



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

Terese Agnew: Drawing with Thread



"We're always trying to increase productivity and consume more, and my work is the opposite of that."

- Terese Agnew

LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will explore the richly detailed work of quilter Terese Agnew, as she adopts the tradition of the quilt as a carefully made, warm and nurturing cover, for another caring purpose: encouraging empathy for others, whether workers, birds, or forests. In this lesson, students will consider the varied uses of perspective in Agnew's work, as a compositional technique, as an aspect of empathy, and as a political stance. Students will consider the importance of titles to convey meaning. They will choose a social issue important to them. Finally, students will have the opportunity to experiment with fabric, paint, and stitching, as they create a quilt to craft their message.

Grade Level: 9-12

Estimated Time: Two 45-minute class periods of research, discussion & planning, followed by five or more 45-minute studio periods

Craft In America Theme/Episode: *THREADS*

Background Information

Terese Agnew's work has evolved from sculpture to densely embroidered quilts by a process she calls "drawing with thread". Her themes are environmental and social. Her most notable quilt to date is the *Portrait of a Textile Worker*, constructed of thousands of clothing labels stitched together, contributed by hundreds of sympathetic individuals worldwide. The resulting image is about the exploitation and abuse of laborers, the by-products of globalization and the insatiable American appetite for goods. Agnew's quilts are included in permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, and the Milwaukee Art Museum, among others.

Artist Terese Agnew originally wanted to be a writer and children's book illustrator. Before finding quilts as a medium, she created public art installations, which can be seen on her website, www.tardart.com. Agnew began quilting, "because her house in Wisconsin was very cold in the winter." She found that quilting was the perfect medium for combining an inviting sense of warmth and security with messages about political issues for which she encourages empathy.

Key Concepts

- Artworks can provide a means for communication and connection among many people.
- People find ways to express political ideas through the arts.
- Methods of crafting useful objects can be used to create objects that convey ideas.

Critical Questions

- Why might an artist choose to send a message by making a quilt rather than a drawing, a print, or a painting? How is a quilt different from and similar to a painting?
- How might an artwork express empathy?
- How might artists use the notion of “perspective?”

Objectives

Students will:

- Become familiar with the work of Terese Agnew and her use of quilts as a medium for expressing political ideas.
- Consider the multiple uses of perspective in a work of art.
- Invent descriptive titles for artworks
- Create a stitched or painted textile piece to communicate a political idea or message.

Vocabulary

Empathy, juxtapose, appliqué, machine embroidery, quilting hoop, batting, perspective (its multiple meanings as in Agnew’s work).

