

James Bassler: Woven in Tradition

“Decisions I make are never based on how long it’s going to take me.”

“Anybody might not consider themselves an artist but yet they can, by some need to survive, make things, which is something I think we’ve sort of lost with high technology.”

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the work of weaver James Bassler and learn about the basic techniques of weaving. Students will view the “Origins” segment of *Craft in America* featuring Bassler. They will discuss the role of technology in craft, as well as consider the importance and origins of weaving in our world. After spending time learning about weaving and dyeing, students will create a piece of woven cloth dyed with indigo.

Grade Level (8-12)

Estimated Time (7-8/ 45 minute class periods)

Background Information

The act of using a set of sticks and yarn to create a piece of fabric is one of the oldest crafts created by humans. Materializing in cultures all over the world, weaving met the daily needs of our earliest ancestors who required the creation of fabric to clothe, house, feed, and comfort them. Today, weaving still meets those needs, however many craft artists use the medium to express their own ideas and interests.

James Bassler is one such artist. Using the most basic of weaving techniques, Bassler creates work that is simple yet sophisticated. Using natural fibers, he creates weavings that he dyes using resist methods and often cuts the weavings apart and sews them into something new. Drawing inspiration from the weaving processes of Central and South American cultures as well as from his father, who created hand-dyed, hooked rugs when on break from his career as a major league baseball player, Bassler enjoys every minute of his work, even if the process can be tedious and repetitive.

Key Concepts

Artists can create sophisticated work from the most basic techniques.

In addition to clothing, weaving can be used to make other objects.

There are benefits and drawbacks to creating art without the assistance of high technology.

Critical Questions

What is weaving? How is it important to our lives as humans?

Other than clothing, what are some items made from woven materials?

How does technology make it easier or more difficult for a craft artist to create work?

What is the value of making an object by hand, rather than with technological assistance?

Objectives

Students will:

Understand the basic techniques of creating a weaving and define key terminology like loom, warp and weft.

Learn about the origins of weaving and the time and effort that goes into creating a weaving from the yarn to the final product.

Consider the role that technology plays (or does not play) in an artist's work, and explain how technology can both assist and hinder the artistic process.

Understand the basic properties and origins of dyes, both synthetic and natural.

Create a weaving and dye it using natural indigo dye and resist methods.

Vocabulary

Warp, weft, cochineal, loom, plain weave, resist

Interdisciplinary Connections

Social studies, history, science

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

1. Content Standard: Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
2. Content Standard: Using knowledge of *structures and functions
4. Content Standard: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
6. Content Standard: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

Craft in America DVD, "Origins."

Craft in America website: <http://www.craftinamerica.org/>

Examples of different kinds of cloth (burlap, linen, microfiber, wool, etc.)

Worksheet: "Tying Up Loose Ends: Weaving Self-Assessment"

Weaving Materials

Wooden picture frame or 4 pieces of wood to form the loom

2" Nails

Hammers

Cotton warping yarn or cotton kitchen twine

Natural yarns or fibers, such as cotton, wool, or linen, preferably undyed

Blunt yarn needles or shuttles for weaving

(Alternatively, cardboard could be used for warp by cutting slits in the top and bottom of it and using that to run the warp threads up and down the weaving)

Dyeing Materials

Dyes

Upholstery thread and/or rubber bands

Vinyl gloves, 5 gallon bucket with lid, other dyeing supplies

Jacquard Indigo Dye Kit from the source listed here or another

Instructional Strategies

Investigation (1-2 /45 minute class periods)

Before viewing

Initiate a conversation with students about the role of fabric in our world. Bring in a variety of different cloths, from burlap to linen to microfiber cloth for students to compare and contrast. If possible, find samples that can be cut apart for investigating the ways they are constructed.

Ask students to define weaving. What materials can it be made from? What objects in our lives are woven? Where have you seen weaving? Brainstorm some of the unconventional, unapparent uses we have for weaving today. Some possibilities beyond the realm of fashion and clothing would be in medicine (stents, vascular grafts), sports and hobbies (tennis rackets, basketball nets and fishing nets), and housing (thatched roofs). How would our lives be different without the invention of weaving? Explain a bit about the history of weaving and how it developed simultaneously in cultures throughout the world (Craft in America website, http://www.craftinamerica.org/fiber/story_62.php). Discuss the invention of the Jacquard loom and how it revolutionized the textile industry.

View the segment on James Bassler in “Origins” of the Craft in America DVD.

After viewing

Discuss Bassler’s ways of working. What is appealing/unappealing about his art making process? What surprised you about his work, philosophy, or techniques? How do his views on technology affect his weaving?

To contrast Bassler’s bare-bones weaving process, share images and examples of the textiles in the Extreme Textiles exhibition from the Cooper Hewitt Museum (http://cooperhewitt.org/EXHIBITIONS/extreme_textiles/site/index.htm) with students.

On a blackboard, overhead, or easel with paper, visually “map” the benefits and drawbacks of technology as it relates to craft. Some ideas to consider would be that technology makes the process easier and faster, yet might not capture the essence of the artist as strongly. However, items made by hand in a more rudimentary fashion often cost less and open up greater freedom to the artist, as Bassler points out, and retain the integrity of the craft’s origins.

Have students view a video clip on the Craft in America website and consider what another weaver, Randall Darwall, has to say about this topic. What tasks or hobbies in their lives do students enjoy doing by hand without the use of machines?

