

Sew Me a Story: African and African American “Quilt Lore”

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Overview

Sew Me a Story: African and African American “Quilt Lore” is a cross curricular course of study that guides students through varied topics including African history, American history, geometric patterning, visual design, and storytelling. By studying examples of African and African American made quilts in their historical and social contexts, students will develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between art and human experience. For example, appliquéd banners made by the Fon people of West Africa depict past events that were instrumental in the development of this West African society telling history through sewed scenes of daily life, royal rule, war, etc.¹ In a similar way, quilts made by Harriet Powers and others who endured American slavery provide an opportunity to study the history of slavery in the United States from perspectives not well represented in history books. Fabrics used, designs constructed, and stitches made tell stories about both the oppression, suffering, resilience, and ingenuity of African Americans living in that time period.²

However, quilts do not “speak” alone! They are the physical traces of people who made community around the creation of the quilts that express their shared values. In this sense, quilting is a collective response to human experience. In many parts of Africa, weavers and textile artists gather in groups to work. As a cloth or blanket is put together, apprentices learn the trade of their elders.³ Working in such a communal and intergenerational environment allows for the sharing of stories and knowledge as well as the exchange of artistic ideas, forms, patterns, and techniques. Similarly, in the antebellum American South, African slaves quilted in groups. They worked together in the plantation house to make quilts for the slave owners and they worked together in their own homes to make quilts for their families.⁴ Moving around the quarters from home to home, these fabric artists ensured the warmth of all in their community. Additionally, quilting parties were occasions for trading stories, gossip, and knowledge with one another, and for reflecting critically on their lives. Children present on such occasions would have absorbed a great deal of information, just as the weaving apprentices who were their counterparts in Africa. Even today, the quilter’s frame is a meeting place for the communal

exchange of ideas, techniques, and stories. As a form of folk art, quilts express a communally-shaped aesthetic, which in addition to the rich historical background is a fertile topic to explore with students. . Studying quilts and other textile arts can enrich students' understandings of geometric shapes, colors, patterns, and designs. These mathematical and artistic visual components are fundamental in the construction of quilts that, when finished and appreciated as a whole, signify or "speak" to the larger picture of the quiltmaker's experience. In the final component of this unit, students will collaborate to depict their experiences through the medium of quilting. They will choose colors, shapes, and patterns that have significance for them in order to create their own folk art and leave their own quilt legacy.

Rationale

When I began this seminar, I did not know exactly where it would lead me. Interested in African American folktales, I thought I might design a curriculum unit centered on oral storytelling, first studying and collecting stories told in both Africa and America and then retelling stories with my students and asking them to generate new stories. I teach kindergarten and my class comprises approximately twenty-five students between the ages of five and seven. All of my students are African American and reside in the West Philadelphia neighborhood surrounding the elementary school. I wanted to find something that would engage all of my kindergarteners and hold their attention. I needed to find a point of accessibility. I hoped to find something that would hold my attention as well! I was looking for a topic that I would be passionate about researching and teaching.

During one seminar session, we were discussing family stories. After reading Kathryn Morgan's memoir Children of Strangers, someone asked, "*Did reading these stories remind you of stories told to you by a family elder?*" Immediately I thought of my grandmother who taught me to piece together quilts when I was a teenager. As we worked, she told me many stories of her childhood and our relatives. Once in a while, she would take out quilts made by her mother or grandmother and these would spark additional stories. The quilts, acted as memory joggers, or, what folklorists call "objects of memory." (Hufford, Hunt, and Zeitlin 1987; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,) Recalling this, I jotted "quilt making" in the margin of my notebook, and I kept thinking about it as a possible topic for a curriculum unit. Remembering that I had once heard that American slaves used quilts as a way to communicate on the Underground Railroad, I began to build a reading list centered on the stories and messages that both African and African American quilts and fabrics may tell.

In a way, the unit that I have developed is still very much about storytelling. The stories I have collected from Africa and America to share with students are not stories fabricated orally, but rather visual tales stitched in the medium of the quiltmaker. The research that I did for this unit revealed that over time African and African American quiltmakers have created an expansive and diverse body of work. The appliquéd story banners of the Fon people in West Africa (Republic of Benin), the Bible Story quilts of Harriet Powers who was born into slavery in the American South, and the contemporary story quilts of American artist Faith Ringgold are a just a few examples of textiles that can be studied to learn about the culture and context of the people

who fashioned them. They all have stories to tell. (or, Quilts are like archives, teeming with stories that their archivists have made accessible to the living community.)

