

## Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui written by Alison Goldberg illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon

### About the Book

**Genre:** Biography

**Format:** Hardcover, 40 pages

**ISBN:** 9781620149669

**Reading Level:** Grade 6

**Interest Level:** Grades K-6

**Guided Reading Level:** U

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:**  
N/A

**Lexile™ Measure:** N/A

\*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

**Themes:** African/African American Interest, Art, Biography/Memoir, Dreams & Aspirations, Imagination, Nonfiction, Optimism/Enthusiasm, Overcoming Obstacles

**Resources on the web:**

[leeandlow.com/books/bottle-tops](http://leeandlow.com/books/bottle-tops)

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

### SYNOPSIS

*"If you touch something, you leave a charge on it and anybody else touching it connects with you, in a way." -- El Anatsui*

Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui has always written his own story. As an art student, El noticed that the works and styles he was studying were grounded in European traditions. Curious about his own people's art history, El found stories in the fabrics they wore and the way they used recycled goods. He decided to tell these stories through his artwork.

El experimented with different mediums. He fired broken clay pieces into pots and sculpted wood using a chain saw. Each time El tried something new, he brought with him the experience of all the experiments he did before. After coming across a discarded bag of shimmering bottle tops, El grew inspired by this new material. He disassembled, flattened, and reshaped the bottle tops, then stitched them together with wire. The results were large, flowing tapestries that tell stories about history and culture and link people together. Today, El's bottle top sculptures are showcased all over the world fascinating audiences everywhere.

Here is the captivating biography of a sculptor whose passion, creativity, and awe-inspiring artwork reminds us that creating powerful art is about being true to your story.

## BACKGROUND

### Author's Note from Alison Goldberg

In 1995, I spent a college semester in Ghana. I stayed in Accra near a contemporary art gallery. On the second floor, an unusual sculpture was mounted on the wall. Made from wood and paint, marked and burned, it seemed woven with many ideas, old and new. Ancient Cloth Series was my introduction to El's work and I have sought opportunities to see his art ever since.

While El's art was recognized before 2007, the show in Venice was a turning point in his career. In addition to the installation of *Fresh and Fading Memories*, he exhibited two other sculptures at the Biennale (*Dusasa I* and *Dusasa II*) that were widely acclaimed. Today, El's art is shown inside museums and on the outsides of buildings all over the world. Each time the bottle top sculptures are displayed, they are arranged and draped differently.

Some of El's sculptures have names in Ewe, El's first language, like *Gli*, which can mean "wall," "story," or "disrupt," depending on how it is spoken. Some of the names refer to African history.

El finds meaning in the bottles' origins: "Objects such as these were introduced to Africa by Europeans when they came as traders. Alcohol was one of the commodities brought with them to exchange for goods in Africa. Eventually alcohol became one of the items used in the trans-Atlantic slave trade... I thought that the bottle caps had a strong reference to the history of Africa."

El encourages people to view his art and see what it says to them, what it makes them feel. When I look at El's art, I am reminded that art does not require fancy tools or new materials. The things around us can be the raw material for telling our stories, and when we're true to ourselves when we create, the art we make can be powerful and unique.

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### Additional Information about El Anatsui

El Anatsui is a sculptor from Ghana who lives and works in Nigeria, Africa. He is one of the most highly acclaimed artists in African history and around the world. El Anatsui's art consists of liquor bottle caps and cassava graters that he uses to create sculptures. El Anatsui's interests and passions consist of reusing and transforming materials while also going beyond the limitations of place and structure. His work engages with colonialism and draws connections between consumption, waste, and the environment. For more information about El Anatsui and to view his artwork, consult his website: <https://elanatsui.art/biography>

## African Art & Artists

For more information about African artists and art, consult the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art (<https://africa.si.edu/>). Virtual exhibits, research, and examples of students artwork are just some of the features available through the museum's website, which has a plethora of important history about African art and artists. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's African Art exhibit also has additional information about artists, exhibits, and various galleries to find out more about contemporary and past African artists and art forms (<https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/collection-areas/african-art>).

