

# ANCESTRY & innovation

African American Art from the American Folk Art Museum

## Art Around the World: Found Objects in Folk Art

**GRADE LEVEL** Elementary  
**SUBJECT** Visual Arts  
**ESTIMATED TIME** Two 45-minute periods

### Lesson Objectives

#### Students will:

- ▶ Consider that alternative and unusual materials, including found objects, can be used to create art.
- ▶ View and discuss three folk art objects created from nontraditional materials.
- ▶ Experiment with transforming everyday objects into original works of art.

### Supplies

- ▶ Images of *A Thousand Tongues Can Never Tell*, *Mother Oatman*, and *The Last Frontier*.
- ▶ Found objects collected by students at home and supplemented by teacher-supplied items. (Encourage students to look for unusual materials: toothbrushes, magnets, coins, bottle caps, pieces of old toys, soda cans, bubble wrap, pine cones, seashells, etc.)
- ▶ Art supplies to attach and transform found objects (clear packing tape, colored tape, glue, string, wire, paint, etc.).

### DAY 1 Introduction

Artists have worked with found objects—materials not specifically created for art production—throughout history.

- ▶ Ask the students if they have ever worked with found materials.
- ▶ Discuss some of the reasons that artists might use found objects.

### DAY 1 Discussion

Have students view and discuss the images, first individually and then together. Ask them:

- ▶ Can you tell what found materials were used to create these artworks?
- ▶ How did the artist transform, or change, the materials?
- ▶ Does knowing what materials were used change the way you look at the artworks?
- ▶ When you look at the images, do you focus more on the materials or on the artworks themselves? At both? Or neither?
- ▶ Could these artworks have been made from other materials? How would they have been different?

### DAY 2 Activity

- ▶ Ask students to look through their collected objects and brainstorm about how to turn them into an artwork, either representational or abstract. Have them experiment with different objects and concepts before settling on one idea.
- ▶ Prepare students that working with found objects can be frustrating, as they often behave differently than other, more familiar art supplies. Students may need to invent ways to change their objects and attach different objects together.
- ▶ Conclude with reflections about students' experiences and feelings about working with found materials. What were the challenges? What were the benefits? Do the students have any new insights about why some artists prefer working with found materials?
- ▶ Share finished artwork with the class in presentations or displays.

This poster is an educational component of **ANCESTRY & INNOVATION**, a national traveling exhibition organized by the American Folk Art Museum, New York, and circulated by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The exhibition was made possible by MetLife Foundation.

The National Endowment for the Arts provided generous support to the American Folk Art Museum through its American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius initiative.

All works are from the collection of the American Folk Art Museum, New York. Text by American Folk Art Museum, Education Department. Photos by Gavin Ashworth. Poster design by Zamore Design.

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### A Thousand Tongues Can Never Tell

Always comforted and inspired by nature, Bessie Harvey worked exclusively with found wood (tree limbs, stumps, driftwood, branches, and roots). She attached tree branches together or embellished single branches with paint, glitter, fabric, beads, and wood putty. Often the size, shape, and features of the tree limbs suggested the sculpture's subject matter.

This work depicts the “lying, deceiving people” Harvey encountered as her artistic fame grew. “One tongue can’t tell enough lies,” she said, “so it just creates more tongues to tell more lies.”

**A THOUSAND TONGUES CAN NEVER TELL, 1991-1993**  
Bessie Harvey (1929-1994)  
Alcoa, Tenn.; painted wood with shells, wooden beads, and miscellany; 59 x 34 x 30"; Blanchard-Hill Collection, gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V. Blanchard Jr., 1998.10.25



### Mother Oatman

Artmaking became an act of healing for retired police officer Kevin Sampson, who began to create sculptural tributes like *Mother Oatman* after the tragic deaths of his wife, newborn son, and cousin. Sampson collects discarded objects from neighborhood streets and from friends and family members. “I rescue other people’s memories left in the objects they leave behind,” says Sampson, “and use that power to fuel my creations.”

This work is a portrait of Avada Oatman, the artist’s best friend’s grandmother and a quiet and powerful presence during his childhood.

**MOTHER OATMAN, 2000**  
Kevin Sampson (b. 1954)  
Newark, N.J.; mixed media; 26 x 23 x 9 1/2"; gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler, 2000.7.2



### The Last Frontier

This artwork by Willie LeRoy Elliot serves as a loveseat, side table, and tray. Constructed of salvaged wood painted in vibrant colors, the main structure depicts a male figure with a snake slinking around his neck. Plastic knives, rearview mirrors, broken glass, tiles, plastic, metal, masks, and popsicle sticks enliven the piece.

This work is based on a childhood memory. On his way to collect water from the family well, Elliot confronted a snake that he thought was poisonous. His grandfather killed the snake and protected him from harm.

