

Celebrating a Community: Quilt

Activity Overview

Students will create “quilts,” using print-making techniques on muslin, that celebrate the concept of community in the biodiversity of prairies.

Objectives

Students will:

- Look at nature as a visual resource and source for new ideas
- Communicate basic ideas by producing a traditional folk art form (the quilt) made up of individual prints drawn by the students
- Work alone and with others to develop visual ideas and objects

Subjects Covered: Art and Science

Grades: K through 12

Activity Time: 2 hours

Season: Spring or Summer

Materials: Unbleached muslin, printing inks and retarder, foam board or linoleum, cutting tools, brayers, ink trays, paper, pencils, field guides and pictures of prairie plants



Background

This activity links a traditional artistic expression of human community—quilt-making—with the community of plants in a prairie. (It can also be easily adapted for another ecosystem.) Students have the hands-on experience of creating something beautiful and meaningful that also celebrates their own classroom community. The activity can be carried out over a number of days, after having good discussions about prairie communities and human communities, and after ample opportunities for students to experience their prairie and gain some feelings about it.

The large blocks of the quilt (5” x 8”) will represent plants. You can talk about the idea that will be expressed by this: the plants (discounting the soil itself) are the foundation of this living community, which suggests that the plants should be the most visually important element of the design. Students will also make smaller Adinkra blocks (3” x 3”) of prairie creatures such as mammals, birds, reptiles, and insects. (Adinkra is a word from the Akan language for small, square, usually abstract patterns that were printed on cloth by the Ashanti tribe of Ghana.) Discuss which creatures to draw so that the design will include a variety of species as well as jobs within the community—pollination, seed dispersal, soil aeration, decomposition, etc.

It may be a good idea to enlist the help of your school’s art specialist, since that person will have expertise, space, and tools and might be interested in working on an integrated collaboration. This could include collaboration on funding for consumable materials. If you collaborate, be sure to include the art specialist’s suggestions for ways to make this both an art lesson and a science lesson.

Pre-activity preparation

Assemble the necessary materials. The unbleached muslin (36 inches wide) should be washed to remove the sizing, then cut into 44- to 46-inch lengths. Iron these to make them lie flat. Make one quilt for each group or class.

For K-3 students, Scratch-Foam board is a safe and easy way to make real prints, because younger children can simply draw their lines with a pencil. NASCO carries packages of 9” x 12” sheets which can be cut with scissors to the desired size of 5” x 8”.

For grades 4-12, NASCO Safety-Kut can be used. It is a backless linoleum, only appropriate for older students since it requires sharp cutting tools. NASCO carries 18” x 14” slabs that can be cut to the desired size with an X-acto knife. To cut the design, each student will need a handle and cutter blades—ideally both a #1 blade (V-shaped for fine lines) and a #3 (broad for wide cuts and gouges).

Use water-based printing inks—Speedball is a dependable brand. For each ink color you use, you will need a brayer (a roller to roll ink onto the print blocks) and an ink tray (flat-bottomed Styrofoam trays work fine).

Celebrating a Community: Quilt (cont.)

State Standards

Art:

Explore elements & principles of design (C.4.1)

Look at nature and art as visual resource (C.4.5)

Use sketching to develop ideas (C.4.6, C.8.6)

Explore & understand characteristics of materials (C.4.8, C.8.7)

Analyze nature & use art as visual resource (C.12.5)

Experiment with sketching for complex solutions (C.12.6)

Apply craft & skills to produce quality art (C.12.7)

Use characteristics of materials to create art (C.12.8)

Communicate ideas by producing studio art forms (E.4.1, E.8.1, E.12.1)

Communicate ideas by producing popular images & objects (E.4.3, E.8.3, E.12.3)

Know art communicates ideas (G.4.1, G.8.1, G.12.1)

Know artwork has meaning (G.4.2)

Create art that has meaning (G.4.4, G.8.4, G.12.4)

Study patterns & color in nature (H.4.1)

Use drawing to examine objects (H.4.2)

Show differences among qualities of objects in artwork (H.4.3)

Draw, paint, sculpt from life (H.8.3, H.12.3)

Work alone & with others to develop visual ideas & objects (I.4.7, I.8.7, I.12.7)

Explore & understand purposes & functions of art (J.4.1, J.8.1, J.12.1)

Understand how materials & techniques influence expression (J.4.2, J.8.2, J.12.2)

Connect art to other areas of study (K.4.1, K.8.1, K.12.1)

Apply learning about life, nature, physical world, people to create art (K.4.3, K.8.3, K.12.3)

Understand and use nature and designs as source for new ideas (L.8.4, L.12.4)

Have 5" x 8" paper templates to draw on, field guides and pictures of prairie plants and wildlife for reference while drawing, and if possible, sample print blocks for inspiration. Along with field guides, you might also be able to draw from "life" using seasonal plants gathered from the school's restoration or, with permission, from a local natural area.

Activity Description

Look through books and pictures to select a prairie plant or creature to draw for your quilt block. If drawing a creature, identify which group it comes from and what function it plays in the prairie community. At this point, the group as a whole will want to make sure that they are choosing a good, representative variety of species for their quilt.