# BEFORE READING

## Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- What are some art forms you know? Where have you seen this kind of art? What was it like?
- Have you ever watched an artist at work? How is the way they work different from the way things are made in factories? How are artists unique in their talents?
- What kinds of things have you made by hand? How did it feel to make them? How did you feel about the objects or sculptures that you made?
- What does it mean to be persistent? How do you demonstrate persistence even though something may be challenging? Why is it important to be persistent? Do you think persistence can be learned? How so?
- Was there ever a time where you solved a problem creatively? What did you do? Why did you have to solve that problem? How did you think quickly?
- Was there a time when you took a chance on something? What did you do? What was the end result? Was it worth taking a chance? How are taking chances important in your life?
- Why is hard work important? What does it mean to be a 'hard worker'? What are some personality traits and characteristics that make up a hard worker?
- How do you think an artist's life might differ from other people's lives? What makes you say that?
- Do you think artists see the world differently from other people? What makes you say that?

## Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- **Book Title Exploration:** Talk about the title of the book, *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*. Then ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book

might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?

- Read Alison Goldberg's Biography: Read about Alison Goldberg on the jacket back flap as well as on her website [alisongoldberg.com](https://www.alisongoldberg.com). Encourage students to think about what it was like to write a children's book, and what could have been her inspiration for writing *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*.
- Read Elizabeth Zunon's Biography: Read about Elizabeth Zunon on the jacket back flap as well as on her website [lizzunon.com](https://www.lizzunon.com). Have students look into her illustrations for other books and compare and contrast her style across books. How are Elizabeth's illustrations among the books similar? How are they different? Does it seem like the subject matter of a book influences the style of her illustrations? Why do you think so?
- Encourage students to stop and jot in their reading notebooks during the read-aloud when they: learn new information, see a powerful image, have an emotional reaction or an idea, have a question, or hear new words.
- Have students quickly write a feeling in their notebooks during reading. After reading, ask students why they wrote down that feeling and have them write a journal entry about it.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- how El was creative at an early age
- why reused materials were important to El during his artistic process
- how El used old materials to create new art
- how El discovered the bottle tops for his sculptures
- why it was important to El to use objects in his art that had a story and "passed through people's hands"
- how El used the history of his country and people in his artwork
- El's legacy and impact today and how he's continuing to pave new paths in contemporary art around the world

Encourage students to consider why the author, Alison Goldberg, would want to share with young people this story about El Anatsui, his incredible artwork, and his impact around the world.

## VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### Content Specific

El Anatsui, Nsukka, Nigeria, recycling market, the Gold Coast, gouache, Britain, Ghana, plaster casting, National Cultural Centre, Adinkra cloth, *Sankofa*, kiln, gouging, sanding, drilling, burning, awl, kente cloths, London, New York, Dakar, Paris, Tokyo, Venice Biennale

### Academic

exhibited, resonated, scoured, scrap, jagged, fashioned, articulate, expanded, sculpture, texture, dimension, enthusiastic, evoked, astonished, transformation, shimmering

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

### Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Who is El Anatsui? What is he looking for at the recycling market?
2. Where did El grow up? What was his family like?
3. How did El experiment with making art at an early age?
4. What happened in 1957? How did El react?
5. Where did El go to school?
6. What did El see at the National Cultural Centre?
7. What is Adinkra cloth? What did El think about the image Sankofa?
8. Where did El move in 1975? Why did he move there?

