



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

Painting With Fabric: How Two Artists Make Quilts

"I call quilting an extreme sport...I kind of get a physical rush when I'm creating something."
– Victoria Findlay Wolfe

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will view two segments from Craft in America's *QUILTS* episode and will meet artists Victoria Findlay Wolfe, who creates new designs by altering traditional quilt block patterns, and Michael A. Cummings, who creates quilted portraits of prominent African Americans. Both artists refer to their quilt making as similar to painting, and students hear about the process each uses. After viewing the episode, students will compare and contrast how the artists work, how their quilts are used, and from where the artists get their inspiration. Finally, students will make a paper patchwork design, choosing to alter a traditional patchwork design or create a collaged portrait of a notable subject.

Grade Level: 6–8

Estimated Time: four or five 45 minute class periods

Craft In America Theme/Episode: *QUILTS*

Background Information



Victoria Findlay Wolfe has a fine art degree in painting but found her life's passion in quilt making. Now a New York-based international award-winning quilter, fabric designer, teacher, author and lecturer, Findlay Wolfe is known for making quilts that look difficult to make, then teaching quilters to make them. Each quilt Findlay Wolfe makes pushes boundaries; supporting her premise that creativity requires risk. Findlay Wolfe was always fascinated by color, pattern, and design. Growing up in Minnesota, inspired by a creative mother and grandmother who was an avid quilt maker, she learned to quilt and sew at 4 years old. After training as a painter, she found her life's passion to be quilting.



Michael A. Cummings is a nationally recognized quilter who lives and works in the historic Sugar Hill neighborhood of New York, NY. Self-taught, Cummings brought years of painting and collage skills to his quilt making. Inspired by jazz and working in the narrative tradition, Cummings and his sewing machine tell stories of the African American experience across historical, cultural, philosophical and mythical realms. Using vibrant colors, applique technique, and a sewing machine for the main body of the piece, he often embellishes the surface with hand embroidery and found objects. Stories involve celebrations of Josephine Baker, Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes, jazz music, mythical/historical characters, and commemorate historical events in African American history. Cummings views his quilts as giant collages, likening the process of construction to painting on canvas.

Key Concepts

- Some quilt artists choose to work within traditions; others choose to break with and change traditional designs to make new ones.
- Some quilts are intended as art objects and not used as blankets.
- Quilt artists may work in themes.

Critical Questions

- How can a traditional quilt design be altered to make a new one?
- How can quilts be used if not as a blanket?
- How can you discover a theme in a quilt artist's work?

Objectives

Students will:

- Sketch a traditional quilt pattern and alter it to make it different.
- Create a paper quilt design that could be a plan for a non-functional quilt.
- Organize their paper quilt designs in groups with similar themes.

Vocabulary

Quilt, patchwork, batting, double knit, functional, portrait, diaspora

Interdisciplinary Connection

- Social Studies: With Michael A. Cummings' work as inspiration, students choose notable African American individuals to feature in collaged patchwork portraits. This provides an opportunity for investigating notable individuals and important events in American history, especially those pertaining to African American history and culture. Also, as they study traditional American quilt block designs, students will encounter many stories detailing particular times and lives in American history.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

- Visual Arts/Creating #VA:Cr2.2
Process Component: Investigate
Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Visual Arts/Presenting #VA:Pr.4.1
Process Component: Relate
Anchor Standard: Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- Visual Arts/Responding #VA:Re8.1
Process Component: Perceive
Anchor Standard: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- *Craft in America QUILTS* episode is viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/quilts
- The National Quilt Collection at The National Museum of American History has a large selection of American quilt examples (and information about each) on its website: www.si.edu/spotlight/national-quilt-collection
- The home page of The National Museum of African American History and Culture website, features a section entitled "Collections Sampler," that includes photographs of objects in the museum's collection, such as the personal hymnal of Harriet Tubman, slave shackles, and a dress sewn by Rosa Parks. Each image is linked to information about individuals and/or events in African American history that could be the focus of quilts designed by students. www.si.edu/museums/african-american-museum

Worksheets

- *Quilts Video Search*
- *Studying the Art Quilts of Victoria Findlay Wolfe*
- *Studying the Art Quilts of Michael A. Cummings*

Materials

- Sketchbooks
- Pencils and colored pencils
- Paper for the final design: 12x18" or 24x36" are good sizes with room for lots of paper patches
- Colorful construction papers
- A plentiful supply of papers to re-use: magazines, newspapers, brown grocery bags, scraps of patterned giftwraps, patterned scrapbook papers, wallpaper samples, etc.
- Large-eyed needles
- Embroidery floss and/or crochet cotton (string) for embellishment
- Other assorted items for possible embellishment: Beads, buttons, sequins, patches, etc.
- White glue
- Scissors
- Rulers
- Permanent markers or paint pens



INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Students will view the segments from the *QUILTS* episode featuring Victoria Findlay Wolfe and Michael A. Cummings while answering the questions on the *Quilts Video Search* worksheet. Students will research and sketch information and ideas in their sketchbooks from two Smithsonian Museum websites, and develop their own ideas for a paper quilt design. Finally, students will create patched paper quilts in their choice of altered patchwork pattern or portrait of a notable person.