When teaching this unit, specific examples, like the ones mentioned above, will be used to facilitate storytelling and discussion. Through these storytelling sessions and discussions, students will gain an understanding of how an object such as a quilt can be used to retrieve knowledge and make meaning. Students will then create their own stories and designs, first thinking about what it is that they want to pass on. What are their stories? As a culminating project for the unit, each child will contribute to the making of a class “quilt” to be displayed in school and passed on to the next generation of students, historians, and quiltmakers.

The Sew Me a Story: African and African American “Quilt Lore” curriculum unit has been harmonized with The School District of Philadelphia’s Core Curriculum standards and objectives. Through listening to stories and telling stories of their own, students will be sharpening their listening, comprehension, and speaking skills – major requirements of the literacy program. While analyzing quilts, students will practice identifying geometric patterns as well as generating their own – a strong focus skill in the kindergarten math curriculum. And, as students study the history of these quilts and learn of the contexts in which they were created, they will deepen their knowledge of African and African American history – a significant module of the District’s social studies program.

As I implement this unit in my kindergarten classroom, I will be interested to find out if any of my students have relatives who are quiltmakers and if they are also aware of any quilts that have been passed down through the generations. All of my students are African American and most were raised in the neighborhood where the elementary school is located. Many of my students’ parents went to the elementary school as well. There is a living history surrounding the school that I hope to tap more deeply into. Through my research for this unit I stumbled upon an African American quilting guild right here in Philadelphia. Established in 1993 and still active today, the Quilters of the Roundtable meet monthly to teach and learn from one another.⁵ They are a multigenerational community of quilters who are busy stitching, making history, and telling stories as we speak! I also plan to share my own quilts as well as my grandmother’s quilts and stories with my students. Most exciting is the prospect of working with students to create a story “quilt” that is unique to their experience in this place and time.

Historical Background

The body of African- American quilts that exists today is as vast and diverse as the people who fashioned it. . Eclectic and idiosyncratic, quilts made by African American hands and minds run the gamut from those heavily influenced by African traditions to those strongly affiliated with Euro-American traditions. When looking at and determining the significance of a particular quilt, it is just as important to consider the social dimensions of the quilt (the life experience of the quiltmaker, the context of its creation, and the ways in which it was used), as it is to consider its aesthetic components. Current research on African and African American textile traditions, including quiltmaking, has stirred up a wealth of information regarding both the aesthetic and the cultural importance of this specific form of folk art/lore. While some historians see strong, undeniable ties between African textiles and African American quilts, other historians argue that

these connections are more hoped-for than real. a Keeping this divergence of opinions in mind, discussions about commonalities between African textiles and African American quilts should be understood as just one way to approach these cultural artifacts.

Like the verbal art of storytelling, quilting is a stylized form of social communication, often passed from generation to generation without written documentation, and in ways that can preserve linkages between African American and African styles of quilting and storytelling. In other words, modern ways of designing and techniques for piecing a quilt together can be investigated for links to shared histories. Many connections have been found between African and African-American verbal arts. When African American quilts are compared with African textiles, commonalities become apparent. ⁶ Techniques shared between West African and African American fabric artists include strip piecing, knot making, a preference for bold colors and geometric designs, story appliqué, and asymmetrical or improvisational patterning. These are by no means definitive of African American quilts, but resonances that open onto a rich history when analyzed. Each of these techniques is described in the following paragraphs.

In strip piecing fabric pieces are first woven or sewn together in long strips. The strips are then joined together lengthwise, side by side, to create a larger textile that often becomes the top of a quilt. ⁷ Many African American quilters create quilts in this manner. For example, the quilters of Gee's Bend, a small rural black community in Alabama, have crafted a multitude of beautiful quilts over the last hundred years, many featuring tops that were pieced in long strips. ⁸ Such strip quilts may have West African antecedents. . . Throughout West Africa, weavers work on small narrow looms to produce long strips of cloth. The strips are sewn together at the edges to form larger swaths of cloth. In both Africa and America, strips are often purposefully misaligned so that the patterns do not match up. Setting off colors and designs within the fabric, the resulting visual dissonance creates a sense of vitality, or "aliveness" – a principle distinctive to African and African American aesthetics. ⁹ Knot-making is a practice that has interesting historical background in both West Africa and in the American South. In some African practices, knots are tied to encode objects with meaning or protective power. For example, in the Kongo, *nkisi* or charms, are knotted to empower them to offer protection. ¹⁰ In the American South, slavery denied African Americans easy access to fabric and string. Slaves' clothing was often so mended as to resemble a patchwork quilt top in places. ¹¹ Quilters often unraveled sacks for string and used old feed sacks and clothing to make quilt tops. Old quilts were often used as the batting, or stuffing, for new quilts. Instead of quilting the layers of the new quilt together with tiny stitches in an elaborate design, many African American quilters knotted the layers of the quilt together, a process called tying a quilt. In this way, generations and memories were literally tied together, and some African Americans recount the protective or restorative qualities of their ancestors' quilts that have been passed down to them through the generations. ¹²

