

## Lesson Plans: Grades 3-5

Search By Standards

# History in Quilts

## Introduction



We Americans have adopted quilts as a symbol of what we value about ourselves and our national history.

--From "Speaking of Quilts: Voices from the Late Twentieth Century"  
by Laurel Horton

More Images »

Throughout history, women and sometimes men have used the art of quilting for many diverse purposes: to keep warm, to decorate their homes, to express their political views, to remember a loved one. Made by hand—often collaboratively—using familiar materials such as scraps of clothing, quilts are personal and communal, aesthetic and functional. The lessons in this unit are designed to help your students recognize how people of different cultures and time periods have used cloth-based art forms to pass down their traditions and history.

Quilting continues to be largely a home-based form of art engaged in primarily by women. Heighten your students' awareness of how quilts have reflected and continue to reflect the lives of the people who create them, and of how quilts record the cultural history of a particular place and time. This theme of History in Quilts contains two separate lessons that can stand alone or be taught in conjunction with one another.

If your students explore the past through their own family history and ancestors, this unit could be used as a tool to focus on those aspects of your curriculum.

## Guiding Questions

What is a quilt? What elements make up a quilt? How are art and history connected through quilts? What are some of the purposes and uses that quilts have served in different places and cultures in the past? What function do quilts have today?

## Learning Objectives

Define what a quilt is and describe some of the historic purposes and uses of quilts.

Explain what a freedom quilt is and how this type of quilt was used historically in the U.S.

Explain what a patriotic quilt is and what types of symbols are used in this type of quilt.

Identify elements in quilts, such as colors, shapes, patterns, and symbols.

Discuss customs represented by the design and creation of quilts.

Understand how quilts can be objects of both everyday use and artistic expression.

## Preparation Instructions

Review each lesson and select archival materials you'd like to use in class. Bookmark these materials, along with useful websites, if possible; download and print out selected documents and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing. Prepare any necessary templates.

Establish an anticipatory set when beginning each lesson on quilts. Read aloud any of the books recommended below, display an actual quilt, or invite a local quilter to demonstrate. Encourage students who own quilts to share them with the class. However, because quilts can be valuable family heirlooms, exercise care in allowing students to touch and work with quilts brought from home. Sharing quilts offers a good opportunity for parents to come to class to share family stories and to help monitor appropriate handling of quilts.

An interesting account of a quilting bee and the accompanying festivities, written by Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman, may be found on the American Studies @ The University of Virginia website, a link from the EDSITEment resource Center for the Liberal Arts. Though of most interest to the teacher, excerpts may be adapted for use with students.

Historical quilts often feature familiar U.S. symbols such as the flag. Refer to the EDSITEment lesson plan *Stars and Stripes Forever: Flag Facts for Flag Day*, a unit on the American flag for grades K-2, and *Oh, Say, Can You See What the Star-Spangled Banner Really Means?*, a unit on the flag for grades 3-5.

If possible, obtain the book *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950*, by Roderick Kiracofe, Mary Elizabeth Johnson (contributor), and Sharon Reisdorph (photographer) (Clarkson Potter, 1993; ISBN 0517575353), which contains many large photos of quilts of every kind.

Quilts and other cloth-based narrative art are used to record and preserve history in many countries and cultures. As a wrap-up activity, teachers can introduce narrative fabric art from different countries and ask students to compare the formal elements as well as the historical purposes with those of quilts from the U.S. Examples include:

Hmong Storycloths: *The Hmong and the Storycloth: How Traditions and Cultures Are Transmitted Through Folklore and Art*, available from the EDSITEment resource AskAsia:

"The Hmong did not have any previous written language until thirty-five years ago when Christian missionaries standardized and romanized the Hmong language. Previously, all of their communication was oral and/or pictorial. Many of the oral history traditions have been transcribed pictorially on a storycloth known as pa'ndau. The pa'ndau, composed of applique, cross-stitches, batik, and embroidery, incorporates Hmong personal family history, village life, the death and disturbance of war and emigration, and life in a new land. Pa'ndau, as an art form, reflects how the medium of an old tradition is also used to tell a more modern story of Hmong history and culture" (from "Brief History of Hmong and the Storycloth Tradition," available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website AskAsia).

Latin American *arpilleras* (wall hangings made of cloth pictures that tell a story): *Arpilleras* have also been used to chronicle political injustices in various Latin American countries. Two books with pictures and descriptions of *arpilleras* are available at LILAS Outreach K-12 and Community Resource Library (Chile -- Children's Literature and Holidays and Celebrations -- Children's Literature found through the EDSITEment-reviewed website Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC):

*Festivals of the World: Chile* by Gareth Stevens Publishing, Milwaukee, Wisc., 1998. 32 pp. (Grades 1-4) This book introduces Chile, its festival calendar, and its specific festival rituals. It includes craft projects to make an *arpillera*.