Next, draw your plant or creature on the paper template. Try to fill up the space with your design.

If using linoleum, you can either sketch lightly directly on the linoleum, or transfer your design from paper by rubbing graphite pencil on the back of the paper, laying it on the linoleum, and tracing over it.

If using Scratch-Foam board, trace your drawing onto the board by placing your paper over the board and drawing over your lines to make an indent on the foam surface. Then remove the paper and draw over the lines again to make a deeper indent.

Remember that everything prints in reverse: the indented lines will not pick up ink and will stay white, and the areas not pressed will have color. Avoid writing words, or remember that they need to be written backward!

You can add texture by making dots, dashes, and other small marks.

Once you have finished your block, "proof" your design by printing it on paper first. If you are dissatisfied, you can improve it before printing on the muslin.

When you print the quilt itself, begin printing along the top edge and side edge of the muslin with Adinkra blocks. Then begin adding the large blocks. Once a row of large blocks is complete, the small blocks can proceed until the project is complete. This allows more students to be printing at the same time without interfering with each other.

Helpful tips about printing

1. Adding retarder to ink (equal amounts) slows the drying-out of the ink, which is very important for a large project like this.
2. Be careful not to put too much ink on the ink tray.
3. When printing on paper, leave the inked blocks on the table face up.

Celebrating a Community: Quilt (cont.)

Put the paper on top, and rub to transfer the ink to paper. When printing on muslin, place the inked block upside down on the muslin, and press fairly hard to transfer the image.

4. When pulling the block off paper or muslin, pull slowly from one corner. Then, if you notice it hasn't printed well, you can still put it back down and push harder.

Extensions

- When the wildlife creature Adinkra blocks are done, include yourselves in the prairie community quilt by creating self-portrait Adinkra blocks (faces only because of the square format). You will be part of your prairie restoration community as you care for it, so this is one way to celebrate that visually on the quilt. Discuss how humans are part of the ecosystem and some ways humans impact native habitats. Make posters that show responsible ways for humans to interact with the prairie or other native habitats.
- For middle school and high school students, research the types of quilts made throughout history (e.g., whole-cloth, pieced, appliquéd, crazy, patchwork, star, Amish, charm, sampler album, friendship, pioneer). Write or draw descriptions and include the history of each type. Compile the reports into a book. Discuss whether your prairie quilt fits into a specific category or whether it might be a combination of more than one type of quilt.
- Research quilts or quilted cloth pieces made by different cultures throughout the world (e.g., Hmong story cloths, Panamanian molas, Tibetan thangkas, Uzbek koreks, Seminole patchwork, African American quilts, Native American star quilts and button blankets, Hawaiian, Mongolian, and African quilts, Chilean arpilleras). Draw samples and do short class reports. Discuss how you might use other cultural techniques to design a prairie quilt. Would a different design affect the meaning of your quilt? Create more visual impact? Include more facets of the prairie community?
- Explore the variety of uses for quilts cross-culturally and historically. These might include burials when no coffin was available (pioneers); blankets, curtains, bedspreads and decoration; clothing (molas); coded signals or information (Underground Railroad or abolition quilts); memorials (AIDS quilt, Sierra Club Wilderness Quilt Project, Canadian Invitation Quilt Project: A Quilt of Belonging); commemoration of special events; preservation of family history or cultural history (Hmong story cloths, quilted storytelling murals); therapy (child abuse quilts, talking quilts); education (math quilts, wildflower quilts); political statements (Chilean arpilleras); ceremony and religion (Tibetan thangkas); and making cloth when only scraps and recycled cloth is available (Seminole patchwork clothing). Make reports and brainstorm other possible modern uses for quilts. How will you use your class prairie quilt? What does this quilt mean to you and to the school or larger community?
- Research various quilt artists (e.g., Faith Ringgold, Keiko Goke, Clementine Hunter, Alison Olsen Williams) and discuss how their works fit into historical quilt categories. How can quilts be works of art? What is the meaning of specific quilt works or specific

Celebrating a Community: Quilt (cont.)

artists' bodies of work? Do certain quilts show specific cultural or ethnic influences? Design on paper a prairie quilt in the style of one of the quilt artists you have studied. Then explain in a short essay how you have adapted the artist's style, what you feel the quilt expresses, and how this was accomplished through the design.

Additional Resources

- Brumbeau, Jeef and Dail De Marcken. (2001). *The quiltmaker's gift*. Scholastic Press.
- Dock, Bates, Sarah Morse and Karen B. Willing. (1994). *Quilting now & then*. Now & Then Publications.
- Wilson, Johanna and Laura Ingalls Wilder. (2004). *Prairie quilts: Projects for the home inspired by the life and times of Laura Ingalls Wilder*. Krause Publications.
- Kavaya, Karol and Vicki Skemp. (2001). *Community quilts: How to organize, design & make a group quilt*. Lark Books.

Assessments

- Asses one another's quilt pieces and decide which ones are visually and scientifically the most appealing; then create a rubric to describe why.
- Create a self-evaluation based on how well you followed directions, how much care and effort you put into your quilt piece, and where you might need improvements.