

# CRAFT IN AMERICA

## WEARABLES MADE FOR STORYTELLING EDUCATION GUIDE

*"Cowboy boots have always been an expression of personal style. Folks, for a long time, have made cowboy boots with traditional imagery, whether it was top stitching or flowers, cactus, things like that. I wanted to make cowboy boots, but I wanted to draw, and I wanted to take things that you might find in the West—whether it's the palm trees from California or you know, scenes from a National Park—do a little bit of storytelling, something that allows me to put my own spin on it." —Graham Ebner*

### LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students meet bootmaker Graham Ebner from the Craft in America WEST episode. Ebner creates leather cowboy boots for clients that cross-pollinate traditional bootmaking and leatherworking techniques with contemporary imagery, yielding unique wearables that tell a visual story. Ebner's approach strikes a harmonious balance between the worlds of conventional leatherwork and dynamic illustration, and his practice of co-creative collaboration with clients imbues each pair of his boots with deep personal meaning for the wearer. The lesson focuses on the way collaboration, co-creation, and technical tradition can work together to produce wearable art that suggests a story. Through investigations, students consider the way the artist cross-pollinates his illustrative designs through collaborative and co-creative planning as well as the way the artist relies on traditional methods to produce his work. Students then create their own illustrative designs, collaborating in the planning of wearable embellishments that suggest personally meaningful stories. In studio work, students use a range of decorative methods such as embroidery, applique, fabric stamping, or iron transfer to translate their illustrative designs into wearable embellishments that intrigue and engage viewers about the stories their works suggest.

Grade Level: 8–12

Estimated Time: eight 45-minute class periods

Craft In America Theme/Episode: WEST

### Background Information

Graham Ebner is a Texas-based bootmaker known for creating custom cowboy boots that blend traditional Western craftsmanship with modern design. Raised in Texas, Ebner's passion for bootmaking grew through an apprenticeship, where he mastered techniques like fancy stitching, last making, and pattern drafting. Ebner views his work as "Western-adjacent," fusing classic cowboy aesthetics with contemporary design. Each pair of Ebner boots is crafted with hand-selected leathers, precision fit, and unique details such as unexpected textures, colors, and stitching.



### Key Concepts

- Collaboration can lead to a unique cross-pollination of ideas.
- The practice of adorning oneself with clothing, jewelry, and other embellishments is a way of visually communicating information about the wearer.
- Makers tend to work within long-standing traditions, sometimes continuing the tradition and sometimes breaking with it to establish new directions.



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### Critical questions

- How does collaboration lead to a unique cross-pollination of ideas?
- How do custom-crafted clothing and wearable accessories—plus the embellishments featured on them—suggest stories about both the wearer and the maker?
- In what ways can contemporary adaptation to traditional craft inspire renewed interest among today's audiences?

### Objectives

Students will:

- understand that collaboration can lead to a unique cross-pollination of ideas.
- be able to identify ways in which clothing and other forms of personal adornment can suggest stories about (or communicate information about) the wearer.
- work collaboratively to plan unique wearable embellishments which, working within or outside of tradition, suggest a story about its wearer and/or maker.

### Vocabulary

Collaboration, embellishment, clothing, textile, accessory, upcycle, cross-pollination

### Interdisciplinary connection:

- English Language Arts: Students engage in co-creative storytelling and symbolic expression and interpretation throughout this lesson. They are also asked to conduct peer interviews, requiring oral communication and active listening skills utilized by journalists and creative writers, to collaborate in the planning of their wearable art pieces.
- Social Studies: Students explore the cultural and historical origins of cowboy boots and other Western wear as expressions of identity and investigate how craft traditions, such as leatherworking and embroidery, evolve through the cross-pollinating impact of cultural exchange and migration.

