Preserving culture: quilting activity

Introduction -

Did you know? A quilt, according to the dictionary, is a coverlet or blanket made by sewing together two layers of fabric with an interlining or “stuffing” of wool, cotton, feathers, down or other materials in between the layers. A quilt, then, is made by sewing together two layers of fabric with a lining or stuffing in the middle. Sewing is joining or fastening something by stitches made with a needle and thread. You can sew by hand or by using a machine that utilizes a needle and thread.

Quilting has been around for centuries in different parts of the world - there are many different types of quilting. One type is called whole cloth work. This type of quilting uses one large piece of fabric for the top of the quilt. A design is created on this top layer by stitching (the pattern of the stitches and the color of the thread create the design). Piecing or piece work is another type of quilting. As you can probably guess from the name, this type of quilting involves sewing together many pieces of cloth to make one large piece that becomes the top of the quilt. An example of piece work can be seen in a picture of a section of a quilt that is actually used as a stage curtain in the music hall at a House of Blues. This particular piece work quilt, which is called a “crazy quilt,” was made from hundreds of pieces of cloth sewn together. Patch work and strip quilts are other examples of piecing. Another style of quilting is called appliqué. Appliqué is the sewing or applying of cutout fabric shapes onto a background of another fabric. The cutouts are “applied” or sewn on to create a decorative design and sometimes to convey a story or record a special event.

When you look at a quilt, what do you notice first, how it was made or the colors and design? Most people probably react to the colors and patterns first. There are many different patterns, colors and designs in quilts. And, quilts from different parts of the world typically reflect the histories and cultural traditions of the people who made them.

Did you know? Quilting is actually a traditional folk art - it has typically been passed along as a cultural “tradition” from one generation to the next, meaning that an older person teaches a younger person the art of quilting. Not all quilts are created as part of a folk art tradition, though. With modern technology and the mass production of consumer items, many quilts today are machine made in large quantities on production lines and are not part of any folk tradition.
**Quilts from Gees Bend, Alabama**

The House of Blues Folk Art collection includes a number of quilts that were made by African American women from a small rural community called Gee’s Bend, located in Alabama. The exact date that these quilts were made is not known but it is believed that most of them were made between the early 1900s and the 1990s. These quilts were created for practical use in the home as blankets and bed coverings. They were made out of fabrics found in everyday life like old work clothes, cotton sheets, handkerchiefs and feed sacks (from animal feed). The women who made these quilts, like many people from Gees Bend, lived hard lives. Many of them worked as farmers and they didn’t have a lot of money. So it was common for them to use and reuse materials to make things that they needed.

Like other quilters, the women of Gees Bend passed the quilting tradition along from one generation to the next. And since they were African Americans, they passed along some traditions and techniques related to fabrics and textiles from different cultures of Africa, including the use of large shapes and strong or bold colors, the use of asymmetrical patterns, designs, and figures, as well as the use of improvisation in patterns (meaning that they created new patterns or changed existing patterns to fashion something new). The outcomes of this process, which can be seen in some of the quilts shown below, were unique: a blending of traditions from African cultures with experiences and other cultural influences in America.

**Did you know?** A shape or pattern is **asymmetrical** when it is uneven or irregular. Asymmetrical shapes and patterns are common in African textiles. When a shape or pattern is described as **symmetrical**, it means that the shape or pattern is equal, even, or regular.

Take a moment to look at some of the quilts that were created by women in Gees Bend:

Look at the **strip quilt** titled “Housetop” created by Louella Pettway. It is called a “strip quilt” because it is made from strips of fabric. This quilt was inspired by a traditional American quilting pattern called the “Log Cabin” pattern. A traditional log cabin quilt would be made by sewing together a number of individual squares of the same size and pattern. Each square would represent the roof of a log cabin - if you were looking at it from above.

Now look at the example of a traditional log cabin pattern (see next page). This is a **symmetrical** design - notice that all of the squares are the same size and follow the same pattern.

Let’s look again at Pettway’s quilt. The squares in her quilt are different sizes and patterns (some have centers and some do not). As you can see, Pettway has chosen
to create unique, individual squares rather than follow a specific pattern. Her quilt design is **asymmetrical**. Pettway has improvised and created something unique, bringing her own creative style and ideas to an established pattern.