The bold colors and audacious geometric designs of many African American quilts resonate with the bright palate and vivid designs of many African textiles. Fabrics in many parts of Africa are designed to communicate messages and thus function well when being able to be read from afar. Bold colors and patterns serve both an aesthetic and a didactic purpose. A textile could display a pattern that indicates the wearer's social status, occupation, heritage, level of wealth, or ancestry. ¹³ Similar brilliant colors and patterns are common in African American quilts. Many African American quilt makers speak of colors *setting each other off* or *hitting each other*

right.¹⁴ Their bold quilts are easily admired from afar, as when drying on a fence in the sun. Some historians believe that black Americans used geometric designs in quilts to encode messages that aided runaway slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad.¹⁵

Appliqué is pieces of fabric that are cut into shapes and then sewn onto a cloth backing to create a pattern or a design. Both African and African American quilters have used appliqué to tell stories with fabric.¹⁶ The most famous African American example of this is arguably Harriet Powers' story quilts. Powers was born into slavery in 1837. After the Civil War, Powers struggled with her husband to keep her family afloat. Around 1886 she crafted an appliquéd story quilt depicting her favorite biblical scenes. A few years later, due to financial hardship, she made the difficult decision to sell the quilt to a white collector for five dollars.¹⁷ Her *Bible Quilt*, which is now treasured by the Smithsonian Institution, is made of two hundred and ninety-nine pieces of appliquéd fabric. Each panel of fabric on the quilt top depicts a different scene from the Bible. When comparing images of Powers' quilt to images of the story banners of the West African Fon people (Republic of Benin), the similarities are striking. Some of the images Powers appliquéd include cutouts of animals, crosses, people, eyes, and stars or sunbursts that are akin to cutouts found on African story banners. Both share an affinity for minimalist figures that capture the essence of an animal, person, or place.¹⁸ The vibrancy of Powers' quilt has faded over time, but historical documents reveal that the colors were arrestingly beautiful at the time of fabrication.¹⁹ Bold colors add to the iconic quality that both African and African American appliquéd story textiles share. In both instances, sewn pictures of suns, moons, animals, and people become symbols that easily lend themselves to universal interpretation.

Asymmetrical designs and improvisational patterning are two things that often distinguish African American quilt tops. Both have roots in Africa. In many parts of Africa, woven fabrics are staggered when joined together so that their patterns clash. This purposeful mismatching creates an offbeat design. An example of this purposeful dissonance can be found in the West African cloths of the Asante people.²⁰ Strips of patterned fabric are joined together at their edges, as described earlier, to form larger expanses of cloth. The patterns are staggered and sometimes interrupted by strips of plainer cloth. This results in a complex asymmetrical design with a multilayered rhythm. The way some black quilters fashion their quilts creates a similar polyrhythm. Geometric patchwork patterns, such as the common *nine patch* (a square made up of nine smaller squares in three rows of three), are often improvised upon. Instead of repeating such a geometric pattern over and over with fidelity to the original color and form, many African American quilters vary colors and positioning of patches to create complex designs full of movement.²¹

Improvisation is fundamental to so many African artistic traditions including art, music, dance, and storytelling. Improvisation takes the old and makes it new. Thus the heritage of quilt makers is not a static one. Each successive generation of quilters will borrow from an array of experiences, materials, and techniques to make quilting their own.²² In this way, quilts record history and tell their own stories. Every quilt provides clues to the context in which it was made. By studying the materials and designs of quilts, a lot can be learned about the human experience. Some contemporary quilters, Faith Ringgold for example, have literally turned quilts into storytellers.²³ Ringgold fabricates quilts and then uses them as canvases for painting pictures and words that tell stories. When quilts are pieced together, the quilter (or quilters, as in a

quilting bee) is creating something that did not exist before. Quilts are literally re-membered pieces of history, mnemonic devices for storytellers. Truly each quilt is as unique and inimitable as the person who stitched it together.

