

ART ACTIVITY

*Quapaw Masterpiece***Background**

Considered to be masterpieces of Native 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 Native tribes.

Task

Students will consider how Quapaw women used these works of art to tell a story by creating their own narrative paintings. Students will begin by analyzing **"the three villages" robe** and discussing 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 then 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
- Fabric Paint (suggested brands: Jacquard and Tulip), Tulip Slick Fabric Paint, or Crayola Fabric Markers
- Paintbrushes
- Sponges
- Small containers for water
- Cardboard
- Clothespins

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.

Steps

- Have students analyze **“the three villages” robe** and consider the following:
 - 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 Native tribes?
 - Why might someone have made this piece?
- Tell students that this piece depicts Quapaw villages and a French settlement, and the figures shown are the Quapaw defeating another Native tribe and participating in a dance or ceremony.
- Next, have students think about the elements of their community that are most important to them. They can choose to focus on their school community or the larger community/neighborhood that they live in. Have them consider:
 - 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?
 - Encourage students to 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?
- Students 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 have students paint their narrative piece on a t-shirt or on a square of fabric.)
- Fabric should be stretched over a piece of cardboard to ensure that paint doesn't bleed through. Give each student a piece of cardboard and four clothespins and have them stretch their fabric over the cardboard.

- Now that the fabric is ready for painting, students should think about which symbols they will use to represent the parts of their community. Quapaw artists used simple geometric shapes to represent ideas, objects, and activities in their paintings. Students may draw inspiration from these types of forms.
- Students can be given sketch paper and pencils if they wish to experiment before painting.
- Give students fabric paint, paintbrushes, and cups of water to begin their piece. You can give them sponges to create texture, or stencils to help them create shapes.
 - As an alternative, give students fabric markers or Tulip Slick Fabric Paint to eliminate the need for paintbrushes and extra materials.
- Once students have finished their paintings, have them set the paintings aside to dry for at least 24 hours.
- Conclude the project with a reflection on the art-making process:
 - 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 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?
- To extend learning, have students display all of their paintings together. Have them consider what a historian from 100 years in the future could learn about the past by viewing their paintings. What stories would they tell? What would they help people of the future learn about the people, interactions, and events that took place within their community?

Fabric Paint Tips

If students are painting on t-shirts, the t-shirts should be washed beforehand in case they shrink in the wash. Shrinking can distort the design if the shirt is not washed before painting.

When stretching t-shirts over cardboard, the cardboard should be placed inside the t-shirt to keep the paint from bleeding through onto the back of the t-shirt.

Don't 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 students are painting on a t-shirt, don't 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.