9. What material did El choose for his art?
10. What happened to the university's kiln? How did this change El's artistic process?
11. What kind of objects did El collect? Why did he collect them?
12. What kind of techniques did El use in his art?
13. What did El notice in the bushes while he was walking in Nsukka?
14. What did El wonder about the bottle tops? What did he do with them when he returned to his studio?
15. What did El discover about what the bottle tops could do? What did he make with them?
16. How did El fashion the forms together? What did it create?
17. What did El think the bottle top tapestries resembled?
18. What happened after El's discovery with the bottle tops? What did he do?
19. Where did El send his creations?
20. How did people in London react to his creations? What did El do afterwards?
21. Where was El invited to exhibit? Why was this important?
22. How did El create his work for the Venice Biennale exhibit?
23. What historic events did El think of while he was creating his work?
24. When did El bring his bottle tops to Venice? What did he name his work?
25. What did El discover about bottle tops? What can they do?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. What does the title *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui* mean to you after reading the book? Why do you think the author chose this particular title?
2. How did El demonstrate creativity at an early age? What were the kinds of things that he did as a child that prepared him to become an artist?
3. How was El artistic at an early age? What were some of the things that he did that showed his creativity?
4. How did El's teacher support him? What were some of the things that El's teacher did to inspire his creativity? Why is it important to recognize and support other people's passions? How do you think this helped El become an artist later?
5. Why was El determined to find his own path? What were some of the things that he has done throughout his life that show how he created his own path?
6. El has a thought during the book, "School exposed me to what other cultures were doing in art. I was curious to know what my people did." What do you think El meant by this? How

is school instrumental in a person's development? How do you think El's experiences at art school helped prepare him as an artist? What did he learn, and how did he use what he learned during his career as an artist?

7. How did El show creativity in his artwork? How did he reuse different objects to create his pieces? Have you ever reused materials to create something? What did you have to do? What was the result?
8. Why does El use memories of old objects in his art? What did that process mean to him? Why do you think El wanted to collect objects that passed through people's hands to use in his art?
9. How did El think about history while he was creating his work? How was he reminded of the transatlantic slave trade? Why do you think the bottle tops were meaningful to him, his people, and his country?
10. How did El draw inspiration from the past and the present within his artwork? Why do you think past histories and objects were important to him alongside present-day materials and events?
11. How would you describe El to a person who had never heard of him? What are some of the qualities you would use to describe him? How would you describe the story of El's bottle tops artwork to a friend?
12. Explore the structure of this text. Does the story describe events chronologically, as comparison, cause and effect, or problems and solutions? Why do you think the author structured the text the way she did? How does this story compare to other texts you have read?

### Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. What is one big thought you have after reading this book? Think about El's dedication to his artwork. What is your takeaway from this book? What would you tell a friend about this book?
2. What do you think is Alison Goldberg's message to the reader? Think about possible motivations behind Alison Goldberg's intentions for writing the book. What do you think she wanted to tell her readers?
3. Have students make a text-to-self connection. What kinds of connections did you make from this book to your own life? What do El's experiences, thoughts, and feelings mean to you?
4. Have students make a text-to-text connection. Did you think of any other books while you read *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*? Why did you make those connections?
5. Have students make a text-to-world connection. What kind of connections did you make between this book and what you have seen in the world, such as online, on television, or in a newspaper? Why did this book make you think of that?

6. What does creativity mean to you after reading? After reading *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*, what does creative problem solving mean to you? Why? How did El use his resources and imagination to create his innovative sculptures and artwork?
7. What does determination and hard work mean to you after reading this book? How did El's dedication to his artwork and reusing materials shape his career as an artist? How can El inspire you in your own life?
8. Why is El's story important to learn about? How will you think of bottle tops differently now? What about reused materials? Why?

### ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)  
(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
  - Have students work in pairs to tell what they learned about one of the poems. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students create a sculpture inspired by El Anatsui's work and share their piece with a small group or the whole class.
5. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students, and several words are printed in bold. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

## Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. Alison Goldberg writes, "Each time El tried something new, he brought with him the experience of all the experiments he had done before." What do you think she meant by that statement? How did El use those principles throughout his career? How does that apply to you and your life? When you try something new, how do you go about the process? Reflect on a time you did something new, and keep this quote from *Bottle Tops* in mind. How did you use your prior experiences? Students can write about their thoughts in an essay, and then share with a partner.
2. How does El demonstrate doubt and uncertainty in *Bottle Tops*? What kind of setbacks does El experience during the story, and how does he channel his determination into creating his artwork? What do you think persistence means to El? Why is it important to be resilient, even if you're frustrated and want to give up? How can overcoming doubt lead to resilience and growth? Have students reflect on these questions in an essay, or discuss with a partner or small group.
3. Which illustration in *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui* best shows an emotion? Explain which emotion you think it shows. How does the image portray that emotion?
4. Choose an emotion that interests you: happiness, sadness, fear, anxiety, frustration, hope, perseverance, and so on. Illustrate or act out what that emotion looks like in *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Complete a genre study on biography, focusing on artists.** Lee & Low titles include *In Her Hands: The Story of Sculptor Augusta Savage* ([leeandlow.com/books/in-her-hands](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/in-her-hands)), *The Pot that Juan Built* ([leeandlow.com/books/the-pot-that-juan-built](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-pot-that-juan-built)), *It Jes' Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw* ([leeandlow.com/books/it-jes-happened](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/it-jes-happened)), and *The East-West House: Noguchi's Childhood in Japan* ([leeandlow.com/books/the-east-west-house](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-east-west-house)). Use a graphic organizer to compare El Anatsui with the artists presented in the books. How did these individuals get started in their artwork? What artwork did they specialize in? What was their inspiration for their works? How were they creative in their work? How did they demonstrate determination and patience? Students can discuss their findings and then write about what they learned from conducting this study in an essay.
- **Read *Rainbow Weaver/Tejedora del arcoiris*** (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/rainbow-weaver-tejedora-del-arcoiris>) **alongside *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*.** In *Rainbow Weaver/Tejedora del arcoiris*, the main character Ixchel discovers plastic bags on the side of the road and uses them to create her own beautiful weavings, after she noticed a shortage of yarn that her mother used to use on her loom. Students can relate the resourcefulness of Ixchel and El in a comparative essay. What do Ixchel and El have in common? How did they use recycled materials to create their artwork? How can Ixchel and El inspire you in your own life to use recycled materials?
- **On the first page, Alison Goldberg writes, “El looks for old things to create something new. El is an artist.”** Have students analyze those two sentences together. Why do you think she chose to write about El this way? How do you think artists create something new from old things? Have students provide examples of their own artwork or artwork that they've seen that have been created from old things. How are artists constantly creating something new? How did El use this philosophy during his career as an artist? How was he creating new things but from using old materials? Students can reflect on these statements in an essay about what it means to create new things through art.
- **Record El's thoughts that are in italics throughout the story, then select one of El's ideas and write a reflection about it.** Have students first discuss how the author uses El's thoughts in italics as a tool to convey meaning throughout the story. How does she write about his thoughts differently than the rest of the text? Then, students can choose one of El's

thoughts and write about what it means to them. Students can refer to the Quotations section in the back of *Bottle Tops* for the quotation references. Afterwards, students can reflect on the following questions: Why did they select his quote? Why do you think El made this statement? How does it reflect El's philosophy?

- **Reflect on how El used materials and stories related to those materials in his art.** What did it mean for El to use materials that had a story? What do you think it means when something has a story behind it? Does every object have a story behind it? Why or why not?
- **Have students come up with a list of questions to ask author Alison Goldberg.** What do students want to know about the process behind writing a children's book? How did the author come up with the idea to write *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*? What about her other books? Consider contacting Alison Goldberg and inviting her to your school, library, or other relevant setting for an author visit ([alisongoldberg.com](https://alisongoldberg.com)).
- **Have students think about expository nonfiction versus narrative nonfiction. How was reading *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui* different from reading a newspaper article about El?** Have students read the article, "El Anatsui's Monumental New Show is an Act of Justice" from *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/arts/design/el-anatsui-art-review-munich.html?searchResultPosition=4>). Have students create a Venn Diagram with the headings, "Narrative Nonfiction: *Bottle Tops*" and "Expository Nonfiction: 'El Anatsui's Monumental New Show is an Act of Justice.'" Students can compare and contrast the different formats of the texts and the information they learn in both. What did they learn from both texts? What was it like to take in information from a picture book about El Anatsui versus a newspaper article about him?
- **Encourage students to write about something they're passionate about that they learned in school or from a museum.** In *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*, El thinks, "School exposed me to what other cultures were doing in art. I was curious to know what my people did." Have students write about how they connect to this statement. Have they learned about something in school, or from a museum or cultural center similar to El, that they wanted to continue to learn more about? How is learning about other things outside their experience? How does it help you think creatively? Students can write their thoughts in an analytical essay and then discuss their pieces with a small group or the whole class.
- **Have students reflect on an object that's meaningful to them.** El saw the beauty and history in the old objects that he saw at the market when he was creating his sculptures. Do students have an object in their life that may not seem meaningful to others but that's important to them? What is it? Why is it special and unique to their own lives? How does it make them feel? Students can write about their thoughts in an essay.