Objectives

The main objective of *Sew Me a Story: African and African American "Quilt Lore"* is for students to understand and use quilts as a medium for storytelling. This is the overarching theme of the unit. Quilts are made by specific groups of people in specific places and times. What can be learned about heritage and community by studying and making quilts?

Students will develop an awareness of textiles made in Africa. They will learn about cloth and quilt making processes, purposes for textile production, and the significance of fabric traditions in Africa. Students will then connect African fabric traditions to quilts made in the American South during slavery. Comparing and contrasting both practical and aesthetic components of African and African American fabric arts will deepen students' understanding of traditions that came to America by way of slavery and that continue to inform practice today. By studying quilts over time and across continents, quilts become storytellers. They are the objects that focus student discussion of history. Just as quilters piece together the top of a quilt, students will be piecing together the story of a people from Africa to America.

After engaging with the past through images of historical African and African American quilts, students will engage with the present and mark their own place in history. A member of the local community who quilts, knits, or is otherwise engaged in the fabric arts will be welcomed into the classroom to share his or her knowledge with the children. Students will interact with this person to learn how the African American fabric working tradition is alive in their neighborhood or city. They will then collaborate to make their own quilt to share with one another and with the school community. By designing a piece of a larger collective quilt, students will see how their own unique story is a part of a larger one. The quilt that they create will become an artifact marking their place, time and story.

This is a unit that integrates multiple areas of the curriculum. Social Studies, Art, Math and Literacy are all embedded within the lessons. Discussions of the historical context of quilts and interactions with community members fall under the umbrella of Social Studies. Appreciating and critiquing images of African and African American quilts, and designing a unique contemporary quilt are Art endeavors. Identifying and creating geometric quilt patterns culls Math skills. Engaging in lively discussions and critical thinking exercises is an central component of the Literacy curriculum. A list of the specific standards addressed by the unit objectives is included as an appendix.

Strategies

Sew Me a Story: African and African American "Quilt Lore" will be implemented in my kindergarten classroom. I typically have twenty-five to thirty students between the ages of five

and seven. I have designed the lessons for this unit with practicality and feasibility first and foremost in mind. However, the strategies used in the lessons could easily be adapted or made more complex for working with older children or smaller groups of students. The format for the majority of the lessons is a whole group discussion or activity followed by a small group or independent activity. The unit consists of five lessons, which will be taught over the course of the ten-month school year. The lessons are long and kindergartners' attention spans are not! For this reason, each lesson may be broken up in to manageable chunks and taught over the span of a few days or even weeks.

Books, images, and guest visitors are critical to the success of this unit. Gathering images of African and African American textiles and quilts, acquiring books for discussion, and tracking down a local quilter, knitter, or fabric worker will most likely be the most time consuming component of teacher preparation for this unit. The fruits of that labor will be well worth it! The images, books, and visitors are the hooks that get students interested in learning about the tradition of quilt making and the rich history that surrounds it. Discussions will be centered on these objects and people, helping students to relate new knowledge to their own experience. Having a rich supply of books and images ready to address students' questions will deepen their understanding. There is no substitute for having a guest speaker visit the class to show and tell students about the work that she does and to answer students' questions specifically.

Assessment will be ongoing throughout the unit. Teacher observation and frequent checks for understanding will be used to guide discussions and maintain conversations on a level that students can understand. Students with special needs will receive the same accommodations that they normally do, including preferential seating for those finding it difficult to focus on the discussion or demonstrated activity. During small group and individual activities, students will be paired up with or seated near peers of differing abilities in order to help and learn from each another.

The culminating project, constructing a group quilt, will illustrate students' understanding of quilts as a medium for storytelling. Each child will design a quilt square that shows something about his life. The children will then work collectively to piece the squares together to make one big quilt. As a celebratory component of the unit, students will put the quilt on display for the school community and share the meaning of the quilt squares with one another. In this way, they will be able to show what they have learned about African and African American "quilt lore" while relating it to their own lives.

