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HISTORICAL
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Art Activity

Quapaw Masterpiece

1692-1783, Settler Colonialism and the American Revolution

Background Information

Considered to be masterpieces of Indigenous art, painted buffalo hides created by Quapaw women in the 18th century functioned as both wearable and decorative pieces. Tanned, stretched, and painted by Quapaw artists, the hides were renowned throughout the Louisiana colony. Their narrative quality and the symbolism of the painted imagery told stories of battles, treaties, celebrations, and religious ceremonies. In the past, these artists would have used a bone or wood stylus to paint these hides with natural mineral and vegetable pigments, made from things such as swelling cottonwood buds or burnt yellow clay. The hides also gave historians insight into the Quapaw's interactions with French colonists and other Indigenous tribes.



Robe: "the three villages"

Quapaw, Robe: "the three villages," ca. 1740. Bibliothèque nationale de France-Musée du quai Branly – Jacques-Chirac.

click [HERE](#) for the full resource

Task

- Students will...consider how Quapaw women used these works of art to tell a story by creating their own narrative paintings.
- Students will...analyze “the three villages” robe and discuss how the Quapaw artists used symbols to depict each element of the scene, as well as how all of these symbols came together to tell a story.
- Students will...use fabric paint to create either a wearable or decorative piece that uses their own symbols to tell a story about their community.

Materials

- Fabric squares or cotton t-shirts
- Paintbrushes
- Sponges
- Cardboard
- Fabric Paint (suggested brands: Jaquard and Tulip, Tulip Slick Fabric Paint, or Crayola Fabric Markers)
- Clothespins
- Small containers for water

Steps

- Begin by analyzing “[the three villages](#)” robe and record your answers to the following questions on a piece of paper:
 - What are some of the things that you notice about this piece?
 - What/who is being depicted? How did the artist choose to depict each aspect of the painting?
 - What symbols do you notice? What do you think their significance might have been to the Quapaw people in the 18th century?
 - What story is each symbol telling by itself? Why might the artists have chosen to represent each thing this way?
 - What story does the whole painting tell? How did the artist create this narrative?
 - What does this piece tell us about the Quapaw community? What does it tell us about the roles of its people and their interactions with the French and other Indigenous tribes?
 - Why might someone have made this piece?



This piece depicts Quapaw villages and a French settlement, and the figures shown are the Quapaw defeating another Indigenous tribe and participating in a dance or ceremony.

Steps

- Next, think about the elements of your community that are most important to you. You can choose to focus on your school community or the larger community/neighborhood that you live in. Consider the following questions:
 - What people, places, and things are important to your community? Which of these things do you want to include in your painting?
 - What symbols will you create to represent these things? What colors will you use?
 - What story do you want to tell about your community? How might you tell this story through a work of art?
 - Review the Quapaw piece once more. How does the placement of the symbols impact the way the viewer interprets the narrative? Where does the narrative begin and end? What kind of composition do you want to create on your piece?
- You will now create either a wearable or decorative piece. (NOTE: Since Quapaw artists painted skins that were used as both robes and decoration for the home, you may choose to paint your narrative piece on a t-shirt or on a square of fabric.)

Steps

- Begin by stretching your fabric over a piece of cardboard to ensure that paint doesn't bleed through. Once you have pulled the fabric tightly over the cardboard, use clothespins to fasten them together.
- Now that the fabric is ready for painting, you should think about which symbols you are going to use to represent the parts of their community. Quapaw artists used simple geometric shapes to represent ideas, objects, and activities in their paintings. You may also draw inspiration from these types of forms. You can start with sketch paper and a pencil if you want to experiment before painting!
- Next you will need your fabric paint, paintbrushes, and a cup of water to begin your piece. You can also use sponges to create texture or stencils to create shapes.
 - As an alternative, you can also use fabric markers or Tulip Slick Fabric Paint to eliminate the need for paintbrushes and extra materials.
- Once you have finished your painting, set it aside to dry for at least 24 hours.

Example



Step 1



Step 2



Step 3

Example

Final Product



Material Modifications

- If you do not have clothespins to secure your fabric square, you can use paperclips or rubber bands.
- Make sure to rinse your paint brush in the water before switching colors, but remember that the water will thin out the fabric paint if the brush is still wet when you dip it into another color.
- If you are using Tulip Slick Fabric Paint, it is easier to apply the paint directly from the bottle as opposed to using the paintbrushes.
- If you are using white fabric paint, it is important to note that it will dry more transparent than opaque, so you may have either to apply a thicker coat the first time or go back in later and apply a second coat.

Fabric Paint Tips

- If you are painting on t-shirts, the t-shirt should be washed beforehand in case it shrinks in the wash. Shrinking can distort the design if the shirt is not washed before painting.
- Cardboard should be placed inside the t-shirt to keep the paint from bleeding through onto the back of the t-shirt.
- Do not dilute fabric paints too much with water when applying with a paintbrush. Water is not needed for fabric paint that can be applied directly from the bottle.
- If you are painting on a t-shirt, do not forget to heat-treat before washing so that the paint sets! Paint should be left to dry for at least 24 hours and then ironed. Dry iron the t-shirt on the reverse side (or place a scrap piece of fabric over the painted side) for 3-5 minutes. Tulip Fabric Paint does NOT require heat-setting; it bonds to the fabric while you work.

Art Vocabulary

- **composition:** The arrangement of the elements of art in a painting or other works of art.
- **geometric:** Shapes that are precise and regular.
- **narrative:** Art that tells a story.

Historical Vocabulary

- **calumet:** A ceremonial pipe.
- **Chickasaw:** The Indigenous tribe that originally inhabited territory that stretched across modern-day Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Today, the Chickasaw nation is headquartered in Oklahoma.
- **hide:** Animal skin.
- **Louisiana:** Founded in 1682, this colony was the second North American colony claimed by the French. The territory stretched from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains.
- **Quapaw:** The Indigenous tribe that inhabited the territory known today as Arkansas in the early eighteenth century. Today the Quapaw Nation is headquartered in Oklahoma.
- **sovereignty:** Self-government.
- **tan:** The process of turning animal skin into leather.

Reflection Questions

When you are finished with your piece, reflect on the art-making process using the following questions:

- How did you choose the elements of your community that you wanted to include?
- What was it like to create symbols to represent the people, places, and things in your painting?
- What decorative elements did you choose to incorporate?
- How did they add to your piece?
- What story did you tell and why?
- How did you use your artistic composition to tell that story?
- How is the viewer meant to interpret the narrative?
- How did this process help you understand how the Quapaw translated events and oral histories into beautiful works of art?

Extension

When you are back in the classroom, create a group display of your paintings with your classmates. Consider what a historian from one hundred years in the future could learn about the past by viewing all of your paintings together.

- What stories would they tell?
- What would they help people of the future learn about the people, interactions, and events that took place within your communities?

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!