



CRAFT IN AMERICA

GEE'S BEND & THE ORIOLE MILL: TIME & TEXTILES EDUCATION GUIDE

Teaching *Gee's Bend & The Oriole Mill: Time & Textiles*

Overview

The Gee's Bend and The Oriole Mill segments introduce topics including the pleasure of hand work, the value of time in making, the quality that can be achieved by producing things slowly, the location of each crafting site as being integral to its marketing, and humans' close relationship to textiles.

Begin with introducing students to the overall lesson, describing what they will be doing over the next few days. The class will fill out a worksheet considering ideas that will be raised in the segments. They will watch the segments and then discuss their own reactions and ideas. They will fill out a second worksheet that involves planning a textile. Finally, they will create a textile on their own or as part of a collective group.

(Video and Discussion: (one to two 45 minute class periods))

Before Viewing

Have students fill out and discuss the worksheet, *Time, Value, and Place: Ideas About Textiles* in anticipation of watching the film segments. Students can work in groups, fostering discussion. Help students find the local businesses and/or industries that may be textile or craft-based, for example, a sign manufacturer that creates and prints vinyl and fabric banners, a sewing factory such as Libby O'Bryan's, tailors and dressmakers who design and make tailored suits and wedding dresses, awning manufacturers, automatic embroiderers (often at sporting goods stores) auto vinyl/seatwork fabricators, and the like. Discuss their worksheet responses as a class, and then watch the videos.

After Viewing/Discussion

Discuss students' reactions to the segments. Potential discussion points include their worksheet responses, students' observations of the films, as well as the following.

- Lucy Mingo started quilting at 14. What does she say about her pleasure in quilting? "It was fun for me; I did it all the time."
- What does she feel about handwork versus machine work? "Quilting on your hand looks better to me than quilting on the machine. See, quilting on the machine, you can do that any time, but you have to take time and do it real well with the hand."
- Why might sewing by hand look better than machine sewing? Could this refer to the care and the human effort that was used? It appears that the patchwork tops of the Gee's quilts are sometimes sewn on sewing machines (there is an old image in the video.) Then they are hand quilted. This is also how Joe Cunningham works.



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What does he say about hand sewing?

Joe Cunningham says "When I sit in my studio and I quilt something by hand...I'll sit and enjoy the silence for four or five hours a day. It makes me feel wealthy. It makes me feel...like the luckiest guy in the world."

- Why do you think he describes taking that time as feeling wealthy? Think about the saying, "Time flies when you're having fun" and the saying, "Time is money." Do these apply to Lucy Mingo's and Joe Cunningham's statements about hand work? Gee's Bend is known for its quilts, and people visit there to see the community and to buy the quilts. Lucy Mingo says that when she makes quilts that are not in the same style as the quilts Gee's Bend is known for, no one buys them. Lucy Mingo says "Since we've been famous most everybody now wants the old fashioned quilts like my mother and my grandmother and my auntie made. Fancy quilts don't sell now. 'Cause I had a couple of fancy quilts. Wouldn't no one look at those..."
- If you could buy a Gee's Bend quilt, would you want it to be in the old fashioned Gee's Bend style? What is the paradox of Lucy Mingo's fancy quilts not being considered part of the Gee's Bend style?
- Considering The Oriole Mill, it is in a location that is known for its rich craft economy. In what ways might the location help the success of the mill? (There was an old mill to be used; there are people from the earlier textile industries who understand the machines, they adopted an artisan identity that matches the philosophy of the craft community.)

Note that The Oriole Mill product line uses the names of other locations to describe a sense of place associated with each pattern and colorway, for example Brooklyn and Cape Cod. How do we associate colors, patterns and moods with places?

- What connections are there between the Gee's Bend quilters and The Oriole Mill? Both make textiles, and in particular, both make blankets. What are the meanings and metaphors we associate with blankets? How do the Gee's Bend and The Oriole Mill processes vary, and how are they similar? While Libby O'Bryan uses machines for sewing The Oriole Mill's products, what does she say about working fast or slowly? Libby O'Bryan says "It's not about how fast we can do it, it's how good we can do it. Taking the time to do things well allows us to extend the life of what we're making."
- How does this compare to Lucy Mingo's comment about hand sewing? Bethanne Knudson says "It's only in recent history that fabric has become a disposable item."
- What made textiles so cheap that they could be considered disposable? What are the benefits and costs of cheap textiles? (They are affordable to more people; they do not last as long; they become a waste problem.)



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- How does The Oriole Mill alter the industrial processes that make textile items cheap? (They slowed down their looms: they use fewer looms and limit their production; they emphasize quality over quantity; they advertise the quality and beauty of the item rather than trying to foster sales with a low cost.)
Bethanne Knudson says "I think textiles are often underappreciated, because they are so much a part of almost every moment of our daily lives. Right at birth we're wrapped in cloth, or at least historically we were, and for burial we're wrapped in cloth. So really from cradle to grave cloth plays a very ever-present part in our lives."
- Do you agree with her? Do you feel you take textiles for granted? Does this make you consider textiles differently?

Studio Production (Five or more 45-minute class periods)

Note: Time to be allowed for studio work will vary according to the scale of the projects you decide on. Allow time for students to learn the technique they are interested in, to design their idea, and then to create the textiles. During studio work, students will design and produce a square of needlework inspired by the Gee's Bend quilts.