Classroom Activities

Lesson 1: Hunting the Lion and Catching the Stars

The materials needed for this lesson are a globe or world map, images of African Appliqué Banners of the Fon people, and images of Harriet Powers' bible quilts. The book [Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers](#), by Mary Lyons, has excellent images of both which could be copied and laminated for teaching purposes. Images can also be found online. There is a terrific example of a Fon Appliqué banner depicting a lion hunt on *Encyclopedia Britannica's* Guide to

Black History website. As an alternative, images of kente cloth or other African cloths could be used to discuss their symbolic qualities alongside the reading of a text such as Debbi Chocolate's Kente Cloth. Regardless, images will be used for both large and small group discussion, so it will be helpful to have enough of them to go around.

Begin by bringing students together as a whole group. Ask students to think about the question, "How do you remember things?" After discussing this for a few minutes ask students to think about the question, "Are there people or things in your life that help you to remember?" Guide students as they brainstorm ideas. For example, they may say friends, relatives, stories, pictures, and scrapbooks help them to remember. Jot ideas onto chart paper to keep a running record of students' thoughts.

Explain that in many parts of the world, people use cloth to help them remember things and to tell stories or send messages. Explain that as a class, you will be looking at cloth that was made in Africa. As a class, find Africa on a globe or world map. Look at it in relation to where the United States is, particularly where the students live in the United States. If using images of Fon Appliqué work, help students find where the Republic of Benin is located in Africa. If using images of kente cloth, help students find Ghana.

Share one of the African cloth images with the class. I will use the Fon Appliqué banner of the Lion Hunt as an example. Ask students to look at the image and think about the questions, "What story does this tell?" "Why do you think it was made?" "How do you think it was made?" "Who do you think made it?" After discussing students' ideas, give students background information on the image and compare their ideas to what is known for certain about the cloth. For example, banners like the Lion Hunt were often commissioned by kings to represent how strong and powerful they were. In Benin, cloth appliqué work has been done by groups of men for generations. They pass on the skills of designing, cutting, and appliquéing cloth to young apprentices.

As a closing activity, divide students into small, mixed ability groups of two or three children and give each group a different image. Give half of the groups images from African cloths and give the rest images from Harriet Powers' bible quilts. Direct students to look at their group's image and think about the same questions, "What story does this tell?" "Why do you think it was made?" "How do you think it was made?" "Who do you think made it?" Afterward, come back together as a large group and share the images and ideas. As a final thought, show a picture of Harriet Powers and explain that she lived in America during slavery. Show her bible quilt in its entirety and ask students to compare and contrast it to the African cloths.

Lesson 2: The Monkey Wrench Turns the Wagon Wheel

The materials required for this lesson are Bettye Stroud's book, The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom, other books showing geometric quilt patterns, pre-made samples of geometric quilt blocks (made with fabric or paper), pre-cut plain and patterned paper squares, triangles, and diamonds (wrapping paper works well!), large white squares of paper, and glue. It is also helpful to bring in a real patchwork quilt or images of patchwork quilts, which can be found online or in books listed in the Teacher Bibliography. Again, it may be helpful to enlarge and laminate

images for teaching purposes.

Begin by bringing students together as a whole group. Display the African cloth images and Harriet Powers images that were studied previously. Talk as a group about what has been learned so far. Explain that sometimes a pattern can have a meaning or tell a story just like a picture can. Harriet Powers made very special quilts with pictures on them that told a story. Many women who lived during slavery made quilts with patterns on them. Show examples of patchwork quilts and talk a little bit about quilts made during slavery. Ask students to think about the question, "Why did people make quilts even when they were forced to live as slaves?" Talk about students' answers, which may include ideas of warmth or beauty. Discuss the role children played during slavery (excellent history in Mary Lyons' Stitching Stars book!), especially with regards to quilt making. Jot notes on chart paper.

Introduce the idea that some people believe that quilt patterns were used as a secret code among runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. Read The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom aloud to students. Discuss the book and the question, "How do you think the quilt patterns got their names?" Show examples of different quilt block patterns (paper or fabric) and talk about the names of the patterns.

Model experimenting with the precut plain and patterned paper shapes to create a unique quilt square. Think aloud about what you might name your pattern block as you manipulate the diamonds, triangles, and squares to make different patterns. After modeling this activity, move students back to their desks. Give each child a blank white square and access to an array of colored and patterned shapes. Monitor students as they design their own pattern blocks and talk to them about what they will name their patterns and why. When each student has designed a pattern and glued it down to the white square, write what they have named the pattern on the back along with the child's name. When the patterns are dry, come back together as a group and ask each student to share his work.