“Corduroy Strip Quilt” (see below) is a quilt created by Allie Pettway. It is also a strip quilt, but rather than being made out of a number of individual squares or pieces joined together, this quilt is one enlarged square.

The design of “Bricklayer” (see below), another quilt by Louella Pettway, is also one enlarged square.

Keep in mind that in addition to creating useful items for households, quilting also gave these women a way to express themselves creatively while allowing them to pass on and preserve some of their cultural traditions. These quilts from Gees Bend reflect the lives and cultures of the women who made them. One of the quilters from Gees Bend was interviewed for a magazine article and she said:

“There are quilts we made in our homes, with our minds, our eyes and our own hands. We made those quilts in our own image, and we made them exactly how we wanted them to be.”
**Quilting Activity** - Now, participants learn to create a quilt design out of construction paper in an activity that can be either a group or an individual project.

**Materials needed:** Construction paper, cardboard, wrapping paper, other decorative papers, yarn, paper hole punch, glue stick or scotch tape (preferably two sided).

**Step 1 - Choose a style** Participants can either choose to create a paper quilt using a piece work process (Step 2) or an appliqué process (Step 3).

**Step 2 - Creating a piece work paper quilt**

→ Select a theme for your quilt that represents something of importance to you or your community (city, school, family, etc.) that you would like to preserve. This could be a person, place, belief, activity or something else of special meaning or significance.

→ Create a series of squares or pieces to represent the chosen theme. Each square/piece can represent either the overall theme or some element of the theme. If you are using same-size squares, be careful when measuring the squares so that they can be joined together without problem. If you are choosing to use different shapes and sizes for your paper quilt pieces, be certain to draw out your overall design before you begin and identify specific measurements for each piece so that when all pieces are completed, they can be joined together without problem.

→ When all squares or pieces have been completed, use a paper hole punch along the edges of each square or piece and then join them together using yarn.

**(Group Project)**

→ If this is a group project, each participant can contribute one square of the same size (i.e. 4” x 4” or 6” x 6”) or, if the quilt is being made from pieces of different shapes and sizes, each participant can select one piece from the overall design (please note: care should be taken to assign all pieces and avoid duplication).

→ Each participant can choose something from his or her culture or community that they would like to preserve in the quilt and then create a square that symbolizes or represents what they have chosen.

Or

→ The entire group can select something that they would like to preserve and each participant can create their own square representing what has been selected.
(Individual Project)

→ If this is an individual project, each square or piece can represent a different part of culture or community life to be preserved or one general theme can be selected and each square or piece can represent that one aspect of culture or community.

**Step 3- Creating a paper quilt using appliqué**

→ Select a story or theme that is important to your culture or community (city, school, family, etc.).

→ Create figures and symbols to tell and preserve the story in the paper quilt.

→ Once all figures and symbols have been created, they can be attached to a background (piece of paper or light cardboard) using a paper hole punch and yarn or using glue or scotch tape.

(Group Project)

→ If this is a group or classroom project, participants can create individual paper quilts or work in groups to contribute to a larger group quilt. When creating a large group quilt, participants should discuss the story and then divide the quilt into sections with each group assigned a section in which they can present their part of the story.

**Step 4- Reflecting on your creation**

(Individual Project)

If this is an individual project, the quilter should take time to reflect on the quilt and consider how well the quilt either preserves a part of their culture/community life or describes a story or theme important to their culture/community life.

(Individual Project)

**Related history - Do you know how Africans first came to this country?**

Beginning in the 1600s, Africans from different countries in West and Central Africa, were taken by force from their homeland. They were placed on ships and brought to North and South America and the Caribbean where they were sold as slaves and forced to work for no wages. Most Africans who came to this country were not allowed to bring their belongings with them or practice their own customs in their new surroundings. But they found ways to preserve their cultural traditions - in their work and in their music. These things were passed along from one
generation to the next during the years of slavery and after slavery was finally abolished in 1865. So things created by African-Americans, including music or quilts, were heavily influenced by African cultural traditions. But they were also influenced by their surroundings and life conditions in America and by the cultures of European and other peoples who settled in America. The outcomes were unique, a blending of different cultures and life experiences.

HAVE FUN EXPLORING YOUR CREATIVITY!