
Bison-Skin Art

Activity Overview

Students learn about Native American way of life and make a work of art Plains Indians used to record important events.

Objectives

Students will:

- Experience Native American folk art in a creative and meaningful way
- Communicate an event or story using symbols and images in the place of written language
- Create a “calendar” that expresses time through significant events rather than hours and dates

Subjects Covered

Language Arts, Social Studies, and Art

Grades

K through 8

Activity Time

30 minutes

Season

Any

Materials

Brown paper, markers, paint, pastels, or crayons, and tape or glue.

State Standards

Social Studies:

Explain history of WI Indian tribes (B.4.10)

Summarize issues associated with WI Indian tribes (B.8.11)

Language Arts:

Create or produce writing (B.4.1, B.8.1, B.12.1)

Art:

Communicate ideas by producing studio art forms (E.4.1)

Communicate ideas by producing popular images & objects (E.4.3)

Background

Plains Indians painted on bison and deer skins to record memorable events during the year. These records are called winter counts because they mark the year between the first snowfall of one year to the first snowfall of the next year. Often symbolic images painted on the skin portrayed battles, dances, buffalo hunts, heroic feats, diseases, and weather phenomenon experienced by the Plains Indians.

Activity Description

Ahead of time, make a large (5' by 4') paper bison skin that will hang on a wall. Make a duplicate skin. Cut the second skin into pieces, enough for each student to have one piece, then number the pieces. Number matching spaces on the full-size skin.

Give each student a cut piece and have him or her draw a picture relating to a specified theme. After everyone is finished drawing, have each student tape or glue his or her own piece to the skin. Stage the activity to build a sense of ritual or ceremony into the process.

Possible themes for the bison skin activity include:

- experiences from a field trip
- Native American life
- memorable events from the school year (as an end of the school year activity)
- chronological history
- memories students share about vacations, their childhood, and families
- community events and history
- land history - geology, land use, vegetation
- prairie themes - plants, animals, underground life, ecology, phenology
- school prairie celebration
- an “Advent” calendar building up to the prairie celebration
- write or recreate a favorite story
- review a lesson

Note: Spray vegetable oil on the finished project to create a beautiful realistic-looking animal skin.

Bison-Skin Art (cont.)

Use visual arts to express ideas that words cannot (E.4.5, E.8.5, E.12.5)

Communicate complex ideas by producing studio art forms (E.8.1)

Communicate complex ideas by producing popular images & objects (E.8.3)

Communicate ideas by producing popular images & objects (E.12.3)

Extensions

- Research how other cultures recorded events in their society.

Additional Resources

- DePaola, Tomie. (1998). *The legend of the Indian paintbrush*. The Putnam and Grosset Group. An illustrated retelling of the origin story of the Indian Paintbrush flower which explores the cultural significance of hide paintings
- Freedman, Russel. (1992). *An Indian winter*. Holiday House, NY. Some artistic depictions of buffalo hide paintings are included in this illustrated journal of two European explorers.
- Grutman, Jewel and Gay Matthaei. (1994). *The ledgerbook of Thomas Blue Eagle*. Thomasson-Grant. A fictional recreation of Native American pictograph art as it was used to record important events in their lives.

Assessments

- Discuss and appreciate the usefulness of folk art as it relates to Native American culture as well as the culture of their classroom.
- Complete an artifact that is reflective and meaningful to the class as a group.
- Effectively record and express a personal phenology and compare it to modern concepts of time.