### National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Visual Arts / Creating — #VA:Cr2.1.1a Engage in making a work of art or design through experimentation, practice, and persistence to explore personal interests, expressive ideas, and clearly communicate intent.  
Process Component: Organize and Develop  
Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Visual Arts / Responding — #VA:Re8.1.1a Interpret an artwork by analyzing how the subject matter, characteristics of form, and use of media convey the artist's intent.  
Process Component: Interpret  
Anchor Standard: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Visual Arts / Presenting — #VA:Pr6.1.1a Make, explain, and justify curatorial choices in presenting artwork for a specific purpose.  
Process Component: Convey Meaning through Presentation  
Anchor Standard: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Visual Arts / Connecting — #VA:Cn10.1.1a Document the process of developing ideas and innovations inspired by personal interests or social concerns.  
Process Component: Synthesize and Relate  
Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.



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## Worksheets

- Worksheet 1: Collaborative Design Planning
- Worksheet 2: Choice Pathways and Visual Brainstorming

## Resources

- Craft in America WEST episode, [craftinamerica.org/episode/west](https://craftinamerica.org/episode/west), Graham Ebner's segment, and Craft in America's website, [craftinamerica.org](https://craftinamerica.org)
- Graham Ebner's website, [grahamebner.com](https://grahamebner.com)

## Materials

- Upcycled textile objects, student- or teacher- sourced (e.g. shoes, scarves, hats, clothing, blankets, quilts)
- Fabric scraps and sections
- Fabric scissors
- Embroidery floss
- Embroidery hoops
- Embroidery needles
- Sewing thread
- Hand-stitching needles (or sewing machines and associated materials if available)
- Thimbles
- Fabric markers, fabric paint, and/or textile ink
- Paint brushes
- Iron or heat press
- Heat-safe surface
- Chalk
- Masking tape and pins
- Paper towels or wipes for clean-up
- Reference handouts for stitch types or transfer safety
- Sketch paper or sketchbooks for planning and designing

## Optional Items:

- Fabric glue
- Block printing foam or carved stamps
- Brayers & stamping mats
- Embellishment trim (e.g. lace, ribbon)
- Iron-on patches

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Investigate: Engage and Explore

Learn About Graham Ebner

(one 45 minute class period)

Note: It will be helpful to familiarize yourself with the work of Graham Ebner ahead of time; even so, teacher and students can learn together about the creative processes of this artist as the class views the WEST episode and then explores internet resources.

## Before viewing

Lead a brief discussion with your students about decorative clothing. Ask them to share what they know about:



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- Designer clothing
- Embellishment
- Upcycling
- Leatherworking
- Cowboy boots
- Collaboration

### After viewing

Ask students to recall how Graham Ebner collaborates with others to design his cowboy boots.

As you guide the discussion, be sure to note the following:

- Ebner collaborates with clients
- Ebner collaborates with neighboring artist Kathie Sever of Fort Lonesome embroidery
- Collaboration in the creative process has a cross-pollinating effect that results in a richly layered visual story. When discussing this point, ask the students to recall the Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox cowboy boots. Some possible questions to ask:
  - Can you identify the different stories that are visually layered in the embellishment of these boots?
  - How well do these boots tell the story of the wearer?
  - How well do they tell the story of the artist involved in their creation?
- Tell students that in the vein of Graham Ebner's creative process, they will collaboratively design wearable art objects featuring imagery that suggests a story about the maker, the wearer, or both.

Discuss the following questions with students:

- How can stories be told with pictures?
- What messages can be conveyed by a person's clothing and other adornments?
- What are the pros and cons of collaboration?

### Seeing Connections with Another Artist

To deepen their understanding, lead the students in an internet search for DIY artists who upcycle used fabric and other objects in unique ways, transforming the function of the original objects. Suggest that they especially look for DIY artists who collaborate with others and use traditional craft processes in new and interesting ways. Have them share at least one example within a small group. Broadening the conversation by relating Ebner to the DIY art movement highlights different ways contemporary makers are reviving traditional craft through personal and cultural narratives. Invite students to compare the artistic practice of Ebner and other DIY artists they find in their internet browsing.

### Collaboration and Cross-Pollination

Distribute Worksheet 1: Collaborative Design Planning. Assign or have students select collaborative partners to help them respond to the questions and prompts found in Part 1 of the worksheet. Ask the students and offer to them some of your own answers to the questions.

### Worksheet Questions with Sample Responses:

- How does collaboration lead to a unique cross-pollination of ideas? In other words, how can working with another person improve the outcome? How does this enhance the work of the artists discussed?



