

## ART ACTIVITY

*Abolitionist Crafts***Background**

In the 1800s, women were expected to conform to behaviors and roles that society deemed “appropriate,” and were not supposed to express their political beliefs publicly. Despite these constraints, women during the Antebellum period found ways to contribute to the Abolitionist Movement. Many made anti-slavery crafts that were then sold to support the political and legal branches of the movement. Women used their domestic skills to create these crafts, including sewing, needlepoint, and doll making.

**Task**

Students will consider the process and politics behind an abolitionist flag created in Andover, OH in 1859. After analyzing this antebellum-era craft and the ways in which the creator used it to express her beliefs, students will create their own version of an abolitionist flag inspired by the constitution of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society using hand-stitching and appliqué.

**Materials**

- Pencils
- Scrap/sketch paper
  - Optional: Cardstock for creating templates
- Fabric chalk pencils
- Assorted cotton fabrics (pre-cut in rectangular shapes for flag base)
  - Optional: Iron-on interfacing (suggested brand: Heat N Bond)
- Hand sewing needles
- Assorted embroidery thread (suggested brands: DMC and Anchor)
- Scissors

## Art Vocabulary

- **appliqué:** A sewing technique that involves stitching a small piece of fabric onto a larger one to make a pattern or design.
- **composition:** The arrangement of elements within a work of art.
- **interfacing:** Material sewn or fused between the facing and the outside of a garment for stiffening, reinforcing, and shape retention.
- **pattern:** A design principle concerned with the repetition of a motif or other elements in a consistent manner to create an overall design.
- **running stitch:** A basic sewing stitch in which the needle and thread run over and under small portions of fabric at regular intervals to form a straight or curving broken line.

## Steps

Invite students to discuss activism, and the ways in which people are able to spread information about the causes they support.

- What does activism mean to you? How would you define it?
- What are some causes individuals and groups have fought for over the course of U.S. history?
- What different modes of activism have people used? What makes a method of activism effective?
- How do we raise awareness today? How important is imagery to the ways that we spread information and share our beliefs?
- First, lead an inquiry with *Twenty Star American Flag*, ca. 1859 using the line of questioning below.
  - What do you notice about this flag?
  - How many stars do you count? How many stripes?
  - This flag is from the year 1859. What clues might this give us about the number of stars and stripes that the maker chose to sew?

- The maker of the flag included only 20 stars and 9 stripes, leaving out every state and original colony that continued to uphold the practice of slavery. What statement does this make?
- Who do you think made this flag? Why do you think so?
- In the 1800s, women were discouraged from expressing their political beliefs. Some women openly defied these expectations, and others found ways to express their beliefs in ways considered acceptable by society because they were within the domestic or moral spheres. What does this tell us about women's experiences with activism in the antebellum era?
- Abolitionist crafts like this flag were primarily made by white middle- and upper-class women who had the opportunity and the means to craft. The economic and social restrictions of racism and sexism made it difficult for Black women to find outlets for sharing their beliefs, but they were still active agents in the fight for abolition. The first women's abolitionist group was founded by Black women in Massachusetts. To expand the conversation of antebellum women's activism, have students read the preamble from the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society's constitution.
  - What were the core principles of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society?
  - What does this document tell us about other forms of abolitionist activism that women engaged in during this time?
  - What makes each of these forms of activism--organizing and fundraising--effective?
  - Why is it so significant that the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society was founded by and for Black women?
  - How might we represent some of the key principles from the SFASS constitution visually?
- Students now have the opportunity to design and sew their own Abolitionist flags inspired by the SFASS constitution.

- Before they begin, have students consider how they will convey the core beliefs of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society. Are there any specific images or symbols that could be used to do this? What phrases from the document might inspire your design?
- Hand out pencils and scrap paper so they can plan the composition of their flag by sketching how their shapes and symbols might come together to convey their message. They should keep their shapes relatively simple so that they are easier to stitch onto their flags.
- Students will be creating their flags using appliqué, which means that they will sew shapes onto a base fabric to create a larger design. First, give each student a chalk fabric pencil and have them choose a piece of fabric as the base for their flag.
  - The base fabric can be a solid color or patterned, but encourage students to think about whether the color or patterns they are choosing are significant to their design or cause.
- Next, have students choose the fabric pieces they want to use for their shapes. They can trace their shapes or draw them directly onto the fabric using their chalk fabric pencil. When they are finished, have students cut out their shapes.
- Adding interfacing will make shapes sturdier as students sew them onto their flag, and will also keep the edges of the fabric from fraying over time. However, this step is time consuming and involves more materials. You can choose to skip this and have students spend more time focusing on their designs, or you can use the Appliqué Tips below to help with interfacing.
  - Give students a large sheet of interfacing and have them cut out pieces that are slightly larger than each of their shapes. Have students come up a few at a time to have their interfacing ironed onto each of their shapes. Interfacing should be ironed on to the underside of their fabric. After ironing, students should cut the excess interfacing off of the edges of their shapes.

- If students want to make multiple shapes using the same fabric, you can save time by ironing the interfacing onto a larger piece of fabric before they draw and cut out their shapes.
- Once students' shapes are ready, they can begin the appliqué process. They should make sure that their base fabric is neat and flat. Then arrange and trace their shapes onto their base fabric with fabric chalk pencil to make sure they are happy with the composition.
- Pass out a sewing needle and embroidery thread to each student. Have students thread their needle with the embroidery thread and tie a knot at the end of the thread. They should begin sewing from the bottom up so that the knot is on the underside of their fabric. You can have students experiment with different types of stitching, but a running stitch is the easiest for beginners. Make sure they are stitching as close to the edge of their shapes as possible.
- When students have finished, have them reflect on the process and inspiration behind their flags. They can discuss with a partner, or write a statement to reflect on the following questions:
  - What part of the SFASS constitution did you choose to focus on and why?
  - How was your design inspired by the abolitionist flag?
  - What shapes and imagery did you choose to include in your design? What statement is your flag making?
  - What was it like to create this flag using appliqué? How did it feel to see each of the pieces come together to create a larger message?
  - What does the physical labor it takes to sew and make crafts tell us about women's commitment to the abolitionist cause?
  - How did this act empower women in the 1800s? How did it feel to engage in this process in the 21st century?

**Appliqué Tips:**

To create more uniform shapes to sew onto the base fabric (especially for repeating patterns), templates for each shape can be created on cardstock first, cut out, and traced onto the fabric. You can also choose to print templates or provide stencils for tracing shapes.

To save time and to avoid ironing in the classroom, you can prep larger pieces of fabric backed with interfacing before the lesson.

To keep shapes in place while sewing them onto the fabric base, you can use fabric pins to hold them in place. If you've chosen to include the interfacing step, double-sided interfacing can be used to iron the shapes onto the base fabric so they remain stationary while stitching.

Embroidery thread colors can be chosen depending on the look you're trying to achieve. If you don't want the thread to show, try choosing one that is as close in color to your fabric as possible. If you like the look of the thread, get creative with the color choice!