

Teaching *Jim Bassler: Woven in Tradition*

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. Discuss the invention of the Jacquard loom and how it revolutionized the textile industry.

View Jim Bassler's segment from the ORIGINS episode at craftinamerica.org/short/jim-bassler-segment.

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 with students. cooperhewitt.org/exhibitions/archive/extreme-textiles-designing-for-high-performance

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 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?
craftinamerica.org/short/randall-darwall-on-handmade-vs-industrialized-weaving

Studio Production

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

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

Once their weavings are off the loom, students will dye them using natural indigo dye. View again the segment on Jim 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 dye techniques. For example, have them stitch lines through the weaving and then pull the threads taut and knot them, which will form a resist.

CRAFT IN AMERICA

JIM BASSLER: WOVEN IN TRADITION EDUCATION GUIDE

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 oxidation. After a few minutes, remove the weaving and allow the oxidation 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.

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.
craftinamerica.org/artists/dona-look