Lesson 3: Tar Beach

The materials necessary for this lesson are Faith Ringgold's book, Tar Beach, a picture of Faith Ringgold, images of Ringgold's and other contemporary African American quiltmakers' story quilts which can be found online, enlarged and laminated, 12" x 18" white or manila construction paper, crayons, colored pencils, markers, or paint, glue, and patterned paper or fabric squares.

Gather students together in a whole group discussion format and as a group look over the images, chart paper notes, and student work from the previous two lessons. Discuss with students what has been learned so far. Explain that just as people in Africa make cloth and just as slaves in the United States made quilts, people living today use fabric to tell stories and to help them remember things. Share a picture of Faith Ringgold and some images of her story quilts with students. Describe how Ringgold makes quilts, sometimes with the help of her mother, and paints pictures and writes on them to tell her stories and remember the past. Explain that the picture book she wrote, Tar Beach, is based on one of her famous story quilts. Read the story with the children and discuss the imagery and text with them. Note the fabric pattern block border at the bottom of each page.

Model thinking of a story and using crayons, colored pencils, markers, or paint to depict that story on construction paper. Think aloud about the story you want to tell and model adding details and text to your image. Finish by showing how to glue patterned or fabric blocks around the edge of your paper to make a patchwork quilt border like Ringgold did in Tar Beach. When finished demonstrating, move students back to their desks and pass out materials for them to make their own quilt paintings. Monitor students as they work and take story dictation, adding their words as text on their pictures. When their quilt paintings are dry, come back together as a group and ask each student to share her work.

Lesson 4: Gather Around the Quilter's Frame

The most important material you will need for this lesson is a guest speaker! Track down a local quiltmaker, knitter, or other type of fabric artist. A few of my students have grandmothers and other relatives who knit, so I have incorporated knitting into this lesson. Because the most important component of this lesson is to interact with a member of the community, it will be necessary to adapt the activities in this lesson to match the skills and specific knowledge of the guest speaker you find to come to your classroom. Other materials needed are scissors and yarn, or if having a guest who quilts or sews, plastic children's needles and string and easy to puncture fabric such as burlap, or shoestrings and cardboard with pre-punched holes.

Before doing this lesson, ask students if they know people in their families, homes, or neighborhoods who quilt, sew, or knit. Contact these people or local quilters' guilds to find someone to come to speak with the children and share knowledge, skills and stories with them. In preparation for the visit, brainstorm with students questions they would like to ask their guest. On the day of the visit, students may welcome their guest and introduce themselves to her. The speaker may share about herself and her life and how she got into quilting, sewing or knitting. Students may ask the questions they prepared and other questions that arise. If possible, ask the speaker to bring some of her work with her to share with the students.

After the question and answer session, the guest may demonstrate some quilting, sewing or knitting. Students will then have time to do some fabric work, such as finger knitting (see resources), stitching on burlap or sewing shoelaces through hole-punched cardboard. Allow students to work while remaining in a large group, preferably in a circle. This will facilitate sharing and storytelling as the students work and continue to interact with their guest. Note how important it is to have an expert near by when first learning a new skill.

Lesson 5: My Own Stitch in Time

The materials required for this project may vary. Depending on the resources you have access to, your class quilt may be assembled with anything from paper and glue to yarn and burlap. You will also need images of friendship quilts (quilts made by groups of people, each person having signed a quilt block) that can be found online.

Explain to students that they are going to take everything they have learned about quilts, sewing, knitting, patterns, history, and storytelling and put it to work. They are going to make their own

class quilt to tell a story and to help them remember. Share images of friendship quilts with the class. Discuss how the quilters used teamwork and collaboration to piece together one beautiful quilt. Compare the quilt to the class, each square is unique and different, but they work together to make a cohesive whole. Talk to students about the fact that many times quiltmakers use fabric that means something to them to make their quilt. For example some quilters use pieces of old clothes that remind them of times or events in their lives.

Each child will then design and make his own quilt square. For example, each child may be given a square of white cloth to draw and write on with fabric markers or paint. Or, students may each be given a square of oak tag to collage on. Or, students may be given burlap square. Help students write their names on the square and then stitch over the lines with colored yarn. Students may want to bring in a small piece of cloth, a button, or a bead that has significance for them and attach it to their quilt square. Students may also cut shapes and images that have meaning for them out of felt or cloth and attach them to their burlap squares.

