



Hero Project Art Lesson Plan

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[See Student Art & Story Gallery and Narrative Writing Lesson Plan in the Education section at www.artandremembrance.org]

This lesson plan is really a how-to for teaching appliqué techniques to 4th and 5th graders. Anything in it can be adapted up for older students and at the end I will suggest alternate ways for much younger children and anyone who cannot use a needle and thread to work with fabric picture making.

The students I work with are deeply moved by Esther Krinitz's story [Visit www.artandremembrance.org for more information]. They have many questions and want to know more about her life and experiences. Esther's appliquéd and embroidered panels allow them to follow the narrative of her experiences visually. Her use of fabric and embroidery stitches creates vivid, detailed imagery for them to "read". The way Esther used fabrics---matching texture, pattern and color to create specific things and moods is a language that children understand immediately. A stripe can suggest the horizontal boards of a wooden house or the rows of a plowed field. The jagged edges of a dark cloud are ominous and frightening. They are charmed and inspired by the embroidery stitches that create the texture of a wheat field or braided hair and notice the use of a bit of lace for a tablecloth and wool fringe that looks just like thatched roof. Many cultures use fabric appliqué and embroidery techniques in their folk arts. There is an intrinsic sense of the heirloom when scraps leftover from more pragmatic uses like making clothing are used to make descriptive imagery. It is a natural and exciting medium for students to tell their own family stories.

MATERIALS

1. Fabric

A selection of lightweight cotton and poly/cotton fabrics with small overall prints, stripes, plaids, solids. You want to avoid novelty designs with large images like teddy bears, stars, rainbows, etc. Children won't be able to see beyond the pre-made imagery to make their own choices and connections. It's a huge distraction. Pieces of trim, lace, rickrack, buttons, and ribbon can be incorporated into the work too.

2. Chenille needles sizes 18-20

Chenille needles have the advantage of having large enough eyes and being sharp. Tapestry needles are too blunt to sew fabric with. Children 7 and up can thread their own needles if shown how and if the needle eye is large enough and the thread sturdy enough.

3. Thread

I recommend two strand craft thread (rather than embroidery thread) because it doesn't need to be divided and come in bright colors. A less expensive alternative is to use rolls of colored crochet cotton ----- it is about the same weight and works fine.

4. Scissors

Good scissors are essential. There is nothing more frustrating than scissors that won't cut fabric. Fiskars® for kids are great but don't let them be used for paper-- --it will dull the blades quickly.

5. Light weight stretcher bars.

These are the wooden bars used by painters to stretch their canvas over. They come in various lengths and fit together without nails and work like an embroidery hoop, keeping the fabric taut while sewing. This makes it much much easier to work with. Unlike an embroidery hoop they can be permanent, working as a frame and making display much easier too. They can be bought in bulk inexpensively from art supply dealers like Dick Blick or Nasco who often have their own house brand. 14'x16", 16"x18" are good sizes for children to work with.

6. Light weight staple gun.

This is to staple the background fabric to the stretcher bars.

7. Straight pins.

These are to hold fabric pieces in place while the image is being composed and until it is stitched. Children find it easier to work with pins that have the colored balls at the end.

8. Chalk.

Used for marking fabric if necessary.

9. Iron and ironing board.

Needed for pressing fabric pieces. Its difficult for children to cut and sew wrinkled fabric---and it doesn't look good.

GETTING STARTED/GETTING ORGANIZED

This can seem like a complicated project to get started if you work with a large class of students. By introducing the project to the whole class and then helping them get started with the fabric and sewing in smaller groups it becomes more manageable. Once they get going, most students work more independently and enjoy the process, helping each other. Sewing is a soothing task and I have always found that children of all ages really enjoy it and often don't want to stop. It is a very satisfying skill for them.

By organizing the fabrics beforehand, it makes it more appealing to the students when they are making their choices. Possible categories are boxes with warm and cool patterns, warm and cool solids. Or get more specific: reds, blues, yellows, greens, browns, grays etc. Separating stripes and plaids....

Making a sampler of different embroidery stitches is a good way for students to make decisions. I taught myself stitches using a book and found referring to my sampler helped me remember how to do the basic stitches when I was showing students.

THE MAIN IDEA

Once students have written their stories, the challenge is to come up with an image that illustrates its main point in the most direct, clear, and visually interesting way. Sometimes it is hard for children to simplify. One way of helping them is to show examples of illustrations in picture books and discuss what makes them effective and how the artist achieved that. Then the students make a pencil drawing of their final idea. This may undergo changes in the process but provides them with a basis to start with.