**THE LAST FRONTIER, c. 1988-1989**  
Willie LeRoy Elliot (b. 1943)  
Detroit, Mich.; mixed media on wood; 53 x 60 x 29"; Blanchard-Hill Collection, gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V. Blanchard Jr., 1998.10.21

# ANCESTRY & innovation

African American Art from the American Folk Art Museum

## Coming Together: Creating a Community Quilt

**GRADE LEVEL** Elementary  
**SUBJECT** Social Studies and Visual Arts  
**ESTIMATED TIME** Two 45–60-minute periods

### Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- ▶ Learn that quilting techniques, styles, and traditions are passed down through families and communities.
- ▶ Work collaboratively to plan, design, and create a quilt.
- ▶ Practice negotiating, collaborating, problem solving, and planning in their artmaking.

### Supplies

- ▶ Images of *Strip Variation Quilt*, *Hens Quilt*, and *Snail Trail Quilt*.
- ▶ Paper and pencils for sketches.
- ▶ Scissors.
- ▶ White glue or glue sticks.
- ▶ Quilting materials (assorted fabric scraps in a mix of prints and solid colors; larger fabric pieces, such as canvas drop cloths or sheets, for backgrounds/supports).
- ▶ Yarn, buttons, ribbons, beads, etc. (optional).

### DAY 1 Introduction

- ▶ Ask students to share their knowledge and understanding of quilts and quiltmaking.
- ▶ Define a quilt. (A quilt is generally defined as three layers stitched, or quilted, together: a top layer of fabric, a middle layer of cotton or wool batting for warmth, and a bottom layer of fabric.)
- ▶ Identify some of the differences between quilts and other blankets.

### DAY 1 Discussion

Have students view and discuss these quilts images, first individually and then together. Ask them:

- ▶ What do you notice about this quilt?
- ▶ What one word would you choose to describe each quilt? In addition to words that physically describe them, consider the mood, emotion, or energy of each quilt.
- ▶ Compare and contrast these three very different quilts.

### DAY 1 Activity

- ▶ Have students work in small groups to plan, sketch, and create a quilt.
- ▶ Offer students the choice of creating individual quilt squares that will be joined together to form one large quilt (see *Hens Quilt*) or structuring their designs asymmetrically (see *Strip Variation Quilt*).
- ▶ Facilitate negotiations and agreement during the planning and design process. (Each group must reach consensus on its design and decide how the work will be shared among group members.)

### DAY 2 Activity

- ▶ Assist students as they execute their quilts in fabric collage. Fabric pieces may be glued onto a fabric background. Larger pieces of fabric (such as old bed sheets or canvas drops) may be used as a background or support for the quilts. (Working with fabric best captures the experience of quiltmaking; however, if fabric is unavailable, paper collage may be substituted.)
- ▶ Add yarn, buttons, or other embellishments, if desired.
- ▶ Conclude with reflections about students' experiences, discussing both the process and experience of working on a communal art form.
- ▶ Share finished artwork with the class in presentations or displays.



**STRIP VARIATION QUILT, 1991**  
Mozell Benson (b.1934)  
Waverly, Ala.; cotton and wool with synthetic yarn; 89 x 70½"; museum purchase made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, with matching funds from The Great American Quilt Festival 3, 1991.13.9; photo by Scott Bowron



**HENS QUILT, 1981**  
Pearlie Posey (1894–1984)  
Yazoo City, Miss.; cotton and synthetics; 71 x 69"; gift of Maude and James Wahlman, 1991.32.2; photo by Matt Hoeberrmann

### About the Quilts

Quilts have long been made and treasured in American homes—as functional bed covers, beautiful objects, and family heirlooms. The story of these three African American quiltmakers begins in the home. Mozell Benson began making quilts to keep her own family warm and went on to discover her passion and talent for quilting. Pearlie Posey and Mary Maxtion were born into quilting families. Maxtion's mother taught her to quilt, and Posey learned from her grandmother. Both lost their mothers early in life. Quilting connected them to the memory of their own mothers and to the generations of African American quiltmakers that came before them.

Quilting, like many forms of folk art, is often learned at home and passed down from generation to generation. The patterns, styles, and techniques found in these quilts can be traced back to the days of slavery. Some quilting experts even claim that many African American quilting motifs have their roots in African textile arts. The transmission of skills and patterns from mother to daughter, friend to friend, and within families and communities has preserved and carried on quilting traditions for centuries and into the present day.



**SNAIL TRAIL QUILT, 1990**  
Mary Maxtion (b. 1914)  
Boligee, Ala.; cotton; 77 x 89½"; museum purchase made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, with matching funds from The Great American Quilt Festival 3, 1991.13.2

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