## Social Studies/Geography

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Encourage students to select a resource from the “Author’s Sources” section at the back of *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*.** Students can examine the piece, whether it’s a book, video, photograph, or website, and write a reaction to how they think the author and illustrator were informed by this information and how it helped develop the text. Have students consider what kind of resource it is, how they know that it contains accurate and correct information, and why research is critical in developing a book. The Library of Congress has a lesson plan for further information about teaching students about using primary sources (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/>).
- **Have students learn about the quest for Ghanaian independence in 1957.** What did the struggle look like? How long was Ghana under British control for? How did colonization affect the Ghanaian people? What important historical figures were behind the quest for independence? Consult the University of Oxford’s resource page on the Gold Coast and Ghanaian independence for more information (<https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/was-the-gold-coast-decolonised-or-did-ghana-win-its-independence>).
- **Research other artists around the world who are using recycled materials in their work** (<https://causeartist.com/incredible-recycled-art-materials-creations/>) (<https://blog.artsper.com/en/get-inspired/top-10-of-recycled-art/>) (<https://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/news/world/2021/04/21/trash-treasure-recycled-art-inspire-you-earth-day/7304971002/>). Have students select one particular artist and conduct additional research about that artist with the following guiding questions: What kind of art does that artist create? How do they create their pieces? What kinds of materials do they use? What museums have they exhibited in? How do they use recycled materials in their work? Students can share their research findings in a visual presentation format of their choosing, and provide information about what they learned about the artist and connect their work to El Anatsui and what they learned from *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*.
- **Encourage students to learn about different systems across the world that use old things to create new things.** El used pieces of old clay pots to create new ones. Can students think of other processes around the world that use similar conservation methods, such as recycling plastic? What does that look like? Students can research online or through books and resources in their local and school library. Afterwards, students can select a particular process and share their findings in a visual presentation to a small group or the whole class. What did students learn from this project, and how can they use what they learned about El and his repurposing of materials in their own lives?

## Science/STEM

(K-ESS3-3 Earth and Human Activity: Communicate solutions that will reduce the impact of humans on the land, water, air, and/or other living things in the local environment; MS-LS2-5: Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, Dynamics: Evaluate competing design solutions for maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services;

(MS-PS3-4: Energy: Plan an investigation to determine the relationships among the energy transferred, the type of matter, the mass, and the change in the average kinetic energy of the particles as measured by the temperature of the sample)

- Have students research the scientific process associated with creating pottery and ceramic sculptures.** The Atlanta Science Festival's "Cracking the Science Behind Pottery" (<https://scienceatl.org/science-behind-pottery-mudfire-pottery-studio/#:~:text=Clay%20contains%20a%20mixture%20of,form%20a%20sheet%2Dlike%20structure>) provides more information about the scientific process behind pottery. If possible and available in your educational setting, have students experiment with clay and fire it in the kiln. Students can write their scientific observations down about the different steps: what does the raw clay look and feel like? What happens when the clay is placed in the kiln? What does the clay look and feel like after? If students do not have access to a kiln, have them conduct additional research online and with supportive texts to learn about the clay and pottery process and what scientific changes a kiln incites.
- What does the recycling process look like and why is recycling important?** The Vermont Department of Education's "Don't Throw Away Our Future" (<https://dec.vermont.gov/sites/dec/files/wmp/SolidWaste/Documents/Don%27t%20Throw%20Away%20Our%20Future.pdf>) has lesson plan ideas and a list of additional texts for future information. PBS' lesson plan "Inventing Beyond Recycling" (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/classroom/2020/07/lesson-plan-inventing-beyond-recycling/>) encourages students to think about items that we need to recycle and how recycling is crucial to our environment. The Works Museum, "The Science Behind Recycling" (<https://theworks.org/the-science-behind-recycling/>) provides details about what happens to objects when they're recycled. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection's "What Do Your Recyclables Become?" (<https://www.maine.gov/dep/waste/recycle/whatrecyclablesbecome.html>) is another useful tool to see how different objects are recycled and what the final result is. Have students create a visual presentation representing the recycling process and provide information about what they learned and how they can implement recycling in their own lives, both at school and at home.