Worksheet: *A Collection of Squares: Making a Textile* (One 45-minute class period)

This worksheet helps students plan their textile project. They may choose to work in groups or separately, and they may plan an intended purpose for their textile design. After they complete the worksheet, have students begin by creating small sketches of square designs on graph paper, dividing the square into smaller squares and then choosing colors and adding surface designs. While allowing for students to pursue alternate ideas they may develop, a square design is a good place to start as it can be created by any of the needlework methods: quilting, weaving, sewing, or knitting. Students can choose whether to make multiple squares and then join them together, or whether to create one whole square with various textures and colors incorporated within it. For example, Lucy Mingo's "Snake Quilt" appears to be of whole cloth (or very large segments) rather than joined small patches of fabric; it is all white, with the design added by the quilting lines.

Because of the example of collective work in the Gee's Bend segment, students may decide to join together in a collective effort to produce a project. Some ideas include creating a collective patchwork or woven piece to be displayed in school, crafting small blankets to donate to a shelter or nursing home, or making hats from rectangles for a children's winter clothing drive.

Techniques

Quilting differs from patchwork, though the two are often combined. Patchwork is joining together pieces or patches of fabric with hand or machine sewing. The design is created by the different colors, sizes, and patterns of the patches. Quilting refers to the stitching, by hand or machine, that finishes a sandwich of fabric: a top piece, often made from patchwork, a middle section added for warmth, made of batting or a lofty fabric such as wool or flannel, and a backing piece. The sandwich is pinned together with the right sides of the top fabric and the



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backing fabric each facing outwards. The quilting is the decorative stitching that sews through all three layers and creates the distinctive dimpled appearance. It adds texture and design. The edges of the quilt can be finished in various ways: with a sewn-on binding, or blanket-stitched (an overcast stitch), or zigzag stitched. The edges can also be left rough and fraying for an alternative look.

Weaving will be most accessible (in a classroom without large looms) by using potholder looms; strung not for potholders (with potholder loops) but for regular weaving, and using yarn or string. You can also make looms from sturdy cardboard in the desired size. Cut slits along the top and bottom edge of cardboard to a depth of 1/2". The distance between slots will determine the density of the weave; closer slots will make a more intricate, dense fabric. Warp (thread) the loom by wrapping string or yarn from the top left slot to the bottom left slot, and following with each adjacent slot, from top to bottom and left to right. Fasten the yarn to the last slot so that it may later be untied. If the loom is also warped around to the back, you can create a tube of weaving. Look at online tutorials for how to warp cardboard looms. Woven squares can be sewn or laced together to make larger pieced textiles. Looms can also be fashioned from sturdy picture frames, and this may allow the construction of larger weavings. Hammer a line of small nails (brads) along the top and bottom rungs for warping the loom, or simply warp the frame without nails and use masking tape to hold the warp threads in place at the top and bottom.

Sewing a textile can include patchwork design. Or sewing could involve using whole cloth and embroidering it, or adding applique patchwork on the surface as Joe Cunningham did with his patched quilt, stitched by hand or by machine.

Knitting for beginners is easier on larger needles, sizes 6 to 10, using worsted weight yarn (the most common yarn size.) If help is needed in instructing, there are most likely students or staff who know how to knit and can share their expertise. There are countless forms of knit stitches. A simple square of knitting can become elaborate through the combining of different stitches, different colors, and various sizes, textures, and types of yarns and strings.

Reflection

When the textiles are complete, students can make artist's statement tags that describe the item, and they can display their work in the school. As a class, discuss student's perceptions of the project when making their textiles. Did time fly by, go slowly, and was there a sense of finishing (or not) "on time"? What variables affected the time it took? Was the time spent enjoyable? Comparing experiences, which processes seemed to go faster than others? Were some students faster at sewing or weaving or knitting than others? How do students value what they've produced in relation to the time it took to make their textile? How do they value it in relation to how it will be used, or in sentimental value? And does any of the work seem to have a sense of location attached to it, either evident in the design, or in the students' perceptions? How could naming the work potentially connect it to a specific place?

Assessment



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In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; through students' writings and responses; and/or by reviewing the students' studio work, it should be evident that the student:

- Compare and contrast ideas about the value of time in handwork and machine made items.
- Describe and analyze their personal connection to textiles.
- Understand the use of locations as a marketing strategy, and find examples in their community.
- Design and produce a pieced textile construction.

Extensions

Students may examine the work of the following fiber artists on the Craft In America website.

Quilting:

- Mississippi Cultural Crossroads features the community group, Crossroads Quilters; a group of artists who create quilts celebrating their traditions and heritage.
- Terese Agnew creates intricately stitched quilts with social and political themes.
- Faith Ringgold creates pictorial quilts that include applique and embroidery. Her quilts have served as illustrations in books.

Weaving:

- Lia Cook uses a computerized jacquard loom to make enormous tapestries. She studies the affect of art making on the brain.
- Kay Sekimachi weaves sculptural forms in dramatic shapes.
- Jim Bassler uses natural dyes for his fibers, and he sometimes cuts apart and reconstructs his weaving.
- Jack Lenor Larsen is a weaver who has designed textiles for furniture, carpets, airplanes, and office buildings.