(Video and discussion: one 45 minute class period)

Before Viewing

Introduce the scope of the lesson to students, sharing the key concepts, critical questions, and objectives. Share a bit about what they will see. This is a good time to introduce the idea that the quilts Findlay Wolfe and Cummings make are not used as blankets. Hand out the *Quilts Video Search* worksheet and go over the questions. Allow students to work in teams so they can cooperatively gather the information as the video plays. You may want to stop the video when each answer is stated, to help students locate the information and give them time to write their responses.

After Viewing

Begin a discussion of the video. What did students find interesting? Go through the questions on the *Quilts Video Search* worksheet and have students share their answers. Answers follow here:

Discussion

Video section 1

1. Victoria Findlay Wolfe states, "Every time I make a quilt...I want it to look different than the last thing."
2. She is working with the traditional quilt pattern called, "Double Wedding Ring."
3. She says, "Once the whole quilt top is complete...I could still cut it apart and turn it into something else."
4. Her grandmother, Elda Wolfe, inspired her. Elda Wolfe's brightly colored quilts were made from scraps of double knit fabrics (thick knitted fabric made from acrylic fiber) from clothes she sewed for the family.
5. Victoria Findlay Wolfe states, "I call quilting an extreme sport...I kind of get a physical rush when I'm creating something."
6. One prominent theme in Victoria Findlay Wolfe's designs is taking inspiration from old quilt patterns and making them new by altering them. She says, "I'm keeping the bones of a traditional pattern but really just trying to tell another story."

Video section 2

7. Michael A. Cummings added African fabrics, Hawaiian fabrics, safety pins, and keys to his portrait quilt of President Obama.
8. He states, "I just visualize the images...I just... with chalk ... start drawing the forms with proportions I feel will work and then pin it down and sew."
9. Michael A. Cummings says that he is " ...trying to tell the story of African American history."
10. Since he was sickly, Cummings explains, "That led me to be by myself a lot, it kind of allowed my mind to drift into an imaginary sort of world where I could draw."
11. After watching: His theme is portraits, and more specifically, portraits of prominent African Americans. He says, "My theme changed to more narratives or historical connections with people and places and events."
12. Students may find connections on their own here: They are colorful; some paintings have similar themes, etc. Wolfe states she works on her design wall trying out patches of fabric "very much the way I would push paint around a canvas." Cummings says, "Like a palette of paint I have a palette of fabric..." After he made his first fabric collage he thought, "'This looks like something I would have painted.'"

Revisit the idea of how these quilts are used as artworks on a wall or as images that may honor or educate more than as blankets. This may provide a good discussion on the topic of functional objects.

After Discussion

Explain that students will have the opportunity to investigate ideas and processes related to the two quilt artists as they prepare to create their own quilt patterns. Hand out the *Studying the Art Quilts of Victoria Findlay Wolfe* worksheet, followed by the *Studying the Art Quilts of Michael A. Cummings* worksheet. Allow students to look at the websites for each and to sketch designs.

For the *Studying the Art Quilts of Victoria Findlay Wolfe* worksheet, first remind students that Victoria Findlay Wolfe was working with the traditional quilt design called, “Double Wedding Ring.” Show students examples of this traditional pattern online. Help students identify the units of repeating blocks in the “Double Wedding Ring” examples. Suggest that they look for quilts at the Smithsonian Museum that feature geometric repeating quilt blocks such as those found in the “Double Wedding Ring” example.

For the *Studying the Art Quilts of Michael A. Cummings* worksheet, help students locate prominent individuals and important events represented by some of the objects on the homepage of The National Museum of African American History and Culture (for example, Marian Anderson’s concert dress or Carl Lewis’s Olympic jersey.)



Studio Production

(three to four 45 minute class periods)

After students have investigated the websites and have created some sketched ideas of quilt designs, have them choose a design to finalize as a paper-patched quilt. Provide a backing paper. A large sheet allows students room to work and can always be trimmed later if not filled. Demonstrate some ways of working. For example, paper can be torn or cut and formed into organic shapes. Or, rulers and stencils can be used to make clean-lined geometric shapes. Students can glue the pieces to the paper to form an overall design. After creating their paper collaged quilt image, show students how to add hand stitching using needle and thread on paper. Or, they can make zigzag style lines to resemble Michael A. Cummings’s zigzag stitching. Show students how to add small embellishments with stitching or glue if they choose.

CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection

Have each student compose an artist's statement to accompany the display of the paper quilt designs. Suggest that they include their theme and their source of inspiration. Ask students to decide if their design would be better for a functional item or as an art quilt to be hung on a wall, and to note that on their statement.

Have students view their work as a class and choose themes that the different works seem to fit. They may choose groups by color, subject matter, style, etc. Encourage them to arrange the works and display them according to the themes they detect. Students may wish to include an introduction to the exhibition in which they describe the videos from Craft In America, the two artists who served as inspiration for their own work, and other aspects of their artistic process as a group.

Assessment

In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; by examining the students' worksheets; and by witnessing the students' studio work, it should be evident that the student:

- Sketched a traditional quilt design and altered it to make a new one.
- Created a paper quilt design that results from the investigation of the two artists.
- Organized their paper quilt designs in groups with similar themes.
- Answered whether their design would work better as a functional quilt (or other item) or as an art quilt.

Extensions

Extend this lesson by having students make small-sized quilts, using their paper designs as patterns. Students also might work in collaborative groups to make a small quilt for which they each contribute a quilt square, again based on their earlier research and investigations. A six or eight inch square would be a reasonable size, expense and difficulty-wise. Materials needed include sewing needles, scissors, spools of thread, fabric for backing, flannel or quilt batting, and fabric for the patchwork top. Seeking donations of fabric scraps from faculty and parents can help defray expenses and provide plenty of variety.

Authors:

The Education Guide for *QUILTS* was developed under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Stewart, Professor Emerita of Art Education, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA. Lead author for *Painting with Fabric: How Two Artists Make Quilts* is Dr. Amy Albert Bloom, December, 2019.



Worksheet: *Quilts Video Search*

Video section 1

1. Does Victoria Findlay Wolfe try to make all of her quilts look the same?
2. The artist works on what she calls her "design wall." What traditional quilt pattern is the basis for the quilt she is designing on her wall?
3. What does Victoria Findlay Wolfe say about cutting apart her quilts?
4. Which member of her family inspires her quilt making?
5. What does Victoria Findlay Wolfe compare her quilt making to?
6. After watching: What do you think is the theme of Victoria Findlay Wolfe's quilts?

Video section 2

7. Besides fabric, what did Michael A. Cummings add to his quilt of President Obama?
8. How does Michael A. Cummings make his quilts?
9. What story does Michael A. Cummings say he is trying to tell?
10. What does he say about his childhood?
11. After watching: What do you think is the theme of Michael A. Cummings's work?
12. Both artists say their quilts are like paintings in some way. How are these quilts like paintings?

Worksheet: *Studying the Art Quilts of Victoria Findlay Wolfe*

"I'll grab a pile of fabric that looks interesting or a color palette that looks interesting and I will just try to make it work."
– Victoria Findlay Wolfe

Use this sheet to research information on the traditional quilts that inspire Victoria Findlay Wolfe.

1. Go to the website of the National Quilt Museum and find three traditional quilts that are interesting to you.
www.si.edu/spotlight/national-quilt-collection

2. Sketch a portion of each quilt, in color, on this page.

3. The artists says, "Creativity involves risk, so if you don't take that risk it's hard to find something new." With that in mind, choose one of the quilts to use to develop a new design. How will you alter it? By shape? By color? By rearranging the pattern? Sketch that new idea on the back of the paper.

4. Label your design. Give your new pattern a name. Describe what you changed. Victoria Findlay Wolfe says, "This is when I'm playing, this is the part of the process that once I get those goosebumps then I'll know I'm on the right track." Do you feel that about your design? If not, are there other times you have made art and had that excited feeling?

Worksheet: *Studying the Art Quilts of Michael A. Cummings*

"I use a zigzag stitch to attach my fabric to the foundation and I use a contrasting color (thread)."
– Michael A. Cummings

1. Use this sheet to research information on prominent African American citizens whom you think would make an interesting portrait.
2. Go to the website of The National Museum of African American History and Culture and find three individuals who are interesting to you. www.si.edu/museums/african-american-museum
3. Sketch a portion of each person, in color, below. Choose one of the portraits. Read the artist's quote at the top of this page. The zigzag stitching Cummings talks about looks like a zigzagged line. On the back of the paper, redraw the portrait and add some bold lines to represent stitching.