When each child has finished, work in small groups to begin fastening the squares together in whatever manner works best for your situation. The resulting quilt may be finished off with a decorative patchwork border or finger knitting. Hang the class quilt in an area of the school where the school community can admire it. You might also display the pattern blocks and quilt paintings that students made throughout the unit. Invite the guest speaker back and have a celebration with her, the students, and family members. Students can admire and talk about their work. In this way the quilt they have created becomes a new tool for telling stories and remembering.

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A sourcebook that contains over seventeen hundred bibliographic references to catalogues, films, books, articles, etc., pertaining to African American quilting.

Hufford, Mary, Marjorie Hunt, and Steven Zeitlin. 1987. *The Grand Generation: Memory, Mastery, Legacy*. Washington and Seattle: Smithsonian Institution and Washington University Press.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1989. "Objects of Memory." *Folklore Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, ed. Elliott Oring. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

Lyons, Mary. *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1993.

This book tells the story of Harriet Powers and her Bible story quilts. A wonderful resource, this book provides images of the quilts, images of Harriet Powers, and images that depict the context in which she lived and created her quilts. This book sets the scene for quilt making in the Antebellum South.

Mazloomi, Carolyn. *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998.

The description and discussion of an array of contemporary African American quilts, including narratives by the featured quilt artists.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Random House, 1983.

A discussion of how African societies and cultures have influenced and are echoed in the aesthetics and cultural manifestations of black people of the Diaspora.

Tobin, Jacqueline & Dobard, Raymond. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

A combination of research and oral history supporting the theory that slaves used quilts to send messages to one another on the Underground Railroad.

Vlach, John. *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978.

Analysis and description of African American folk art (basketry, blacksmithing, quilting, etc.).

Wahlman, Maude. *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*.

Atlanta, Georgia: Tinwood, 2001.

A study of African American quilts and their links to African textile traditions, including interviews with featured quiltmakers.

Student Bibliography

Chocolate, Debbi. *Kente Cloth*. New York: Walker Books for Young Readers, 1997.

Stories of African and African American life are related to the colors and patterns of the Ashante kente cloth from Ghana. The text rhymes and is easily understood by young students.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2003.

The story of a young girl's escape from slavery using a quilt as her guide and map to freedom.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *Under the Quilt of Night*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

This story of a slave family's escape to freedom ties the metaphor of hiding beneath the dark blanket of night to the folklore of secret signals of the Underground Railroad, including the use of quilts to signify safe houses.

McKissack, Patricia. *Stitchin' and Pullin': A Gee's Bend Quilt*. New York: Random House Books for Young Readers, 2008.

Every day the main character of this picture book, Baby Girl, watches and listens until she is called to join the elder women at the quilting frame. As her quilt is pieced together, so is the story of her heritage.

Mitchell, Rhonda. *The Talking Cloth*. New York: Scholastic, 1997.

In this story, a girl learns about her African heritage as her Aunt tells her about the adinkra cloth from Ghana that is covered with symbols that hold both beauty and meaning.

Ringgold, Faith. *Cassie's word quilt*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002.

The main character of this picture book, a young African American girl, takes readers on a tour of her 1930's Harlem home, school and neighborhood. The illustrations are presented in the format of quilt blocks complete with patterns that students can identify.

Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1991.

Faith Ringgold's famous 1988 story quilt translated into a children's picture book. *Tar Beach* tells the story of a little girl whose imagination takes her off of her rooftop and carries her above Harlem and the George Washington Bridge. Ringgold's signature border of patterned quilt blocks is along the bottom of each page.

Stroud, Bettye. *The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom*. New York: Scholastic, 2005.

This book tells the story of a girl who escapes to freedom on the Underground Railroad by following the secret signs of quilt patterns. Each pattern block is given a name and the story describes how that name gives the runaway slave instructions for her journey.

Vaughan, Marcia. *The Secret to Freedom*. New York: Lee & Low Books, 2001.
The story of the Underground Railroad told to a young girl by her great aunt, a former slave who escaped with her brother using quilts as secret signifiers along the way to Canada.

Web Resources

Often the easiest way to find an accessible image to share with students is to do an image search of the terms below ("Fon Applique" for example) on a search engine such as www.google.com. This will yield an array of vivid images to use with students during a lesson. The websites listed beneath each term also have related images and a wealth of accompanying information.