*Tonight Is Carnaval* by Arthur Dorros. Puffin Unicorn Books, Penguin Books, USA Inc., New York, 1991. (Grades 1-4) This is a story illustrated with photographs of *arpilleras* created by the Club de Madres Virgen del Carmen of Lima, Peru.

## Lesson Activities

Activity 1. An Introduction to Historical Quilts

Activity 2. Patriotic Quilts

### Activity 1. An Introduction to Historical Quilts

If possible, center this lesson around one or more authentic quilts in the classroom, to give students the opportunity to see how a quilt is constructed (the stitching, squares, stuffing and so on). How is a quilt different from a blanket? It is like two blankets sewn together with padding in between. The stitching that keeps the padding in place creates a pattern that invites further decoration. This decoration can employ elements such as color, pattern, symbols, and narrative.

If it proves impractical to bring a quilt into class, use Quilt Image #21, available online via a link from the EDSITEment resource Center for the Liberal Arts, or images from one of the recommended books.

Ask the class if anyone has a quilt at home. Encourage some discussion about those quilts. How are they used? Do any of the students use a quilt as a blanket or have a quilt hanging on the wall at home? Show students the quilt(s) or quilt image(s), and have them describe what they see: How many different kinds of cloth are in the quilt? Do they see some of the same cloth in different places on the quilt? What colors have been used? Are there objects on the quilt -- people, animals, flowers, baskets, etc.? How many? Where does the quilt feel thicker and thinner? Where are stitches located?

Without telling students the names of each quilt, display several different kinds of quilts or quilt images as described below, available on The American History Museum of the Smithsonian, a link from the EDSITEment resource Center for the Liberal Arts (unless otherwise noted):

## A) Story Quilt

Bible stories -- students might recognize the Noah story.

## B) Patriotic Quilt

This quilt appears to have been created by a man, Mark Rockhold Teter.

## C) Groom's Album Quilt

A family record quilt.

D) Friendship Quilt, available on the EDSITEment-reviewed website Women of the West Museum. From the homepage, go to "Exhibits," then to "Collaborations: Drawn Together," and click on "Quilts" to see the Friendship Quilt image.

As you show each quilt, ask the students to describe what they see. Have them describe the patterns and objects on each quilt, suggest why each quilt was made, and hypothesize about what kind of story the artist was telling with the pictures on the quilt.

Provide students with the following chart and have them match the letter of each quilt to its appropriate type, or set up one large chart for the class and ask for volunteers to write the letter of the quilt that matches the quilt type:

<b>Type of Quilt</b>	<b>Matching the Quilts</b>
	<b>Letter of Matching Quilt</b>
<b>Patriotic Quilt</b>	
<b>Friendship Quilt</b>	
<b>Family/Album Quilt</b>	
<b>Story Quilt</b>	

## Activity 2. Patriotic Quilts

National symbols such as stars, stripes and eagles were used in American quilts throughout the 19th century.

Look at the following quilts (and especially the photograph of the details from the quilts), available on The American History Museum of the Smithsonian, a link from the EDSITEment resource Center for the Liberal Arts. What images do students recognize?

Appliqué quilt with stuffed work eagles. Mid-19th century

Stars and Stripes

Quilt pieced together from Centennial cottons, 1876

Some quilt designs are created through repetition of a pattern. Show the class Quilt Image #24, available online via a link from the EDSITEment-reviewed website Center for the Liberal Arts. What patterns do the students see? How many times does the pattern in the center repeat? The pattern on the border?

Students can create a patriotic quilt based on this pattern, using five large image blocks as a centerpiece, surrounded by a border. Give students templates with pictures of national symbols. (Note: Download the PDF containing templates of several patriotic symbols is provided with this lesson. To view PDF, download the Adobe Acrobat Reader.) Allow students to color in the symbols any way they want. Once all the squares are done, gather the class. Now, together the students can create a patriotic quilt. Decide how the center symbols will be organized, and paste them onto a large sheet of paper or attach them to a bulletin board. Allow students to add a border around the edge of the quilt, like the one in the example. In classes where students are assigned to research and/or write about a national symbol, this activity could initiate that project.

If desired, end the lesson by comparing the quilt squares designed by the students to Quilt Image #45, available via a link from the EDSITEment-reviewed website Center for the Liberal Arts. This contemporary quilt records the celebration of the American Bicentennial. Which symbols are used in both this quilt and the students' squares?

An additional patriotic quilt, Proud to Be an American: 1992 1st Place National Winner, may be viewed on the EDSITEment resource American Memory. This is a kind of patriotic quilt, showing what's important to the quilt's creator. What did she consider important? What symbols are used in the quilt? How?

## Extending The Lesson

Invite a quilter to your classroom.

