



Button Blanket Art

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Grade 4

Subject Social Studies

Topic Northwest Coast Button Blanket Art

Descriptive Sentence

Students will explore cultural aspects of the Northwest Coast First Nations People and the Button blanket tradition & art

Curricular Outcome or Expectations

Please see the lesson plan preview for the expectations/outcomes for your province.

Materials

Construction Paper-1 red, 1 black for each student

White dots of paper or sequins

Glue

Scissors

Photocopy of symmetrical template (see downloadable Butterfly template)

Space Requirements

The classroom

Background Information

Button blankets have been in use for well over a century. They are part of the regalia of many Northwest Coast First Nations people including the Haida, Nisga'a, Tsimshian and Tlingit peoples. The designs/crests on the button blanket identify the dancer's/wearers family history and lineage. They were first created by the Northwest Coast people's after contact with fur traders, explorers and the Hudson's Bay who introduced wool blankets to them. The women of these various First Nations transformed these blue/black blankets into ceremonial robes by affixing an appliquéd crest and a frame (of a contrasting color-usually red). The crest and frame were then outlined in dentalium shells. Other materials used to outline the crest and the frame included shell buttons, abalone shell and pearl buttons. Today Button Blankets are often outlined with shell buttons, plastic buttons, beads, metal decorations etc.

Button blankets are worn to a variety of ceremonies including potlatches, pole raisings, namings, memorials, feasts, weddings, graduations, public performances and dances. If one is to receive their traditional First Nations name it is essential to have the females of the family (usually the aunts) design, create and sew a button blanket for the person receiving their name.



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The Button Blanket is an art form unique to the Northwest Coast First Nations and an important symbol of our culture, traditions, community and history.

Getting Ready

The Button Blanket is a symbol of the culture, tradition and history of the Northwest Coast First Nations people. Discuss who the Northwest Coast First Nations people are and the importance of the Button Blanket.

- Look at a map of Canada to discover the area where the Northwest Coast First Nations people live.
- Show samples or pictures of Button Blankets of the Haida, Tlingit, Nisga'a, Tsimshian or other Northwest coast First Nation that you have researched. Show pictures in books or slides of button blankets.

**Please take a moment to review the
"Button Blanket" video**

- Notice the various placements of buttons on the button blankets. Discuss designing and drawing the crest. (Typically you select the crest, design the crest and use ovoids, s-shapes, u-shapes that represent the inner body parts). This is based on the principle that an animal's shape/form and its main parts drawn in one continuous outline-the primary formline. Inner parts play a secondary role to the primary formline. Templates of ovoids, u-shapes, s-shapes can be used to practice. (See downloadable template)
- Look for symmetry on the button blankets, you should be able to identify some on every button blanket. Identify ovoids, u-shapes, s-shapes. What do you notice about the placement of the buttons on the various button blankets?
- Look at the symbols/crests used on button blankets. Ask the students to think about what the symbols might represent (e.g. Eagle could represent- Visionary, Courage, Wisdom, Strength, Grace).

Development

- Discuss the occasions for which the Button Blanket was used.
- Discuss the crests that the Northwest Coast First Nations used.
- Animals, mammals, plants and celestial bodies are symbols that are used on button blankets. Why?
- Discuss family lineage, extended family.
- Discuss how the use of the Northwest coast symbols as a form of communication, what does a crest on a button blanket signify about the wearer?
- Talk with the students about their extended family and have them write down some of their names. Discuss and relate how they keep track of who their extended family is. Do they keep a family tree at home? If the student was to go to a family reunion how would they identify the members of their family?

Application

Explain to the students the process of preparing the design before starting the button blanket. The crest needed to be selected, designed, the pattern/template made, design transfer to the red fabric,



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cut the crest out, cut out the frame, sew. It could be a very lengthy process that required a lot of work and was usually done by the women. Women sometimes work as a group to speed up the button blanket making process.

- Give each student a sheet of the red construction paper, use the standard 8 ½ x 11 size.

**Please take a moment to review the
"Creating the Frame" video**

- Measure one inch around red paper for the frame (the frame should include the two short sides and the third side will be considered the top side).
- Glue the red frame onto the black construction paper.
- Keep the inner piece of the red paper for the crest.
- Select your crest eg. Butterfly
- Cut out crest (silhouette)

**Please take a moment to review the
"Creating the Crest" video**

- Cut silhouette in half
- Draw ovoids, U-shapes or S-shapes on the "1/2" cut out
- Carefully cut out the ovoids, S-shapes or U-shapes
- Place "1/2" crest on red paper and trace the silhouette and the ovoids/split-u's/s-shapes
- Flip the cut out to complete the whole crest
- Repeat previous step
- Carefully cut out the crest on the red paper
- Glue the crest on to the black paper
- Use sticky dots or small circles of paper as buttons and place on the frame and around the crest

Each Button Blanket is unique among the different First Nations groups of the Northwest Coast. Each First Nations has clans, crests and designs unique to their traditional territories. For example the Bear can have a variety of meanings such as strength, motherhood or teaching, depending on the territory/nation from which you come.

- The teacher hands out half of a symmetrical design (e.g. Butterfly, frog, flower) to each student.
- The students can now transfer their design onto the smaller red piece of construction paper by tracing the design onto the folded paper.
- Students insert ovoids, s-shapes or u-shapes into the design on one half of the design. (see down loadable template).
- The ovoid, s-shape, u-shape are basic shapes used in most Northwest Coast art



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**Please take a moment to review the
"Completing the Button Blanket"**

- Cut the outline of the crest out and carefully cut out the inner designs by poking the scissor into both sides and carefully cutting out the ovoid, s-shape or u-shapes.
- Traditionally the Northwest Coast First Nations people use melton wool for the button blanket and it measures approximately 5 feet wide by 4 feet high, depending on the size of the wearer.
- Place the "buttons" on the button blanket by gluing on the dots. They are typically placed around the design and around the inner frame. Remember to look at the sample pictures and be sure to make your design symmetrical.

Closure

Have the class reflect on the meaning and many uses of the button blanket.

In small groups have students present their button blankets to one another. Display the button blankets in the classroom.