## Art/Media

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- Have students research Adinkra cloth** (<https://www.pbs.org/wonders/Kids/cloth/cloth.htm>) (<https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/adinkra.html>). El Anatsui was influenced by Adinkra cloth and its symbols. Why do you think El Anatsui was inspired by Adinkra cloth? Have students research different kinds of Adinkra cloth. Students can create their own Adinkra cloth based on what they learned. What symbol do they want to use in their Adinkra cloth? What is meaningful to them in their own lives? Afterwards, students can share their Adinkra cloths with the whole class.

- **Watch the video of El Anatsui** ([https://art21.org/artist/el-anatsui/?gclid=Cj0KQCQjw5-WRBhCKARIsAAId9FngyeMZ8bEFLQxn55koR46IBTMOAgN1MaEgPV3SmsyatpDPVNZm6\\_AaAg9FEALw\\_wcB](https://art21.org/artist/el-anatsui/?gclid=Cj0KQCQjw5-WRBhCKARIsAAId9FngyeMZ8bEFLQxn55koR46IBTMOAgN1MaEgPV3SmsyatpDPVNZm6_AaAg9FEALw_wcB)). Have students reflect on what they learned about watching a video of El Anatsui and his art. What is his process like? What was it like to watch a video featuring El and his work versus reading *Bottle Tops*? What did they learn from the video that they hadn't gathered from the story? How can they use what they saw from a video of El into their own work, whether it's through art or another hobby or something that they're working on?
- **Have students select a piece of art from El Anatsui and write a reaction essay to it.** Students can use photographs from El Anatsui's website for reference, or other virtual exhibitions featuring El's work (<https://elanatsui.art/>) ([https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/el\\_anatsui/?gclid=Cj0KQCQjw5-WRBhCKARIsAAId9FmK2n2dnSGWUmlWa2ZhgBQ8DTPrm5bqgZaTrJhBxFivEMhlurZNPuAaAmMTEALw\\_wcB](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/el_anatsui/?gclid=Cj0KQCQjw5-WRBhCKARIsAAId9FmK2n2dnSGWUmlWa2ZhgBQ8DTPrm5bqgZaTrJhBxFivEMhlurZNPuAaAmMTEALw_wcB)) ([https://jackshainman.com/artists/el\\_anatsui](https://jackshainman.com/artists/el_anatsui)). The Museum of Fine Arts have guiding questions about how to help students look at art (<https://www.mfah.org/learn/practice-looking-art>). The Art of Education also has tips and strategies for students on how to observe art (<https://theartofeducation.edu/2018/01/05/teaching-students-observe-like-artist-just-5-steps/>). Have students write an essay featuring questions that you want them to focus on when they're viewing the artwork, such as: what do you notice about the artwork? What kinds of colors do they see? What about different textures? How does the artwork make you feel?
- **Create a project inspired by El's process.** Blick Art created a video and lesson plan about how El Anatsui uses acrylic materials in his sculptures (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajTF6JYvKDs>). After students watch the video of El creating his artwork and the Blick Art video, students can create a sculpture inspired by El and his recycled materials. What can they use from home, or from their surrounding space, to create their own sculpture? Encourage students to think about El's process and using recycled materials that have a story. How can they make their sculpture meaningful to them and their own lives?
- **Have students create a sculpture using materials in the classroom or art space.** Check out the Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM's lesson plan, "Junk Art: Project Based Learning Lesson" (<https://artsintegration.com/2017/12/01/junk-art-project-based-learning-lesson/>) for ideas on how to use recycled materials in students' artwork. Have students think creatively before starting: what kinds of materials do I like to use? What kind of structure do I want to create? How can I use these objects that are restricted to my space to create something new from them? Afterwards, students can reflect on what the process was like to work with reused materials from their own classroom or educational setting.
- **Consider having students come up with questions to interview the illustrator, Elizabeth Zunon.** What is her process behind creating the illustrations for a children's book? What medium did she choose to create the illustrations? Why? What was it like to work on *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*? Consider contacting Elizabeth Zunon for a virtual or school visit (<https://lizzunon.com/>).
- **Encourage students to select the illustration that resonated with them the most from *Bottle Tops: The Art of El Anatsui*.** Have students write a reflection about the illustration. What stood out to them? How did it make them feel? What did it make them think about?