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- *Collaboration with others expands the kind of information that could be added to an idea or a plan, since it requires the collaborators to combine their knowledge and experiences. Ebner works in collaboration with clients, which improves the outcome of his plans and enhances the impact of his work by incorporating personal client interest and story with visual imagery. The clients are left with custom-made, heirloom quality craftworks that speak to the experiences and interests of both the maker and the wearers.*
- How do custom-crafted clothing and wearable accessories—plus the embellishments or decorations featured on them—suggest stories about both the wearer and the maker?
  - *Images and styles worn by individuals speak to the culture and time period they come from.*
  - *The type of material used to make clothing and wearable accessories also tell a story about what a maker might have access to and what ability a wearer might have to afford certain materials.*
  - *Adding custom fitting, along with embellishment, adds layers of story to the wearable item that convey a sense of personal style and can emulate the personality of the wearer and/or maker.*
  - *One example that demonstrates this idea is the pair of cowboy boots featuring Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, designed and created by Graham Ebner, in collaboration with Kathie Sever of Fort Lonesome embroidery.*
    - *The imagery featured on the boots tell a story of the wearer's childhood vacation memories.*
    - *The materials and method of construction of the boots tell a story of the maker's training and personal design sensibility, and the decision to enlist the help of a fellow artist to embroider fluffy chest hair on Paul Bunyan and fluffy clouds in the sky convey a sense of playfulness in both the styling of the artists involved, as well as the disposition of the wearer.*
- In what ways can contemporary adaptation to traditional craft inspire renewed interest among today's audiences? In other words, how do updated and new approaches to craft traditions make these traditions more interesting to audiences today? Give an example of an updated approach to a craft tradition that's personally interesting to you.
  - *Updated and new approaches to craft traditions make them relatable to people today and offer a sense of connectedness to the past that carries into the present. The upcycling of used textiles, as can be seen in many DIY art examples created today, transforms objects otherwise discarded or forgotten into unique and fashionable items that can be enjoyed by new audiences.*
- Prompt students to work with partners to generate their own answers to the worksheet questions, in the manner suggested above. Depending on prior knowledge of the student group, you may opt to intentionally assign student partners based on skill sets or interests (e.g. confident illustrator with an experienced stitcher).

### Investigate: Make Connections

Studio Production: Cross-pollination and Collaborative Design Planning  
(two 45-minute class periods)

Students interview partners and work together to identify a theme and story that they will incorporate into their wearable artworks. The prompts on Part 2 of the worksheet will guide them through the process of collaborative planning.



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Explain that their responses to prompts such as those found on the worksheet will guide them through the planning process. With the worksheet, students first interview each other. They then review their responses and attempt to identify common threads. Finally, the worksheet prompts them to identify a theme and/or working title, along with a description of the story they hope their wearable artwork will tell.

### Worksheet Questions with Sample Responses:

- What personal, cultural, or literary story would you like to tell through your design?  
*I would like to tell the story of my grandmother's immigration to the United States. My partner would like to tell the story of their favorite vacation trip to the beach.*
- What emotions or memories do you have in connection to this story?  
*I feel pride when hearing the story of my grandmother's arrival to the United States. She overcame a lot of difficult circumstances. My partner feels love when they think of their favorite vacation trip to the beach. It was when they felt their family had the most fun together.*
- What images, symbols, patterns, or materials come to mind when you think about this story?  
*For me, I think about the pattern of my grandmother's dress from the first photograph taken of her in the United States. For my partner, they think of the kinds of seashells they collected with their siblings on those vacations.*

### Prompts to Identify Common Threads

- Which ideas or story elements overlap between your story and your partner's story?  
*Both of our stories are about family members we love. Both stories also involve travel away from home.*
- How could you combine both perspectives in your design? What symbols, materials, or patterns could be used to achieve this?  
*We could combine the patterns of my grandmother's dress with patterns of seashells. We could also overlap the dress pattern with sea shell images or create a dress in the style of my grandmother's dress, featuring a seashell pattern.*