Invite family members of students to bring their quilts to class for "show and tell." Where quilting is still a tradition, students can also conduct interviews about quilts in their homes.

Study cross-cultural connections regarding quilting using quilts from other countries or cultures. One example is the European- and African-influenced quilts on Southern Quilting Traditions, a link from the EDSITEment resource Center for the Liberal Arts.

Use the book *The Keeping Quilt* by Patricia Polacco to introduce an activity in which students make a 'keeping quilt' and hang it in the school. Read aloud from *The Keeping Quilt*, and then ask students to write about a memory. For younger grades, the children can talk about their memories, and the teacher can write down a list of memories on the board. After writing/talking about their memories, each student should draw a picture related to that memory. The picture is then traced onto vellum paper and colored with fabric crayons, along with the child's name. Finally, the drawings are ironed onto a large piece of material that can be stuffed and backed as a 'keeping quilt' for the school.

In some communities, quilting clubs can assist with classroom projects. Such a group may be able to help your students create a real quilt. A discussion of quilt making in the classroom as well as helpful tips can be found at America Quilts: Quilts in the Classroom, available through a link from the EDSITEment resource Africans in America.

Through the EDSITEment-reviewed website American Memory, students can view many additional images of contemporary quilts. Each of the images is accompanied by the artist's explanation of the process involved in the making of the quilt, as well as the quilt's meaning. This collection also includes a glossary of quilting terms that could be useful for understanding how a quilt is assembled.

59 Hoover Schools, a special section of the EDSITEment resource Digital Classroom, features a quilt from the Hoover Presidential Library, depicting the 59 schools named for Herbert Hoover. Your class might be interested in viewing these student-made quilts, and might also like to design a quilt square for their school. Perhaps there are other schools around the nation with the same name as your school.

**Selected EDSITEment Websites**

Africans in America

American Memory

Quilts and Quiltmaking in America 1978-1998

American Studies at the University of Virginia

Cultural Objects: An Anthology of American Studies, Vol. II: Spring 1996

Cultural Objects Table of Contents

Jamie Leigh on American Quilts

Southern Quilting

African American Quilting Traditions

At Home in the Heartland Online

Center for the Liberal Arts

The American History Museum of the Smithsonian

Incredible Art Department

National Archives Education

59 Hoover Schools

The Internet Public Library

Kids World 2000

National Security Administration

Follow the Drinking Gourd

National Park Service: Links to the Past  
Smithsonian Art Museum

Women of the West Museum

Collaborations: Drawn Together -- go to main site, then: "Collaborations: Drawn Together" -- "Exhibits" -- "Quilts"

Image of a Friendship Quilt -- go to main site, then: "Collaborations: Drawn Together" -- "Exhibits" -- "Quilts", click on image of "Friendship Quilt"

### Other Resources:

The recent film "How to Make an American Quilt" (1995), based on Whitney Otto's novel of the same name, has several scenes of women sitting together to stitch a quilt. Students might gain a visual image of what is involved in quilting by viewing brief clips from that film.

Recommended reading from American Memory

Brial, Raymond. *With Needle and Thread*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

Coerr, Eleanor. *The Josafina Story Quilt*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Lyons, Mary. *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1997.

From Women of the West Museum

Turner, Ann. *Sewing Quilts*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994. Illus. by Thomas B. Allen. "Pioneer girl sees pieces of her life sewn into quilts that she, her mother and sister create."

From The New York Public Library On-Lion for Kids, a link from Internet Public Library

Flournoy, Valerie. *The Patchwork Quilt*. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Dial Books, 1985 (ISBN 803700989). "Using scraps cut from the family's old clothing, Tanya helps her grandmother and mother make a beautiful quilt that tells the story of her family's life."

Other recommendations:

Guback, Georgia. *Luka's Quilt*. (Reading level: Ages 4-7)

Hines, Anna Grossnickle. *Pieces: A Year in Poems & Quilts*.

Johnston, Tony and Tomie DePaola. *The Quilt Story*.

Jonas, Ann. *The Quilt*. (Reading level: Ages 4-8)

Paul, Ann Whitford and Jeanette Winter (Illustrator). *Eight Hands Round: A Patchwork Alphabet*.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*. School & Library Binding, 1994. (Reading level: Ages 4-8)

Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*.

## Time Required

3 class periods

## Subject Areas

- History and Social Studies > People > African American
- History and Social Studies
- Art and Culture > Medium > Visual Arts
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Civil Rights
- History and Social Studies > U.S. > Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)
- Art and Culture > Subject Matter > Folklore
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Culture
- History and Social Studies > U.S. History
- History and Social Studies > People > Women
- Art and Culture

## Skills

- Analysis
- Oral presentation skills
- Representing ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing
- Using primary sources
- Visual art analysis

## Activity Worksheets

History in Quilts: Worksheet 1

## Media





