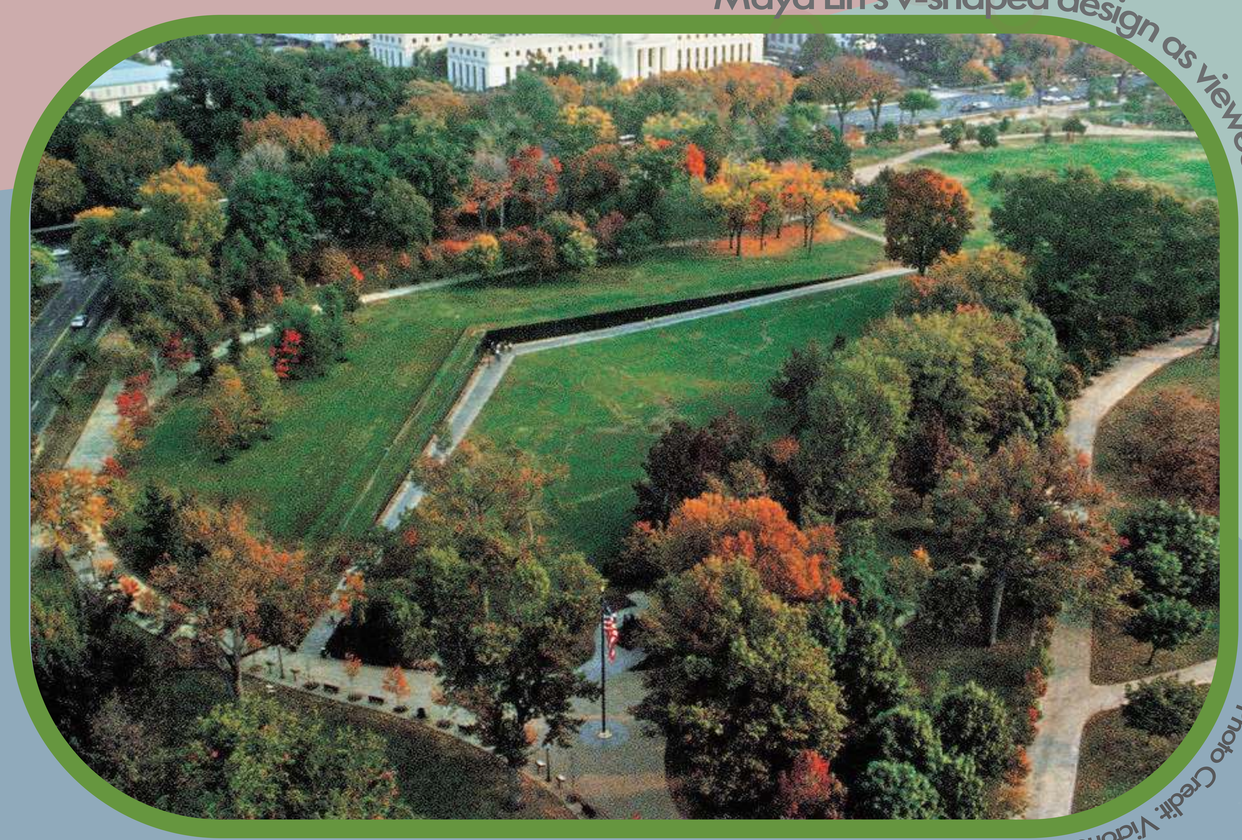
Juror: one of many judges for a competition
Naive: without wisdom or experience
Critic: in this case, a person who thinks badly of something
Harmonious: works well together

Maya Defends Her Design

But Maya was determined. She spoke up and defended her design in newspapers and on TV. Many of Maya's supporters also stood by her, especially the judges who chose her entry. Despite powerful men in Washington trying to stop her project, Maya refused to change her design. Eventually, a deal was made against Maya's wishes. A U.S. flag and a traditional statue of three soldiers designed by Frederick Hart was built near the wall. Later, another sculpture was added of three women caring for an injured soldier. The controversy quieted down. When the wall was finally built, public opinions changed overnight, and the critics shut their mouths. The country finally had a memorial it could see and touch,with reflective walls inviting visitors to face their emotions about the war. Today, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is widely praised and wildly popular.