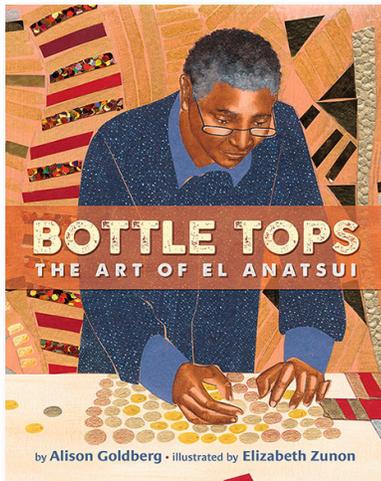
### School-Home Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- **Ask students to interview family members about artwork that they've seen or created that is special to them.** What kind of artwork have they seen or made that they enjoyed? What does it mean to them? Why is it important? How did they discover this artwork or create their own artwork?
- **Have students and families read about other artists from their local or school library.** What artwork are students and families interested in learning more about? What kind of artwork do they like to look at?
- **Students and families can conduct additional research about El Anatsui.** If possible and accessible, students can show families El Anatsui's website and other resources online (<https://elanatsui.art/>) (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/el-anatsui-17306/who-is-el-anatsui>) ([https://art21.org/artist/el-anatsui/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw5-WRBhCKARIsAAId9FIHgCHVRvEs4Wuiuzz-6TivX41FEHFRV8rpOP9CbzMGtHOhC343xJcaAsTLEALw\\_wcB](https://art21.org/artist/el-anatsui/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw5-WRBhCKARIsAAId9FIHgCHVRvEs4Wuiuzz-6TivX41FEHFRV8rpOP9CbzMGtHOhC343xJcaAsTLEALw_wcB)). Ask students to reflect with families: what do they enjoy about El Anatsui's work? What did they notice about El Anatsui's sculptures? How does it inspire them to use their own recycled materials?
- **Have students and families investigate other contemporary African artists today** ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/contemporary-african-artists\\_n\\_56255056e4b02f6a900d59a6](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/contemporary-african-artists_n_56255056e4b02f6a900d59a6)) (<https://www.norton.com/books/9780500652596>). If possible, students and families can research these other artists through their websites and current virtual exhibitions. What kind of art do these artists create? How is their work important to people? How does their artwork make them feel?



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alison Goldberg** is a writer based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the author of *I Love You for Miles and Miles*. She blogs about activism in children's literature and loves researching everything from marine life to contemporary art for her books. Alison first learned about El Anatsui's work while studying art in Ghana and has sought opportunities to see his sculptures ever since. You can visit her online at [alisongoldberg.com](https://alisongoldberg.com).

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Elizabeth Zunon** earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design, and since then she has been illustrating books, as well as making jewelry and handbags. Zunon grew up in Ivory Coast, West Africa, but now lives in Albany, New York.

## REVIEWS

"This picture-book biography is a fascinating introduction to Ghanaian artist El Anatsui and his innovative artistic process... Back matter provides additional context and sources while inviting readers to get their own hands involved in creating art." –*The Horn Book*

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