

CREATE YOUR OWN PARFLECHE!

LESSON PLAN

For nomadic American Indians of the Great Plains, a parfleche box was essential for transporting food and household supplies. Give students a taste of what it took to make a parfleche with this easy and fun classroom activity!

Intended Age Group

Elementary (grades K-5)

Length of Lesson

One 30 minute lesson

Standards Area

Visual Arts

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- describe the uses of a parfleche;
- describe the general process for creating a parfleche;
- identify design elements and their symbolism on an example parfleche; and
- create their own replica of a parfleche.

Lesson

1. *Warm-up:* Display the image of *Box* and invite students to look carefully and share what they observe. Ask: *What do you notice? Do you think this piece is old or new? Why? What do you think American Indians might have kept in boxes like this one? What materials do you think the artist used to make this? What do you notice about the decorations on the box?*
2. Share with students that the object they see is a modern day version of a traditional rawhide box called a parfleche (say “par-flesh”). Although the artist, Debra Box, uses traditional techniques and bases her designs on objects in museum collections, photographs, and books, her parfleches are her own unique artistic creations. Historically, plains and western Indians made parfleches out of treated animal hides to store or carry items like moccasins, clothing and dried food.
3. Explain that making a real parfleche from rawhide takes about one month given the many steps needed to prepare the hide, assemble the box and then decorate it. The students will prepare the “hides” for their parfleche envelopes by taking their sheets of brown paper and crumpling them completely in their hands then smoothing them out and crumpling them once again. Have them crumple and straighten the paper as many times as they like and/or until the paper feels “leathery”.
4. Once the paper has been well worked, have students flatten out the paper and fold it in half lengthwise, leaving one edge 2” longer to create a flap that can later be folded over to complete the envelope shape. Explain that parfleches came in many shapes and sizes including ones that looked like leather envelopes.
5. Using a hole punch, have students punch holes along the open sides of the envelope. Don’t punch along the folded side or the edge that will become the top flap. Show students how to sew the edges closed with pieces of yarn. Call students’ attention to the leather ties and dark blue trade cloth on the edges of *Box*.
6. Before decorating their own unique parfleche, share with students the symbolism behind Debra Box’s decorative choices. In traditional Southern Ute art, blue symbolizes mountain slopes and big predatory animals like the grizzly bear, wolf, and coyote; red signifies spring, bodies of water, and the weasel’s domain; and yellow represents summer or the mountain lion’s domain. The black outline stands for winter and the rattlesnake’s domain, while the white background represents the sky and the eagle’s domain. Ask: *How will you use color to represent the world around you?*

Will you use the same colors as this artist or will you choose different ones? Now pass out the markers and invite your students to create their designs!

7. Got extra time? Extend the lesson by asking students to create mini replicas of items they would want to pack in their parfleche before setting out on a long journey.

ABOUT THE ART



Box
2010
Debra Box

WHO MADE IT?

For more than twenty-five years, Debra Box has been reviving the almost-lost art of making *parfleches* (rawhide containers). She has received many awards for her artwork and represented the Southern Ute Nation at the grand opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in 2004. In addition to making parfleches, she also does bead and quill work. Her creations have found their way into such movies as *Dances with Wolves* and are offered for sale in galleries and at the Santa Fe Indian Market every August.

WHAT INSPIRED IT?

Plains and western Indians made containers out of treated animal hides to store or carry items like moccasins, clothing, or dried food. French traders called these boxes *parfleches*, from the French words *parer*, meaning “parry” or “defend,” and *flèche*, meaning “arrow,” because the hide was tough enough to deflect an arrow.

Debra Box became interested in making parfleches when she began to travel with her late husband to mountain man rendezvous, where they would stay in a tipi they tried to keep authentic to the pre-1840s fur-trading period. After much research and conversations with her grandmother, Box learned the month-long process of tanning, shaping, and decorating animal hides to make a parfleche.

Although Box uses traditional techniques and bases her designs on objects in museum collections, photographs, and books, her parfleches are her own unique artistic creations. “My rawhide painting reflects my Ute heritage but in an abstract and contemporary form,” she says.

DETAILS



Material

Debra Box makes her parfleches out of cowhide that she buys from a slaughter house and cleans by soaking in water and detergent. She ties the hide to a wooden frame and leaves it in the sun to dry. Once the hide is dry, Box uses a metal scraper to scrape off the hair and fatty tissue—a process that takes three full days. She sets the hide out in the sun again until it is white, turning it every few days so it bleaches evenly. After a few weeks, the hide is stiffened and ready for her to cut and shape with a wooden mallet.



Leather Ties

Box fastens the edges of her parfleches with leather ties made from deer hide she tans herself. She describes the tanning process as “very labor intensive...I’ve never done this work but if you’ve done it right your hide will be as soft as velvet. This is [also] the kind of hide that I buy for my beadwork. The beading needles won’t break.”

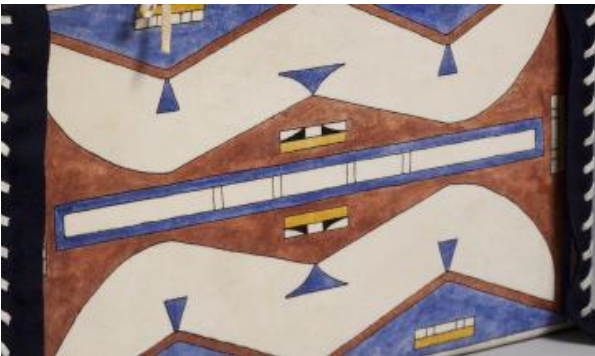
Dark Blue Trade Cloth

The material on the four side edges is modern-day trade cloth. Box doesn't normally add fabric, but she did on this piece—made especially for the Denver Art Museum—to add color and texture, and because the museum's curator requested it. "When the fur traders came to the West they brought glass beads, trade beads, metal pots, guns and trade cloth. A trade cloth dress was a sign of wealth," Box says.



Colors

Box uses three colors in this particular work: ochre, red, and blue, plus small amounts of black for accents and outlines. In traditional Southern Ute art, blue symbolizes mountain slopes and big predatory animals like the grizzly bear, wolf, and coyote; red signifies spring, bodies of water, and the weasel's domain; and yellow represents summer or the mountain lion's domain. The black outline stands for winter and the rattlesnake's domain, while the white background represents the sky and the eagle's domain.



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