Children touching the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Photo Credit: Maya Lin Studio/The Pace Gallery/photo by Terry Adams/National Park Service



Maya Lin's v-shaped design as viewed from above

Photo Credit: Vidonia Rock

FUN FACT

Almost every detail of Maya's design was debated, including the color. Maya had chosen black granite because, when polished, it is very reflective. But others did not like it. Some people called her wall "the black gash of shame." Then, General George Price, an African American military official, declared, "I see nothing wrong with the color black... Black is not a color of shame. I am tired of hearing it called such by you."

THE POWER OF A NAME

Maya wanted only the names of Vietnam War soldiers on the wall. She didn't even want to include her own name! If you visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial today, you can find Maya's name on the back of the wall, out of public view.

Fun Fact

Maya's middle name Ying (瓔) means "precious stone" in Chinese! Every name is given for a reason. Every name has a meaning.

What is your name? Do you know the story behind your name, or why your parents chose this name for you?

NOT-SO-FUN FACT

Frederick Hart was paid $200,000 for his design, while Maya was only paid $20,000. Why do you think that happened? Do you think it's fair?

GLOSSARY

Controversy: a big public disagreement

Remembering with Water

Maya received a lot of attention from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial! People were so moved by her memorial that they asked her to design more. Maya didn't want to be known as a "memorial designer" though, so she turned them all down... until she received a phone call to build the Civil Rights Memorial in 1988. This memorial honors the lives of people who were killed during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. Maya couldn't believe that there wasn't already a national civil rights memorial—and so she agreed to design one.

Maya has enjoyed a long career as an artist and architect ever since then. Today, she continues to design memorials, sculptures, public spaces, and environments inspired by nature. While she did not end up becoming a veterinarian or a field zoologist, Maya works to bring nature and the environment into her job as an artist.

Photo Credit: K. Kendall

The Women's Table: Carvings on Rock

Like her Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Civil Rights Memorial, Maya used granite for her design of the Women's Table at Yale University. On the green granite table, Maya included spirals with numbers counting how many women studied at Yale University in the past. The spiral starts at zero because Yale started as a men's only college.

Photo Credit: Penny Weaver/Southern Poverty Law Center

Maya Lin and visitors witnessing the dedication of the Civil Rights Memorial on November 5, 1989.

Maya's designs for the Civil Rights Memorial were greatly inspired by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words: "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." This quote is carved on a curved wall as part of the memorial. Below the wall is a circular black granite table with a timeline of the Civil Rights Movement and the martyrs' names. Water comes out from the table's center and flows evenly across the top. Maya shares that, for many, the memorial is "a place to remember the Civil Rights Movement, to honor those killed during the struggle, to appreciate how far the country has come in its quest for equality, and to consider how far it has to go."

GLOSSARY

Martyr: someone who gives their life for an important cause

The Wave Fields: Unearthing Oceans

Like her father who sculpted clay, Maya has also sculpted the earth. The Wave Field project began in 1995 with the University of Michigan, where Maya created a field of grass shaped like ocean waves. She spent hours looking at the ocean, trying to figure out how one water wave begins and another one ends. Using scientific data, she was able to recreate ocean wave-like landscapes.

Photo Credit: University of Michigan

Wave Field in Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1995
The first of Maya's wave field sculptures.

Photo Credit: Stuart Page/Gibbs Foundation

A Fold in the Field in New Zealand, 2013
Maya's latest wave field has 5 folds. The folds reflect the way the weather shapes the land and the way the land dips as it gets closer to the sea.

Photo Credit: Maya Lin Studio, courtesy Pace Gallery

Storm King Wavefield
at the Storm King Art Center in New York, 2007
Maya sculpted her largest wave field in 2007 at the Storm King Art Center in New York. It has 7 rows of rolling waves of grass and earth. They are up to 40 feet wide and 15 feet tall.

Maya's wave fields change with the seasons! What do they look like in the FALL? Color the wave fields to find out!

MAYA SAYS

"What I'm trying to do is allow you to pay attention to beautiful forms in nature."

Looking Inwards

Some of Maya's more recent projects include inside spaces, too! In 2015, Maya worked with fellow architect Toshiko Mori and Cannon Design to design a research center for Novartis, a Swiss medical company. The eye-catching building, located in Boston, Massachusetts, is a workplace for over a thousand researchers. Because it's so important for researchers to work together, Maya and her partners worked hard to build an environment that encouraged collaboration and emphasized the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