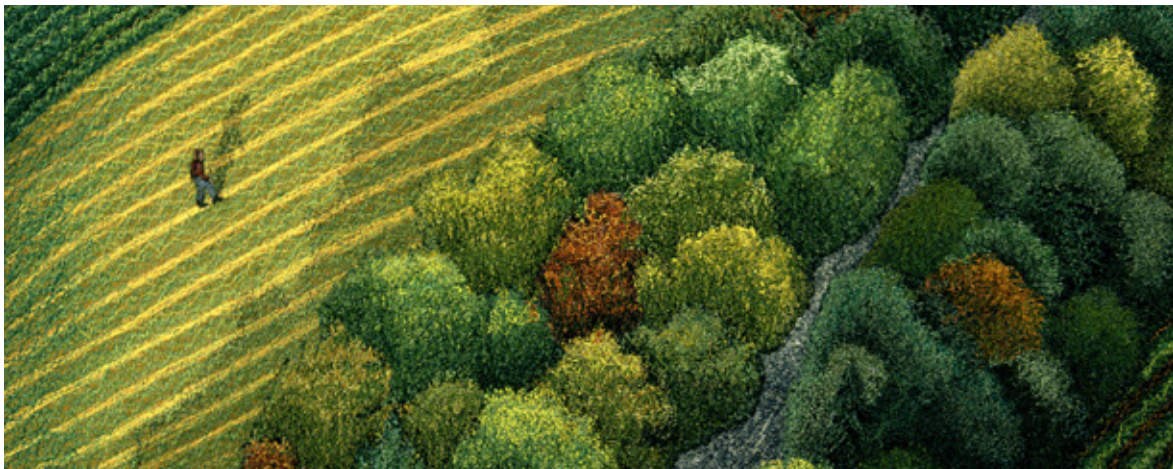
Interdisciplinary Connection

History/Social Studies: The International Quilt Study Museum (www.quiltstudy.org) has quilts that touch on many historic periods, suitable for an investigation in social studies, including Civil War era quilts, political message quilts, and World War I Red Cross quilts. The interactive timeline is an engaging feature for student research. Also, as stated in the program, quilts (and other needlework forms) were one of the limited forms of expression available to women in the 19th century. An historical investigation of women’s political needlework would be an excellent extension of this lesson.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard:

1. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
2. Using knowledge structures and functions
5. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others.



Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *THREADS*. Also viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/threads
- Craft in America website, www.craftinamerica.org
- An image of *Portrait of a Textile Worker* can be viewed at www.tardart.com
- The International Quilt Study Museum and Center has a quilt timeline, which includes images of historic quilts with political themes: explorer.quiltstudy.org/timeline.html
- The National Quilt Museum has a collection of contemporary quilts, beginning in 1980 when quilting had a resurgence in popularity: www.quiltmuseum.org
- The Aids Memorial Quilt, which weighs 54 tons, has an informational website including directions for making a 3 by 6 foot panel to add to the project: www.aidsquilt.org
- Digital images of other work by Agnew, available online: *Portrait of a Textile Worker, Proposed Deep Pit Mine Site, Lynne Township, Wisconsin, Cedar Waxwings at the AT&T Parking Lot, The D.O.T. Straightens Things Out, Practice Bomber Range in the Mississippi Flyway*
- Books about quilts, historic and new
- Current newspapers and magazines
- Access to online resources for contemporary social issues (optional)
- Books about contemporary social topics, such as environmental issues, economic issues, sustainability issues, consumer issues, youth rights issues, and discrimination issues
- Books about women's history in the 19th and 20th centuries

Worksheets

- *What's Your Perspective?*
- *Your Designer Label: Creating Titles*

Materials

- Drawing and scrap paper
- Assorted magazines for the title worksheet
- Glue, for titles on magazine pictures
- Fabrics, such as plain cotton muslin, prints, and solid color cottons (recycled clothes can be used). Natural fabrics such as cotton, and woven medium-weight fabrics work well for quilts, that is, fabrics about the weight of cotton shirts, and no heavier than jeans material, but students may experiment with any fabric. A 12 -inch square each of top fabric, batting, and bottom fabric is a good amount for each student, but as small as 6-inch squares will work. Note: batting is the soft, lofty layer of cotton or synthetic fabric that goes in between the top and bottom layer of the quilt. Before manufactured batting, people made quilts with a layer of wool or flannel for warmth, and these may still be used
- Sewing machine, (optional)
- Hand-sewing needles, including large-eyed embroidery needles
- Straight pins
- Safety pins
- Sewing thread
- Embroidery threads
- Paints, such as watercolor and acrylic
- Fine point brushes

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

"What I'm looking for is common ground with shared experiences with people."

Before Viewing

Explain to students that the artist they featured in the video uses quilts as her medium. Share the following comment made by Terese Agnew: "Everybody has a quilt story. It's about being loved and cared for, and I think that's one of the things I'm trying to say with my work." Based on what the artist has to say about quilts, ask students what they might expect to see. View the segment on Terese Agnew in *THREADS* on the Craft in America DVD or online at www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/terese-agnew-segment

After Viewing

Begin a discussion of Agnew's work by asking for student reactions.

