



Sharing the Art and Story of Holocaust Survivor Esther Nisenthal Krinitz

INSTRUCTIONS CREATING STORY CLOTHS

OVERVIEW:

The power of art and story to reveal and heal is universal and timeless. Story cloths, in particular, have been used in many diverse cultures around the world as a way to pass on family memories as well as to speak of difficult or painful experiences. And as research and experience have shown, personal narrative allows individuals to transcend their differences and discover their shared humanity. When language and culture limit communication, art provides a means to transcend these barriers.

Esther Krinitz created her tapestries in order to share her memories of childhood and survival with her daughters; they also served as a means to keep her memories of family alive for her and in this way, to soothe the pain of their loss. If you have the opportunity in a classroom or extracurricular setting, engage participants in making their own story cloths as Esther did, telling the story of their unsung hero, or perhaps a story of immigration, hope, and healing to share with others. To see story cloths and fabric arts from around the world visit [Story Cloth Traditions](#) (Sutori) and [A&R Story Cloth Galleries](#).

INTRODUCTION:

To introduce participants to story cloths, you can have them watch [Interview with Esther Nisenthal Krinitz](#) (13-minute film) or [Through the Eye of the Needle](#) (30-minute film). After viewing, share some reactions and talk about the use of story cloths to tell Esther's story. Examine a few of Esther's story cloths in the [Fabric of Survival Gallery](#). Look at examples of story cloths created by students and adults in the [A&R Story Cloth Galleries](#).

Talk with participants about the process, colors, materials, and choices Esther made in order to convey her story.

Explain to the participants they will be able to make their own story cloths. Once they get going, most participants can work relatively independently, with limited guidance, while helping one another and enjoying the process.

It is important to allow time once the story cloths are completed for participants to share their stories with others in the class or program. This sharing is a vital part of the process, allowing people to understand and feel empathy for the experiences of others. Where people are telling difficult stories, the act of sharing can be cathartic and healing.

What follows are instructions for two basic methods for creating story cloths:

The first involves hand-stitching, working with a variety of materials as well as needle and thread. This is recommended for settings in which participants will have enough time for the handwork, working in multiple sessions over a number of days, as well as instruction if people are unfamiliar with sewing. More experienced stitchers may also want to use machine stitching if they have access to sewing machines.

The second method can be done without any sewing, using felt, fabric glue, other fabric scraps, notions and trim. This method works well when time is limited to four or more hours over one to three sessions and when there's little opportunity for sewing instruction. This method can also be used when working with colored and patterned paper.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STORY CLOTHS USING STITCHING:

Materials

Fabric: Obtain a selection of lightweight cotton and poly/cotton fabrics with small overall prints, stripes, plaids, solids. Avoid novelty designs with large images like teddy bears, stars, rainbows, etc.; people are often unable to see beyond the pre-made imagery to make their own choices and connections.

Organizing the fabrics beforehand is helpful to participants when they are making their choices. Possible categories are boxes with warm and cool patterns or solids. Or get more specific: reds, blues, yellows, greens, browns, grays etc.

Notions: Pieces of trim, lace, rickrack, buttons, and ribbon can be incorporated into the work.

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.

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

Scissors: Good scissors are essential. There is nothing more frustrating than scissors that won't cut fabric.

Lightweight 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 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.

Lightweight staple gun: This is to staple the background fabric to the stretcher bars.

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.

Chalk: Used for marking fabric if necessary

Iron and ironing board: Needed for pressing

Organization. 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?
- Look at Esther's choice in colors: What mood did her selections evoke?
- Examine the skies in Esther's artwork: What did the sky convey in her story cloths?
- Look at the borders, specifically the pictures of Jewish holidays and her arrival in the U.S. How are these borders different from the other pieces?
- Have students plan their piece in a brief sketch or diagram.

Cutting, Pinning, and Sewing

- When it comes to cutting—the bigger the better. People are tempted 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. 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 participants 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, students can create fabric collage using iron on bonding material. Iron the material onto the back of a selection of fabrics in ¼ 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.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STORY CLOTHS CONSTRUCTED WITH FELT:

MATERIALS

- 8x11" pieces of felt of various colors
- White muslin-type fabric, allowing for a 4x6" piece per student/participant
- Sharpie markers of various colors, and some 'very fine' black ones for writing on the white muslin
- Bottles of fabric glue. Tacky Glue is good for this, or any other kind of glue, specifically a fabric glue.
- Embellishments: Other types of printed fabrics, ribbon, string, buttons, feathers, sequins, etc.

Process

- Participants each choose a pre-cut piece of colored felt (8x11") on which they glue images cut out of other pieces of felt or other fabrics.
- They add embellishments of ribbon, string, buttons, feathers, wire, fencing, sequins, etc. to their piece for their desired effect or emotion.
- For the stories to be appended to the picture, they use a small piece of muslin-type white fabric, about 4x6," and write a caption in very fine black Sharpie markers that tells the story depicted in the piece or about their experience that led to the piece.

DISPLAYING STUDENTS'/PARTICIPANTS' WORK

If you choose to display the story cloths, which we'd encourage you to do, you can employ a couple of different methods:

- Use fabric glue to adhere story cloth to a slightly larger piece of background fabric—leave a border of at least 1 inch on each of the 4 sides. Then glue the piece onto black or white mat board, available from art supply stores. The size of the mat should be appropriate to the size of the story cloth and should allow enough room below the story cloth to affix the white fabric with caption. Allow a minimum border of 3 inches on each of the other three sides. The mat boards can then be displayed using stick-on picture hooks, at least one on each side of the picture.
- Students' work can also be displayed as a "quilt," arrayed in blocks across and down a large piece of black felt. The background felt is available at fabric stores from a roll, which is typically about 4 or 5 feet wide.

The piece can be 6-7 feet long, or as long as your space allows. The individual pieces can be glued directly on the larger cloth. While tacky glue will work, you can get better adhesion with a hot glue gun. The quilt can then be stapled or tacked around a dowel and hung.

SHARING THE STORY

Each of the participants should be given the opportunity to share their story and display their work to the whole group. Be sensitive to the difficult emotions some of the stories encompass.

If the project is conducted in conjunction with a language skills or English literacy project, the participants should read their written stories aloud while displaying their work.

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