NOVARTIS INSTITUTES

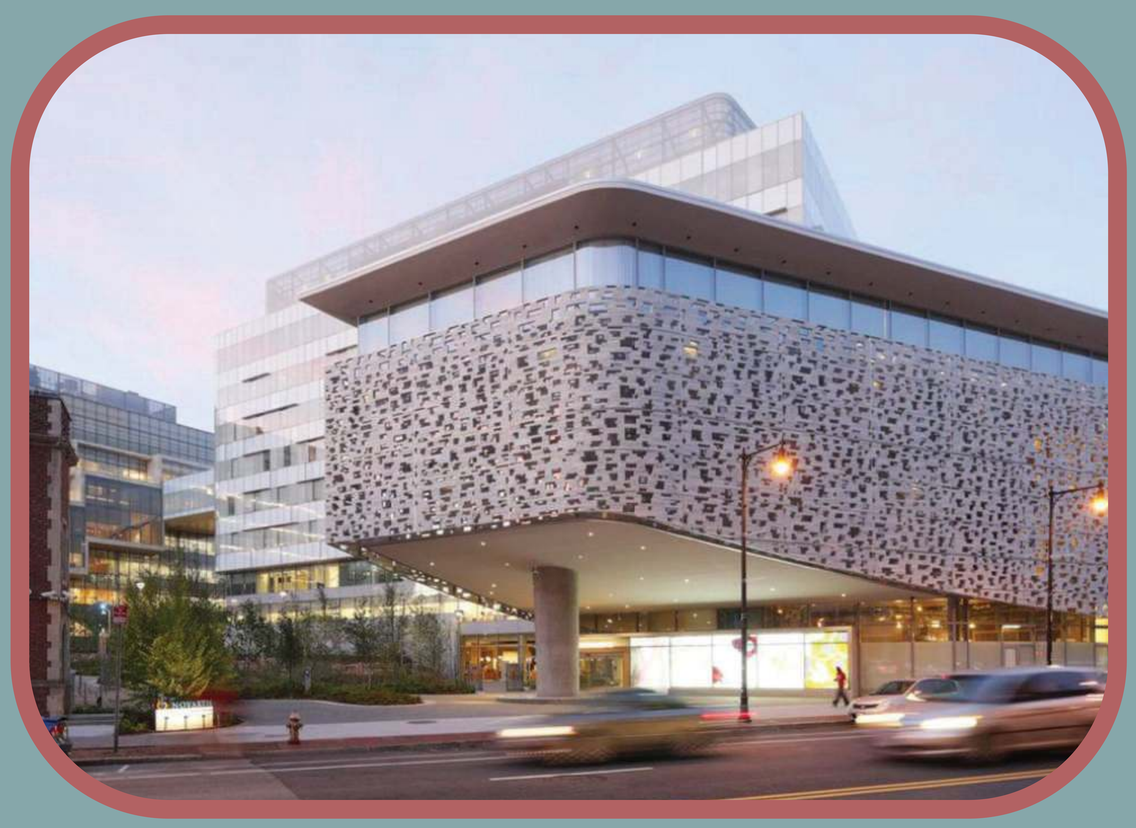


Photo Credit: Iwan Baan

Even when designing a building, Maya still looked to nature for inspiration: she said that the outside of the building—which is made of many small pieces of granite placed together to make a pattern of holes—was inspired by microscopic views of human bones! Can you see the similarities? What other interesting patterns can we find in nature?