Studio Production (6-8/ 45 minute class periods)

After considering the origins of weaving in the previous class, students will produce a weaving using the Plain Weave technique (over and under alternating warp threads) or if desired, something more complicated like a basket weave (over 2, under 2, and alternating on subsequent rows). When taken off the loom, students will make resist designs on their weavings using thread or rubber bands, then dye them using natural indigo dye.

Part 1: Weaving (4-6/ 45 minute class periods)

Using a wooden picture frame or four wooden boards (smaller than 2x4s) nailed or screwed together at the corners, students will create a simple loom to make a weaving. The loom does not have to be large, but should be at least 12"x12".

Once the looms are assembled (one per person), students will hammer nails along the top and bottom of their looms, spacing each nail 1" apart and driving the nails roughly 1" into the wood.

Starting at the first nail, (either side, top or bottom), they will tie the end of the cotton yarn to the nail. To warp the loom, students will loop the yarn around the nail opposite the one to which they tied the cotton yarn, along the top or bottom, then return to the top of the loom and loop cotton yarn around the next nail. Students should continue to work back and forth until they've come to the last nail, making sure the warp yarn is tight along the way.

At the last nail, students should tie another knot. To weave, they will take a length of yarn, leaving a short tail to tuck in later, and go over and under the warp threads, being careful not to pull too tightly (you don't want an hourglass effect with your weaving). Encourage students to experiment with yarns of different textures and colors. They might also explore weaving techniques like knotting or wrapping warp threads.

When the weaving is finished, have students weave in any loose ends on the back and carefully take the weaving off of the loom.

Part 2: Dyeing (1/ 45 minute class period)

Once their weavings are off the loom, students will dye them using natural indigo dye. View again the segment on James Bassler when he's tying and dyeing his weavings using cochineal dye to give students an idea of ways to use resist dyeing.

Using rubber bands (similar to tie dyeing), or upholstery thread, students will create a resist pattern on their weavings. Upholstery thread is used because its synthetic makeup prevents it from soaking up the dye, and it is unlikely to break when pulled tightly into knots. Students may also wish to try some Japanese shibori resist techniques. For example, have them stitch lines through the weaving and then pull the threads taut and knot them, which will form a resist.

Following the instructions on the Jacquard Indigo Dye Kit, set up the dye vat in the 5 gallon bucket. Since indigo's blue color comes from the dye coming into contact with air (oxidizing), keep the vat covered with the lid when not in use to minimize the spoiling of the dye.

Soak the weavings in a bucket of plain water, squeeze out the excess water, and place them in the indigo vat, being careful not to splash or add any extra movement to the dye as to prevent oxidization. After a few minutes, remove the weaving and allow the oxidization process to occur. When removed from the dye, the cloth will look bright green; it will then turn blue after a few minutes. After the color changes, the rubber bands or thread can be removed and the weaving should be rinsed in a sink until the water comes clean. Allow the dyed weavings to dry.

Display the weavings as a class. They might be stitched together onto a larger piece of cloth or displayed on a wall together.

Reflection

Engage students in a discussion about their results. Are they pleased with how they turned out? What surprised them? What was easiest/hardest about the process? Did they enjoy the slow pace of weaving, or would they prefer to use a machine? Is there a newfound respect for the time and effort it took our ancestors to make simple garments?

Assessment

Give each student a copy of the “Tying Up Loose Threads: Weaving Self-Assessment” worksheet. By the lesson’s end, students should be able to:

Describe how a weaving is made and how to use resist dyeing techniques.

Understand the importance of weaving in the scope of human civilization.

Be able to explain ways that technology can support and hinder the artistic process.

Weave a piece of cloth and dye it using resist methods.

Additional Resources:

Oral History Interview with James Bassler from Smithsonian Archives of American Art (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/bassle02.htm>)

History of Weaving from Classic Encyclopedia (<http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Weaving>)

World Shibori Network (<http://shiboriorg.wordpress.com/>)

Handweavers Guild of America (<http://www.weavespindye.org/>)

Extreme Textiles Exhibition at Cooper Hewitt Museum http://cooperhewitt.org/EXHIBITIONS/extreme_textiles/site/index.htm

Natural Dyes International (<http://www.naturaldyes.org/>)

Dharma Trading Company dye resources (<http://www.dharmatrading.com/topnav/dyes/>)

Extensions

Dona Look is also an artist featured in the Craft In America series who works with natural materials and fibers and basic stitching techniques. View a video clip of Dona sharing her work process at Craft in America, and visit her website to learn more.

Tying Up Loose Ends: Weaving Self-Assessment

Please circle the responses that best fit your working process (1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree):

a. I can describe the importance of weaving and name a variety of items that are created using weaving techniques.

1 2 3 4 5

b. I can explain ways that technology both helps and hinders the weaving process.

1 2 3 4 5

c. I enjoyed the pace of the weaving process.

1 2 3 4 5

d. I felt frustrated or discouraged by the art making process.

1 2 3 4 5

e. I ran into problems or had to redo parts.

1 2 3 4 5

f. I like how my final product turned out.

1 2 3 4 5

g. I could explain the weaving and dyeing process to someone who has never woven something before.

1 2 3 4 5

In the space below, share what you have learned about the significance of weaving reflect on what you liked most and least about the process. What would you do differently next time?