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Art Activity

Abolitionist Crafts
1832-1877, A Nation Divided

Background Information

In the 1800s, women were expected to conform to behaviors and roles that society deemed “appropriate” and were not supposed to express their political beliefs publicly. Despite these constraints, during the Antebellum period, women found ways to contribute to the Abolitionist Movement. Many made anti-slavery crafts that were then sold to support the political and legal branches of the movement. Women used their domestic skills, which included sewing, needlepoint, and doll making, to create these crafts.

click [HERE](#) for the full resource



Quaker Male Black Doll and Quaker Female Black Doll

Quaker Male Black Doll and Quaker Female Black Doll, ca. 1800-1840. Philadelphia History Museum, objects from the collection of the Friends Historical Association, gift of Anna Walton. Photo, Bridgeman Art Library.

Task

- Students will...consider the process and politics behind an abolitionist flag created in Andover, OH in 1859.
- Students will...analyze this antebellum-era craft and the ways in which the creator used it to express her beliefs.
- Students will...create their own version of an abolitionist flag inspired by the constitution of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society using hand-stitching and appliqué.

Materials

- Assorted cotton fabrics (pre-cut in rectangular shapes for flag base)
 - *Optional: Iron-on interfacing (suggested brand: Heat N Bond)*
- Hand-sewing needles
- Assorted embroidery thread (suggested brands: DMC and Anchor)
- Scissors
- Pencils
- Scrap/sketch paper
 - *Optional: Cardstock for creating templates*
- Fabric chalk pencils

Steps

- Think about the word activism and the ways in which people are able to spread information about the causes they support.
 - What does activism mean to you? How would you define it?
 - What are some causes that individuals and groups have fought for over the course of U.S. history?
 - What different modes of activism have people used? What do you think would indicate that a method of activism had been effective?
 - How do we raise awareness today? How important is imagery to the ways that we spread information and share our beliefs?

Steps



Unknown maker, *[Twenty Star American Flag]*, ca. 1859. Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05762.

- Take a look at the [Twenty Star American Flag, ca. 1859](#) and record your answers to the following questions on a piece of paper:
 - What do you notice about this flag?
 - How many stars do you count? How many stripes?
 - This flag is from the year 1859. What clues might knowing this give us about the reason for the number of stars and stripes that the maker chose to sew?

Steps

- The maker of the flag included only twenty stars and nine stripes, leaving out every state and original colony that continued to uphold the practice of slavery. What statement does this make?
- Who do you think made this flag? Why do you think that?
- In the 1800s, women were discouraged from expressing their political beliefs. Some women openly defied these expectations, and others found ways to express their beliefs through methods considered acceptable by society because they were within the domestic or moral spheres. What does this tell us about women's experiences with activism in the antebellum era?

Steps

- Abolitionist crafts like this flag were primarily made by white middle- and upper-class women who had the opportunity and means to craft. The economic and social restrictions of racism and sexism made it difficult for Black women to find outlets for sharing their beliefs, but they were still active agents in the fight for abolition. The first women's abolitionist group was founded by Black women in Massachusetts. To learn more about the Antebellum Era activism of Black women, read the preamble from the [Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society's \(SFASS\) constitution](#).
 - What were the core principles of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society?
 - What does this document tell us about other forms of abolitionist activism that women engaged in during this time?
 - What makes each of these forms of activism--organizing and fundraising--effective?
 - Why is it so significant that the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society was founded by and for Black women?
 - How might we represent some of the key principles from the SFASS constitution visually?

Steps

- You will now have the opportunity to design and sew your own Abolitionist flags inspired by the SFASS constitution.
- Before you begin, consider how you will convey the core beliefs of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society. Are there any specific images or symbols that could be used to do this? What phrases from the document might inspire your design?
- Begin by using your pencil and scrap paper to plan the composition of your flag by sketching how your shapes and symbols might come together to convey a specific message. You should keep your shapes relatively simple so that they are easier to stitch onto your flags.