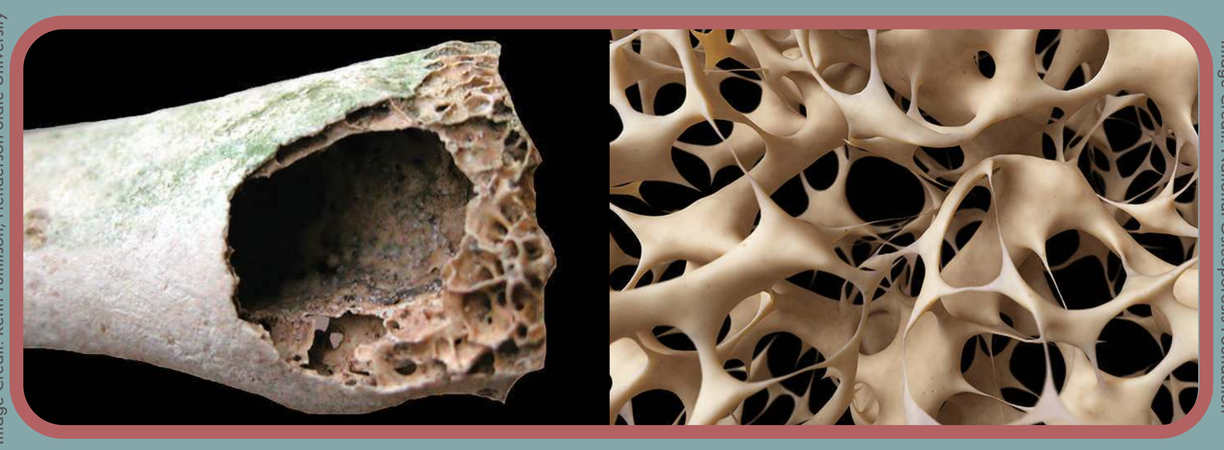


Image Credit: Renn Tumlison, Henderson State University

Image Credit: National Osteoporosis Foundation

Microscopic pictures of human bones, such as the one above, were a huge inspiration for Maya's Novartis design!

GLOSSARY

Researcher: someone who studies and discovers information about a special topic

Collaboration: working together

Microscopic: so small that it can only be seen with a special tool called a microscope

Photo Credit: Maya Lin Studio

SMITH COLLEGE'S NEILSON LIBRARY

Maya's design for the Neilson Library adds two curved "jewel box" wings to each side of the original library structure. The new library opened in March 2021.

Like her design for the Novartis Institutes, Maya's design for Smith College's new Neilson Library also highlights collaboration. Her environmentally friendly design features lots of natural light, spaces for learning together, and super new technology. The design of one side is meant to encourage students to work together— it includes bookshelves, reading spaces, a digital area, and a café. The other side is quieter and holds Smith's special collections of books. In addition, there are lots of flexible spaces that can be used in many ways. Even when designing indoor spaces, Maya Lin brings her values—that is, her love of community, light, and nature—to her work. She thinks carefully about how the design of a space shapes how people feel and interact with it. What would your dream library look like?

Museum of Chinese in America: History through Glass

In 2004, the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) asked Maya to lead a design team and prepare a new space for the museum.

Photo Credit: Museum of Chinese in America

MOCA's main entrance

Image Credit: Matter Architecture Practice

MOCA's courtyard portraits

As a Chinese American and a long time supporter of the museum, Maya agreed. She helped transform the new building, an old machine repair shop that was six times larger than the museum's old space, into what it became in 2011. Maya is also leading the architectural design of MOCA's future, permanent home, a new museum at the same address. Leaving its brick walls bare, Maya designed the museum around a hidden courtyard. Each exhibit is connected to the courtyard by glass. Video portraits of Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants are projected onto the glass. It's almost as if they're having a conversation!

Image Credit: Maya Lin Studio

Maya's design plan for MOCA

MOCA has two entrances on opposite sides: the main entrance opens onto Chinatown and the second entrance faces SoHo. Both entrances feature large sheets of clear glass where people walking by can peer through, as invitations to visit the museum.

Image Credit: Maya Lin Studio

The second entrance to MOCA

Maya Today

President Obama presents the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Maya Lin

Photo Credit: AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

One of Maya's most meaningful projects is an interactive memorial called *What is Missing?* The memorial asks people to think about of all our endangered and extinct species. As the world changes and human activity destroys habitats and environments, what animals, plants, and landscapes will go extinct? What is, and will be, missing? Maya describes this memorial as her "memorial to Earth."

Maya's project includes sounds, images, and videos of endangered animals and the environments they live in to show people what will be missing in world when these animals go extinct. It includes exhibits, sculptures, and even a billboard video! One video, called "Unchopping a Tree," shows how every minute, 90 acres of rainforest are chopped down. Imagine—an area like Central Park in New York City, destroyed in only 9 minutes! Paired with music and a clip of a tree falling played in reverse, the video really captures the feeling of loss.

Finally, *What is Missing?* also exists as a website, which means that the memorial can be experienced anywhere in the world. In this way, it's different from all of Maya's earlier memorials, which were all monuments rooted to a single place. Maya says that she has loved nature and the environment her whole life, and *What is Missing?* is especially meaningful to her. Because of this, she has also said that this project will be her last memorial.