- Why does Agnew make quilts instead of making paintings? (She hopes the familiarity of quilts as blankets creates a connection with viewers.)
- Why does Agnew take so much time on her quilts? (She says she wants them to reflect the richness of the world. The detail and time could represent a caring for or honoring of her subject, as in *Portrait of a Textile Worker*.)
- For whom, and what, does Agnew express empathy? (Workers, and nature such as birds and forests.)
- How does she show this? (Perhaps in the time and attention she devotes to the work. Also through juxtaposition, such as the textile labels with the textile worker; the highways with the woods.)
- Encourage students to examine the many meanings and uses of perspective in Agnew's work, including in composition (she combines different "views," as in *Proposed Deep Pit Mine Site, Lynne Township, Wisconsin*), her own political perspective represented in the work (often she encourages empathy in others for the people or other life depicted in her work, she protests certain events, such as a deep pit mine and a road reconstruction) and the perspective of characters within the quilts, such as the visual perspective of the cedar waxwings and the factory laboring perspective of the textile workers.)
- How might Agnew's work make a difference or help people? (Perhaps people seeing *Portrait of a Textile Worker* will question the treatment of textile workers, here and abroad. Maybe some viewers will appreciate nature and seek to protect it because of how effectively she combines beautiful images of nature with what can affect nature adversely. Also, posters of *Portrait of a Textile Worker* are sold to raise money for a workers' rights organization.)
- Most of Agnew's pieces have a conflict of interest represented. Can you identify the conflicts? (Textile workers' treatment vs. profits. Parking lot vs. birds. Workers with pink slips against the parking lot of the business that laid them off. Highways vs. woods.)



Studio Production

Tell students they will be making a quilt that will express an idea. Discuss Agnew's comments about craft, and the idea that quilts connect to people because of their reference to warmth and nurturing. Present the idea that some students may want to focus on the historical situation of women who had no other socially approved ways of expressing their political ideas. Have them consider the question: Does this apply to any populations in the world today? This can lead to a discussion of the situation of women in various parts of the globe, or, on a local scale, the dialogue could turn to the rights of expression for people their own age. Show them the books and available online content for their research. Also, discuss whether they will use new or recycled fabrics, and how Agnew uses each (mostly new fabrics, but also the recycled labels) and why some quilts are made with recycled fabrics because of the limited resources people may have (or have had in the past.)

What's Your Perspective?

(one 45-minute class period)

Using this worksheet, have students consider the multiple uses of perspective in Agnew's work, including as a compositional device, as a political view, and as a sight point of view from a particular place (such as the cedar waxwing's view of the lot.) Guide students to discuss ideas and to use the available books, newspapers, and online resources for research. Help students choose social issues that interest them, and to define their stance. This could involve discussions with individual students, or opening up discussion about certain topics to the entire class. Political topics encourage lively dialogue. Social issues may be small-scale and local, or large national issues. School issues are social and political issues as well, and students may want to look at their own school for ideas. One generative topic: what would you change about school? When they have an idea and are ready to draw it, encourage students to try different compositional views in their work. On the other hand, Agnew's quilts are extremely complex, and some students might like to work in a simpler format. Perhaps they will rely on larger shapes and symbols to create their sketch. This sheet will provide the start on a design for their quilt.

Your Designer Label: Creating Titles

(one 45-minute class period)

This worksheet allows students practice with creating titles, and pushing titles to indicate meaning. Provide magazines and strips of paper for practice with inventing titles. Students can create titles that are simply descriptive (which actually takes some time) and then move on to inventing titles that convey other meanings, whether they are humorous, ironic, evoking a mood, creatively descriptive, or purposely ambiguous.



Quilting

(five 45-minute class periods, including reflection activity)

Have students practice painting techniques and formulations on fabric scraps. This is a good opportunity to understand the qualities of various paints. Tempera will crack and flake off if fabric is folded, but acrylic and watercolor remain pliable. Acrylic can be diluted to achieve watercolor like effects. Also, acrylic is fairly laundry-proof, so students can quilt a wearable item if they choose.

Agnew uses a sewing machine, and that can be a useful classroom tool that students can share. The machine can be used for quilting and/or machine embroidery. To make a quilted square, first the top layer of fabric is decorated, then pinned together, right side up, with the batting sandwiched between the top and backing layers. The sandwich is sewn through all layers, creating the dimpled, puffy, quilted appearance. Edges can be finished in different ways: turning in raw edges and sewing, overcasting, or applying binding strips of fabric.

To decorate the face, or top layer of the quilt, there are many options, which may be used alone or combined. Designs may be painted on the surface. When dry, painted designs may be outlined with stitching. Fabric shapes can be cut and sewn in place (appliqué). Designs can be embroidered by hand or machine. Agnew creates some quilts using fabric that sticks up from the surface, and students may want to try that.