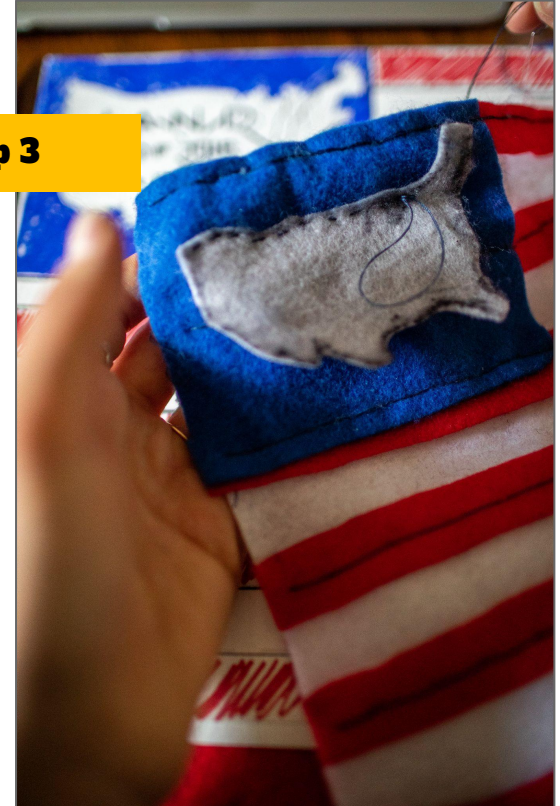
Steps

- You will be creating your flags using appliqué, which means that you will be sewing shapes onto a base fabric to create a larger design. First, choose a piece of fabric to use as the base of your flag.
 - The base fabric can be a solid color or patterned, but as you are choosing think about whether the color or patterns are significant to your design or cause.
- Next, choose the fabric pieces you want to use for your shapes. You can trace your shapes or draw them directly onto the fabric using a chalk fabric pencil. When you are finished, you can start to cut out your shapes
- *Adding interfacing will make shapes sturdier when you sew them onto your flag and will also keep the edges of the fabric from fraying over time. However, this step is time-consuming and involves more materials. You can choose to skip this step and spend more time focusing on your designs or you can use the Appliqué Tips on slide 15 to help with interfacing.*

Steps

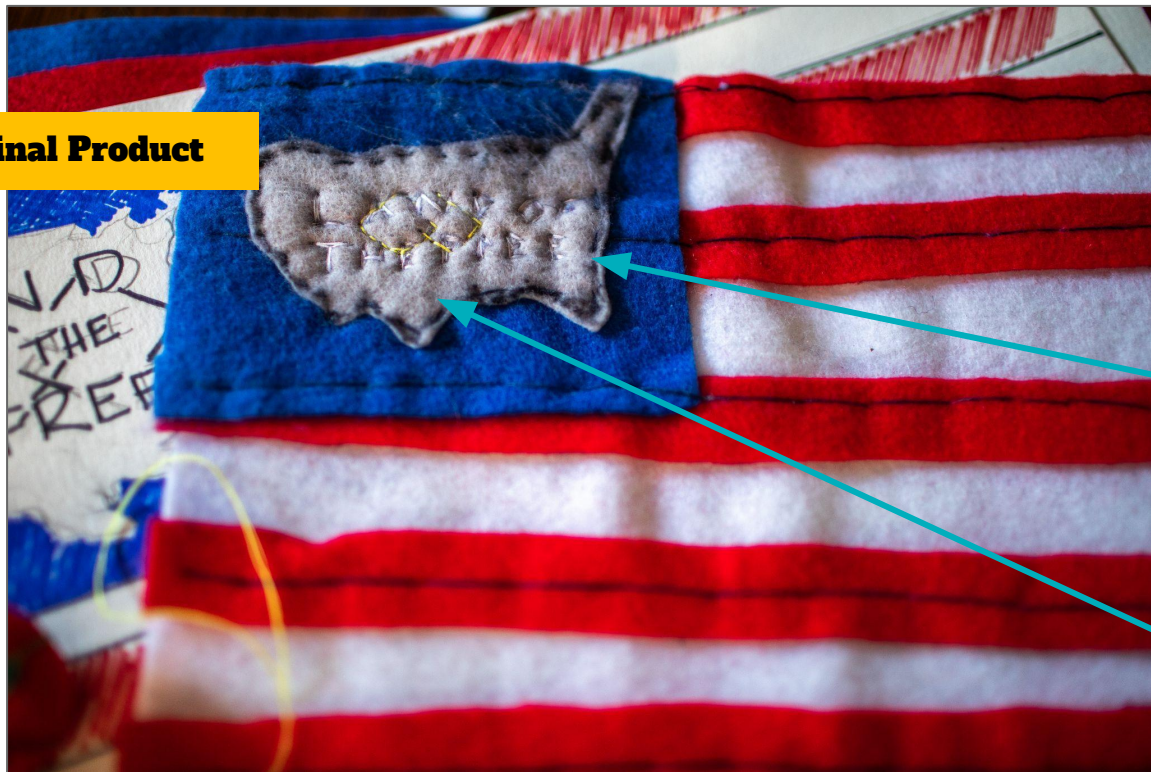
- Once your shapes are ready, you can begin the appliqué process.
- You should make sure that the base fabric is neat and flat. Then arrange and trace the shapes onto the base fabric with fabric chalk pencil to make sure you are happy with the composition.
- Next, you will need your sewing needle and embroidery thread. Thread the needle with the embroidery thread and tie a knot at the end of the thread. You should begin sewing from the bottom up so that the knot is on the underside of the fabric. You can experiment with different types of stitching, but a running stitch is the easiest for beginners. Make sure you are stitching as close to the edge of the shapes as possible.

