

Asmat Mobile Activity

Grades 3-5

Time: 1 hour

Objectives

Students will study examples of Asmat art objects. Students will incorporate Asmat pattern and symbols in decorating objects. Students will assemble a mobile to display their designs.



Asmat Peoples, Papua, Province of Indonesia (Formerly Irian Jaya), *Ancestor Canoe*, 1980s. Wood with white lime, charcoal, red ochre, fibers, and feathers. Promised gift from the Loet Vanderveen Collection.

Instructional Materials

Images of Asmat art objects - a shield, a drum, and a spirit canoe
World map or globe

Art Materials

Red and black crayons or markers
Construction paper (3 sheets per student)
Optional: feathers, yarn, wire, beads
Scissors, glue sticks, hole punches
Drinking straws (about 8" long, 3 per student)
String
Paper clips (large, about 10 per student)

Procedure

Introduction

Asmat art objects display some distinctive characteristics. Items such as shields, drums, and spirit canoes are carved from wood and are sometimes decorated with items such as feathers, fibers, and shells. Pigment is often applied, and red, black, and white are the only colors used. Bold lines - straight or curved or zigzag - and animal motifs are common. Human figures are often depicted and usually represent ancestors.

Object-based Instruction

Show the students the Asmat art objects, and use the map or globe to show where the objects come from. Help the students focus on the uses and the distinct characteristics of each object. Make lists of the characteristics on the board for the students to refer to during the project. The following details and sample questions may be helpful:

Shield: Used in warfare, and sometimes carved to honor an ancestor. They usually have a white background with red and black geometric designs and patterns.



Asmat Peoples, Papua, Province of Indonesia (Formerly Irian Jaya), *War Shield*, 1980s. Wood with white lime, charcoal, and red ochre. Promised gift from the Loet Vanderveen Collection.



Describe: What kinds of lines do you see? Describe the symmetry.

Analyze: What are the repeating elements that provide unity? What are the unique elements that provide variety? What designs look like symbols?

Interpret: What might the symbols represent?

Judge: What do you like about this piece? What don't you like? What is special about this piece?

Drum: Used in various ceremonies. Drums are carved from the trunk of a tree with various Asmat motifs. The drum head is usually lizard hide tied on with fibers; beeswax is applied to change the drum's tone. Stored over fireplaces in homes, they darken over time from the skin oils of those who handle them.

Interpret: What recognizable figures are in the carving? What story do you think they tell?

Notice the negative spaces in the carving of the handle. Why would someone spend so much time and effort to decorate an object like this?

Judge: What do you like about this piece? What don't you like? What is special about this piece?

Spirit canoe: Carved to memorialize a person or persons who have died. The Asmat believe the spirits travel to a world beyond the sea in canoes such as this. The human figures represent people and are often adorned with feathers and other decorative items. The vertical red stripes were believed to help the canoe move more quickly.

Describe: Repetition provides a sense of rhythm and movement; what repeated elements can you find?

Analyze: How many people are making their final journey in this canoe? What is an important difference between this object and the other two? (This one is for art only - it's not a utilitarian object.)

Interpret: Why do you think the canoe is bottomless?

Judge: What do you like about this piece? What don't you like? What is special about this piece?

Procedure

Distribute construction paper to the students and have them draw a shield, drum, and canoe, each one on a separate sheet, using the images they viewed and the characteristics they listed to guide them. Ask that they draw the objects as big as they can on the paper; demonstrate if necessary. Have the students cut out the three items. If you're using the optional decorative items, have them add them to their objects. On the back of each one, have them write their name and the name of each object; they should also punch a hole in the top of each object.

When their decorated objects are ready, have the students assemble their mobiles using the following steps:

1. Thread a 30" piece of string through three drinking straws and then tie a knot, forming a triangle. Cut the extra ends of string off.
2. Connect three paper clips into a chain and then hook it onto the string at one corner of the triangle. Make two more paper clip chains just like that and hook them at the other two corners.
3. Hook all three paper clip chains into another paper clip - this one will be the hook. Bend part of that paper clip out to make the hook easier to use.
4. Put a piece of string through the hole of one of your decorated objects and tie a knot, so it's hanging from a loop of string. If you need help, tie the string around a friend's finger. The



lengths of these strings can be different, depending on how you want your finished mobile to look. You might experiment to see what looks and balances best.

5. Hook one string loop into the bottom paper clip of each chain. Hang your mobile from the paper clip hook and enjoy watching it move.

Assessment

Assess the students' finished projects using the following rubric:

- 3 – Outlines and designs reflect appreciable awareness of the characteristics of the Asmat art objects discussed. Mobile is assembled correctly with all steps followed carefully. Student demonstrates careful work and creativity.
- 2 – Outlines and designs reflect some awareness of the characteristics of Asmat art. Mobile is assembled correctly. Student demonstrates careful work.
- 1 – Project is attempted but reflects a lack of awareness of Asmat art characteristics and/or unsatisfactory completion of the steps.
- 0 – Did not attempt.

Adapting and Extending

Consider adding these elements to the activity above, or using them in subsequent lessons.

- Prepare some cards with descriptive terms written on them, and distribute them to students (maybe to pairs or trios of students) before the discussion. Have the students listen and watch for those features to be described or displayed as you talk about the images. Decide on a signal students will use to tell you when they have the card with the term you are describing or discussing- they might raise it high in the air. Use the cards to make the lists described above. Here are some suggestions for the cards:

Shield: white, oval shape, red and black, zigzag lines

Drum: fancy carving, dark wood, carved, animal designs, lizard skin, fibers

Spirit canoe: stripes, carved, repeated objects, hollow bottom, feathers, fibers

- Use the mobiles to decorate the classroom, or perhaps arrange to hang them in the library or the school office.
- Instead of making mobiles, the students could make small books of Asmat art that include drawings of the art objects. Older students might write a paragraph describing each object; younger students might simply label each one.