### Identify a theme or working title for your collaborative design:

*Traveling across time and memory*

### Write 1 or 2 sentences describing the story you want to your wearable artwork to share:

*I want my artwork to tell the story of how travel can lead to life changing adventures and exciting events.*

Distribute Worksheet 2: Choice Pathways, using it as a guide for students as they continue working with partners to plan their wearable artworks. From a range of possible options, students should select a choice that supports their collaborative goals, allowing them to create wearable art that tells visual stories. Invite students to browse internet tutorials to inform how they could utilize various technical options in their design plans, but also offer fabric marker, fabric paint, and iron transfer as options for each choice to ensure accessibility across ability and readiness levels. Choices include but are not limited to patches, scarves, and upcycled clothing





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items, utilizing techniques such as embroidery, appliqué, stamping, painting, stitching, mixed media, and quilting. Choices include:

- Story Stitching: Collaborate on a shared memory or story. Each partner designs one panel or section that connects visually to the other's.
- Partnering Patterns: Create a repeating pattern that incorporates symbols from each partner's story into one design.
- Patchwork Story: Piece together visual fragments from each partner's stories or found fabric associated with those stories.
- Texture + Technique: Split roles: One partner focuses on imagery, the other on embellishment or construction.
- Contemporary Creators: Combine traditional and contemporary processes (e.g. digital illustration + embroidery).

### Studio Production: Co-creating Wearable Art (three to four 45-minute class periods)

Once students have chosen their design options, guide them to begin sketching ideas for their projects. Students may choose creation methods that differ from their partner, but making sure that the collaborative story is still evident in the final products.

Once student sketches are finalized and artworks are planned, have students identify and locate the object they will embellish, and if necessary, remind them to bring that item to class. Students can move on to executing their design plans once students have the items they intend to embellish.

Some suggestions for managing materials proactively in this studio setting include:

- Prepare clearly labeled supply stations that align to each method of embellishment
- Encourage students to bring personal or thrifted items for upcycling. This adds layers of meaning and mirrors the creative process of the artist Andrew "Wandy the Maker" Burgess.
- Maintain scrap bins organized by color and material type

### Reflect and Refine

Midway in working, invite students to reflect on their experiences. Suggest that they step back and consider their goals with this project and how closely they have met them. Invite them to consider aspects of the process that they have enjoyed thus far. Ask the students:

- What do you especially like about your work in progress?
- What changes would you like to make before you complete this artwork?
- What do you need to do to complete the artwork?

## CLOSING STRATEGIES

### Reflection

Once students complete their collaboratively designed wearables, have them reflect on their work to determine the success of their projects. Begin by facilitating a class discussion using prompts such as:

- In what ways did collaboration influence your final design idea?
- How might you think differently about your story, now that you've co-created with your partner?



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- What choice did you select from the available options? Did your chosen methods affect how well your wearable art suggested a story?
- What challenges did you experience working collaboratively, and how did you resolve them?
- If you could change one aspect of your process or design, what would it be and why?

### Assessment

Have students use the following criteria to determine the relative success of their completed work. Assessment may be self-, peer-, and/or teacher-directed. The following criteria are intended to guide the assessment of the completed work.

- Final artwork is planned collaboratively with one or more peers, featuring clear evidence of shared responsibility between/among collaborative partners.
- Final artwork features imagery and techniques inspired by collaboration that suggests a story about its maker, its wearer, or both.
- Final artwork features adaptation of traditional clothing and accessory construction and embellishment techniques in interesting ways.

Optional: Have students draw or photograph their finished wearables, labeling their images to indicate where story elements are located (e.g. symbols, colors, materials, patterns).

The following criteria are intended as a guide. Through discussions with the student, examining their worksheets, and witnessing their participation and production of the final project, it should be evident that the student:

- benefitted from collaboration with peer(s), as evidenced by the complexity of the stories suggested by the artwork.
- can explain how their artwork, as well as the wearable artworks and personal adornment items of others suggest stories about or communicate information about the wearer, the maker, or both.
- was actively involved in the planning and co-creation of the artworks created by both their partner(s) and themselves, exhibiting a shared sense of responsibility with their collaborating peer(s).

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