Example



Example

Final Product



in yellow, I
embroidered two
broken chain links

“Land of the Free”

Material Modifications

- For cutting the fabric, it can be very difficult to use regular scissors. If you have access to sewing scissors or an exacto knife, I recommend using it for this project.
- If you plan to mark out your symbols on the felt (or other material) before you cut it, keep in mind that you can flip the piece before you sew it. This means that it may make sense to draw the image out backwards so when you turn it over it is facing in the correct direction.
- For my project, I laid out all of the material before I started the appliqué process, and I found that pinning the pieces into place helped me to keep everything in order while I continued to work.

Appliqué Tips

- To create more uniform shapes to sew onto the base fabric (especially for repeating patterns), templates for each shape can be created on cardstock first, cut out, and traced onto the fabric. You can choose to print templates or provide stencils for tracing shapes.
- To keep shapes from moving while sewing them onto the fabric base, you can use fabric pins to hold them in place. If you have chosen to include the interfacing step, double-sided interfacing can be used to iron the shapes onto the base fabric so they remain stationary while stitching.
 - You will need a large sheet of interfacing from which you will cut out pieces that are slightly larger than each of your shapes. Interfacing should be ironed on to the underside of the fabric. After ironing, you should cut the excess interfacing off of the edges of the shapes.
 - If you want to make multiple shapes using the same fabric, you can save time by ironing the interfacing onto a larger piece of fabric before you draw and cut out the shapes.
- Embroidery thread colors can be chosen depending on the look you are trying to achieve. If you do not want the thread to show, try choosing one that is as close in color to your fabric as possible. If you like the look of the thread, get creative with the color choice so it stands out against the fabric!

Art Vocabulary

- **appliqué:** A sewing technique that involves stitching a small piece of fabric onto a larger one to make a pattern or design.
- **composition:** The arrangement of elements within a work of art.
- **interfacing:** Material sewn or fused between the facing and the outside of a garment for stiffening, reinforcing, and shape retention.
- **pattern:** A design principle concerned with the repetition of a motif or other elements in a consistent manner to create an overall design.
- **running stitch:** A basic sewing stitch in which the needle and thread run over and under small portions of fabric at regular intervals to form a straight or curving broken line.

Historical Vocabulary

- **abolitionist:** A person or group that wanted to end the practice of slavery.
- **antebellum:** Before the American Civil War.
- **Cult of Domesticity:** A term historians use for the rules for middle-class female behavior that emerged in the first half of the 1800s.
- **John Brown:** An abolitionist who tried to start an armed slave uprising in 1859.
- **Quaker:** A Christian religious group founded in the 1650s. Quakers were early advocates for ending slavery in the United States.
- **sectional crisis:** A term historians use to describe the period in the 1850s when the divisions between free and slaveholding states became more pronounced.

Reflection Questions

When you have finished, reflect on the process and inspiration behind your flag and write a statement based on the following questions:

- What part of the SFASS constitution did you choose to focus on and why?
- How was your design inspired by the abolitionist flag?
- What shapes and imagery did you choose to include in your design? What statement is your flag making?
- What was it like to create this flag using appliqué? How did it feel to see each of the pieces come together to create a larger message?
- What does the physical labor it takes to sew and make crafts tell us about women's commitment to the abolitionist cause?
- How did this act empower women in the 1800s? How did it feel to engage in this process in the 21st century?

Share your work!

We would love to see your artwork!

Consider sharing your work with the Education Division at the New-York Historical Society. Please send it to:

wams@nyhistory.org

Include your grade level and location. You can also send us feedback, questions, and thoughts!