In 2009, Maya received the National Medal of the Arts from President Obama. In 2016, he awarded her again—this time with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest non-military honor, for her vital memorials, including the most recent *What is Missing?*

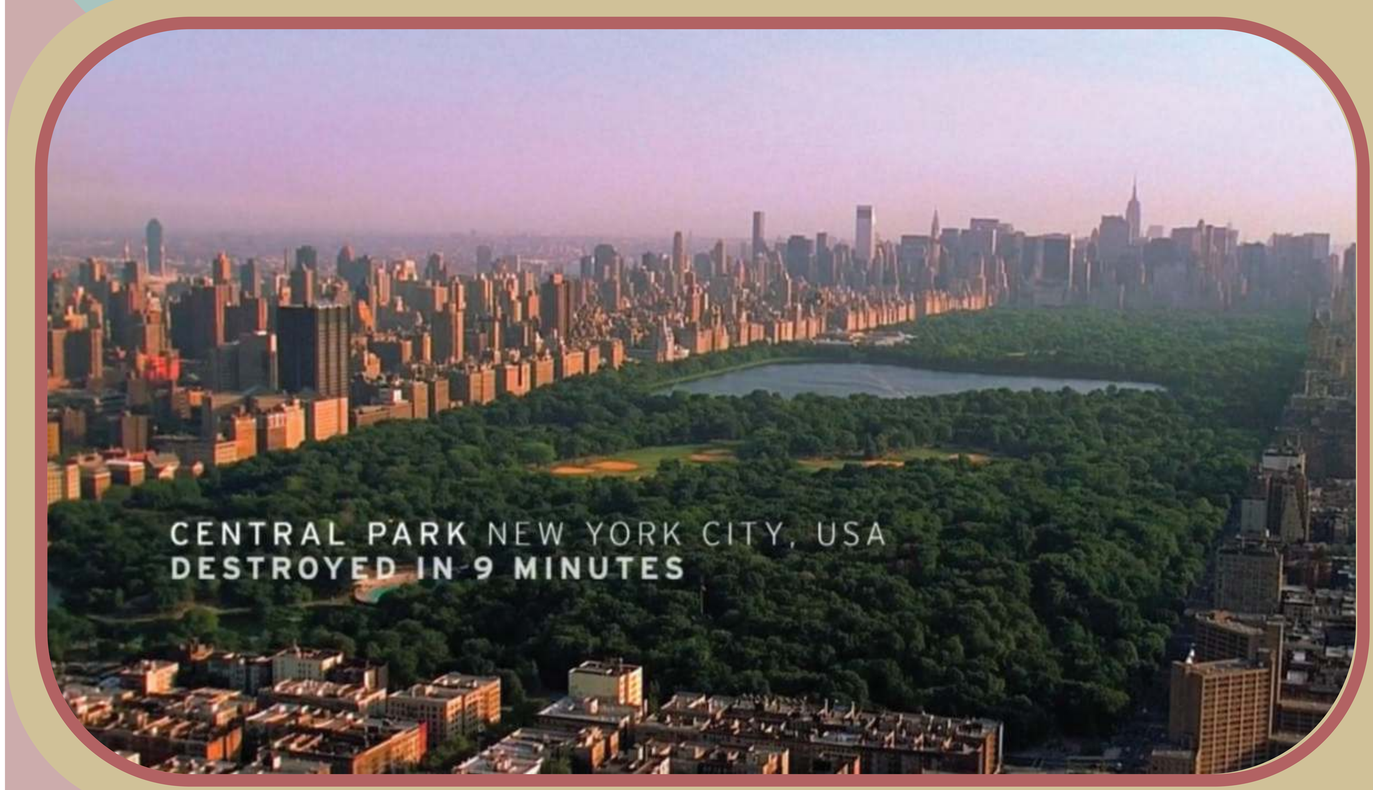


Photo Credit: What is Missing? Foundation

Maya's last memorial is meant to be a call to action—what can we do to help the species facing extinction? Get started by visiting the memorial at www.whatismissing.net. Take some time to explore the website—listen to the sounds of some extinct, or almost extinct, animals. Find the "Stories" section of the website and pick a few stories to read! Just like with many of Maya's other projects, *What is Missing?* is collaborative, and it grows with the participation of others. Interview your family members about what they believe has disappeared from the natural world. How has this change made the world better or worse? Share your story on the website!

Since playing in her backyard as a kid, Maya has always loved nature. We hope her work inspires you to look around and feel respect for everyday nature. What do you see? Draw, paint, write, and make your stories come to life! Maybe one day you, too, will find your work shared in a museum or chosen to win a national contest! And even if that doesn't happen, we know you'll have so much fun rocking the world as an artist!

MAYA SAYS

"I am going to try to wake you up to things that are missing that you are not even aware of disappearing."

GLOSSARY

Endangered: almost extinct

Extinct: no longer existing

Species: kinds of living things, like plants and animals

Habitat: the home of a living thing