Note: Quilts can be very small, just a patch size, or very large (see the AIDS quilt link). Smaller quilts may be more feasible depending on your allotted time with students, and the availability of materials. Keep in mind recycled fabrics from used clothing and linens are appropriate for this project and have a long tradition in quilt making. Consider the possibility of a group project, or allowing students who choose to do so to work together.

Agnew's quilts seek to engage the community, and *Portrait of a Textile Worker* relied on contributions from thousands of people, who became, in a sense, co-constructors of the piece. Community interaction can occur through displaying students' individually created pieces to engage the viewing public, or through students working together as a classroom community to create a quilt.



CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection

Encourage students to examine how Agnew describes her work, and to consider how they will describe their work. Have students write an artist's statement to be displayed with their quilt. They may want to include details of interest, for example, if they used clothes with a family heritage, such a detail could add to their statement and to the appreciation of their work. Student quilts and these artist statements can be displayed for the viewing of the rest of the school. However, to continue in the Agnew's theme of engaging the public, perhaps the quilts can be displayed at a local library or community center to engage with a larger community.

Assessment

By lessons end students should be able to:

- Explain the work of Terese Agnew and her use of quilts as a medium for expressing political ideas.
- Identify potential uses of perspective in a work of art.
- Create a meaningful title for a work of art.
- Create a stitched or painted textile piece to communicate a message or political idea.

Extensions

Students may examine the work of the following fiber artists on the Craft In America website.

- Quiltmaker Faith Ringgold also creates pictorial quilts that tell stories. More of her work can be seen on her website: www.faithringgold.com
- Lia Cook uses weaving, photography, painting and technology to craft intricate fiber pieces that rival the detail and intricacy in Agnew's work: www.liacook.com
- Janet Lipkin creates wearable art pieces of yarn, some of them inspired by traditional quilt designs: www.janetlipkin.com

Authors

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Worksheet: What's Your Perspective?

"It's very small, but anyway I just had to put that in there in honor of the workers."
-Terese Agnew

Perspective can mean:

- An opinion.
- A compositional device, such as creating the illusion of distance in a drawing.
- A vista, or what you see from a particular place.

Can you find an example of each in Terese Agnew's work?

1. Create one list of ideas and three sketches on this sheet. First section, list some social issues about which you have an opinion, or a perspective. You might want to work with a friend and compare ideas.
2. Second, sketch a depiction of that perspective. For example, if you think your town needs more bike paths, how would you depict that in a design? You might show a young child, or yourself, on a bike.
3. Third, try to add a different point of view in your sketch (or show it in a new sketch.) For example, you could create the sketch from your perspective on the bike, by showing your hands on the handlebars in the foreground. Or you could show a bird's eye perspective from the air, of people biking all over a town.
4. Last, juxtapose two different images in your sketch to tell more of your story. For example, you could show the child on the bike in a center square, and a map around the edges with bicycle wheels marking the places where you think bike paths are needed.

Decide if your sketch is something you would like to recreate in quilt form. If not, return to step one and consider a new idea.

Worksheet: Your Designer Label: Creating Titles

"I remembered these women and I thought, yeah, but what are their names?"
- Terese Agnew

Sometimes, artists choose to label a work "Untitled." They may want to leave the piece open for more interpretation. But some titles can help the viewer understand an artwork better. Titles can add another layer of meaning to an artwork. Titles can be funny, shocking, or moving. A title makes it easier for people to talk about your artwork, because your artwork has a name. Terese Agnew thinks titles are important because they further communicate her ideas.

1. First, create a list of titles and names you know, such as artworks, movies, books, musical groups and songs, video games, sneakers, colognes, and other products. Which are your favorites, and why? What other ideas or feelings do they evoke? Try inventing new titles for some of the things on your list. If you could, would you rename certain things?
2. Next, cut out three pictures from the stack of magazines. Choose images that interest you. Cut strips of paper to write titles on. Invent titles for the images, write them on the paper, and try them out next to the image. Try several titles for each image. Can you change the meaning of the image depending on the title you add to it? Ask a friend what they think about your titles.
3. Going back to your sketch plan for your quilt, try out several titles, considering what you want to communicate with your work. Can a title add to the meaning in your work?