MAKING CHOICES

All collage works from back to front. The student's first decision is to choose the fabric for their background based on the place, time of day, and mood they want to express. This can be effective with patterned fabric as well as solid. The background fabric should be 2" bigger all around than the stretcher frame. Staple fabric to frame, stretching edges around to the back. Staple sides first, and then corners.

Again thinking back to front, the students start composing their images, choosing fabric they think is best suited. What is the next furthest back? If they are doing a person in a landscape, it will be the ground or mountains etc. and then the person. When doing collage, overlapping always has to be discussed. An effective way to help them understand this is to show them one of Esther Krinitz's appliqué panels and have them analyze it. Which pieces did she sew down first? Which could have come next?

If a student seems overwhelmed by which fabric to choose or takes the first thing available, I have them choose 3 possibilities and then looking at them next to their work, pick the one they think is best suited.

CUTTING, PINNING, SEWING

When it comes to cutting---the bigger the better. The temptation is there for children to want to draw the shape they want to cut onto the fabric first. When they do this, the tendency is to make things too small and the shapes too detailed. So I encourage them to cut directly into the fabric, thinking in basic shapes--- and always at a corner or an edge, never into the middle of a piece of fabric. If they do need to draw a shape first, have them do it with chalk, not pencil. Chalk encourages larger shapes and can be easily wiped off with a damp paper towel.

All of the pieces don't have to be in place before they begin sewing, but it helps if the major ones are. Discuss which details are easier and more effective in fabric and which work best in stitching. Some students will really get into the embroidery and want to try different kinds of stitches. The stitching is always part of the picture, like a drawn line, so the size of the stitches and color of the thread matters. They may want the stitches to be very obvious in some places and choose bright or contrasting thread colors.

When working with students who cannot use needle and thread, I have had them do fabric collage using iron on bonding material. I iron the material onto the back of a selection of fabrics in $\frac{1}{4}$ yard pieces. It stiffens the fabric and makes it easier to cut. The pieces are arranged on a background fabric and ironed in place. The results are very effective. It goes much more quickly than sewing.

Bibliography

Many cultures have traditions of making appliqué imagery. One of the most famous of all American quilts was made by an African American former slave named Harriet Powers. Her depiction of stories from the Bible bears a close resemblance to the appliqué style of the people of Abomey in the now Republic of Benin in West Africa where the tradition continues today. The beautiful, highly detailed arpilleras of Peru and Chile combine flat appliqué with 3d elements. The Cuna Indians of Panama have their distinctive style of reverse cut appliqué that is used to form the front and back of traditional women's blouses. Applique is done by the Hmong people of Laos, in Egypt and China as well.

Here is a short list of books about textiles as well as children's story books that are illustrated with appliqué work:

Memories of Survival

By Esther Nisenthal Krinitz and Bernice Steinhardt
Second edition, Art and Remembrance, Washington DC 2010
[Originally published by Hyperion Books for Children, New York, 2005]

Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong People's Journey of Freedom

By Dia Cha
Lee and Low Books, Inc. New York, 1996
A book for children, illustrated with Hmong appliqué work.

Tonight is Carnaval

By Arthur Dorrow
Harcourt Brace and Co., New York
A children's book illustrated with Peruvian arpillera appliqué.

Market Day: A Story Told with Folk Art

By Lois Ehlert
Voyager Books, Harcourt, Inc. New York
Illustrated with Peruvian arpilleras and other folk art objects.

The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950

By Mary Elizabeth Johnson

Fables from Aesop

Adapted and Illustrated by Tom Lynch
Puffin Books, New York, 2002
Illustrated with wonderful appliqué images of animals.

Textiles: The Collection of the Museum of International Folk Art

By Bobbie Sumberg
Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe

For learning embroidery stitches, I found this book to be both clear and colorful:

Mary Thomas's Dictionary of Embroidery Stitches

By Jan Eaton

Trafalgar Square Publishers, Vermont, 1998

Sources

Source for inexpensive stretcher bars and craft thread is Dick Blick Art Materials.
www.dickblick.com

They ship all over the country.

For inexpensive fabric, notions, craft and crochet thread and general art supplies the following places are great:

Walmart stores with a fabric and crafts department

Michael's Crafts

Hobby Lobby

Jo-Ann Fabric

And then of course, some of my best materials have come from the families of students. People have stashes of fabric and yarn scraps they are saving for worth projects and are often grateful for an opportunity to clear out their closets.