African Textiles and Story Banners (Kente Cloth, Fon Applique)

<http://www.quiltethnic.com/textiles.html>

<http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/akanclothintro.html>

<http://www.epa-prema.net/abomeyGB/resources/hangings.htm>

<http://search.eb.com/blackhistory/article-57167>

Harriet Powers

<http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/powers/index.html>

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/quilt/harriet.html>

<http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/powers/index.html>

<http://www.historyofquilts.com/hpowers.html>

Faith Ringgold

<http://www.faihringgold.com/>

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/ringgold.htm>

Philadelphia's African American Quilters' Guild, *Quilters of the Round Table*

<http://qtrphilly.com/index.htm>

African American Quilting

<http://www.quiltethnic.com/historical.html>

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/atrads.html>

http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/afam.htm

<http://www.nqaquilts.org/gallery/HarlemGirlsQC/index.html>

<http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/>

Geometric Quilt Patterns

<http://earlywomenmasters.net/quilts/>

<http://earlywomenmasters.net/quilts/tangrams/index.html>

<http://www.quilterscache.com/QuiltBlocksGalore.html>

Learn to Finger Knit

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3LKAI Dz9ig>

<http://www.kyledesigns.com/product/FINGER-KNITTING>

View a clip of the film *Quilts in Women's Lives*

<http://www.folkstreams.net/film,37>

Appendices/Standards

The Core Curriculum used by the School District of Philadelphia is aligned with the Pennsylvania Department of Education's set of Academic Standards. *Sew Me A Story: African and African American "Quilt Lore"* has also been aligned to those standards, which may be viewed in further detail at www.pde.state.pa.us/. This is a cross curricular unit that incorporates Literacy, Art, Mathematics and Social Studies. The following PA standards are addressed in the lessons of this unit.

Academic Standards for the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1.6.3. Speaking and Listening

- A. Listen to others.
- C. Speak using skills appropriate to formal speech situations.
- D. Contribute to discussions.
- E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.

Academic Standards for the Arts and Humanities

9.1.3. Production, Performance and Exhibition of Dance, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts

- A. Know and use the elements and principles of each art form to create works in the arts and humanities.
- B. Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.
- E. Demonstrate the ability to define objects, express emotions, illustrate an action or relate an experience through creation of works in the arts.
- I. Identify arts events that take place in schools and communities.
- J. Know and use traditional and contemporary technologies for producing, performing and exhibiting works in the arts or the works of others.

9.2.3. Historical and Cultural Contexts

- A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.
- B. Relate works in the arts chronologically to historical events.
- D. Analyze a work of art from its historical perspective.
- E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts.
- F. Relate works in the arts to geographic regions.
- L. Identify, explain and analyze common themes, forms and techniques from works in the arts.

Academic Standards for Mathematics

2.8.3. Algebra and Functions

A. Recognize, describe, extend, create and replicate a variety of patterns including attribute, activity, number and geometric patterns.

2.9.3. Geometry

A. Name and label geometric shapes in two and three dimensions.

B. Build geometric shapes using concrete objects.

D. Find and describe geometric figures in real life.

I. Predict how shapes can be changed by combining or dividing them.

Academic Standards for History

8.1.3. Historical Analysis and Skills Development

A. Understand chronological thinking and distinguish between past, present and future time.

B. Develop and understanding of historical sources.

C. Understand fundamentals of historical interpretation.

D. Understand historical research.

Endnotes

¹ Maude Wahlman, Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts (Atlanta, Georgia: Tinwood, 2001) 69.

² Gladys-Marie Fry, Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts From the Ante-bellum South (New York: Dulton Studio Books, 1990) 12.

³ Mary Lyons, Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1993) 33.

⁴ Fry 47.

⁵ <http://qrtphilly.com/index.htm>

⁶ Wahlman 85.

⁷ John Vlach, The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978) 55.

⁸ John Beardsley and William Arnett, The Quilts of Gee's Bend (Atlanta, Georgia: Tinwood Books, 2002) 18.

⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit (New York: Random House, 1983) 220.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Toblin and Raymond Dobard, Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 75.

¹¹ Fry 81.

¹² Roland Freeman, A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories (Nashville Tennessee: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996) 8.

¹³ Wahlman 119.

¹⁴ Wahlman 120.

¹⁵ Tobin and Dobard 8.

¹⁶ Vlach 44.

¹⁷ Lyons 19.

¹⁸ Vlach 48.

¹⁹ Lyons 18.

²⁰ Thompson 215.

²¹ Wahlman 23.

²² Wahlman 25.

²³ Dan Cameron, Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998) 1.