

“Gawu” — African-influenced Tapestry

Inspired by El Anatsui sculptures
made from recycled objects

(art + social studies)

Ghana-born artist El Anatsui is known internationally for his large-scale sculptures called “Gawu,” a composite of the words “ga,” meaning something made of metal and “wu,” meaning a fashioned garment.

From a distance, the “Gawu” appear to be large pieces of draped, luxurious fabric, similar to the traditional kente cloth that is woven for African royalty. Close examination reveals the sculptures are made from discarded materials, such as metal liquor bottle wrappers and tops, and flattened food tins. El Anatsui leads his viewers to contemplate the social and economic history of West Africa, consumerism, and waste, as woven into beautiful sculptures.

In this lesson, students create their own tapestries as a response to El Anatsui’s art, using African kente to discover rhythm and pattern in art. Recycled materials can be used, including folded papers and labels. Craft sticks glued to a burlap background give the piece rigidity and dimension, so it can hang as a sculptural “Gawu.”

GRADES K-12 Note: instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. View and discuss images of El Anatsui’s art. Also, view African designs and patterns for kente; recommended resource: [Dover Pictora Clip and CD, African Design](#) (71310-1012).



Materials

Burlap, Black, 46" wide x 1-yd (63202-2036); share six yards among class

Creativity Street® Craftsticks, assorted colors, box of 1000 (60401-1003); share one among class

Elmer's® Craft Bond Tacky Glue, 4-oz (23883-1004); share among three students

General's® White Charcoal, package of 4, 3" x 1/4" sticks (22921-1001); share one stick between two students

Blick® Studio Newsprint Pads, 18" x 24", 50 sheets (10311-1049); need one sheet per student

Recycled items to incorporate into the tapestry: papers, labels, jar lids, metal caps, etc.

Optional Materials

Roylco® Decorative Papers, 8-1/2" x 11", package of 32 sheets African Textile Design Assortment (11262-1080) or package of 40 sheets Animal Print Designs (11262-1020)

Hygloss™ Metallic Foil Paper, package of 24 assorted sheets, 8-1/2" x 10" (11205-1002)

Prang® Metallics Art Markers, 6-color set (21281-0069)

Blick® Student Tempera, assorted colors (00018-)





Step 1: Plan design based on African textile colors and patterns.



Step 2: Create design on burlap using folded papers, found objects, and craft sticks for rigidity.



Step 3: Hang the tapestry, allowing it to drape and hang sculpturally.

Preparation, continued

2. Gather colorful, metallic found materials to incorporate into the tapestry. Flat items such as foil, labels, and papers can be folded to fit. Bottle caps, jar lids, can pulls, paper clips, and more can also be used, as long as there are no sharp edges.
3. Cut burlap into 23" x 18" pieces (four per yard).

Process

1. If desired, plan design on newsprint first, then sketch it onto the burlap with white charcoal. Sticks may be halved to distribute across class.
2. Fill design with folded papers, foils, labels, and found materials. Materials may be glued or stitched into place.
3. Glue craft sticks in place around the border of the burlap or in other areas to give the tapestry sculptural dimension. Craft sticks may be enhanced with patterns created in marker or paint.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #2 — Using knowledge of structures and functions

- K-4** Students use visual structures and functions of art to communicate ideas.
- 5-8** Students select and use the qualities of structures and functions of art to improve communication of their ideas.
- 9-12** Students create artworks that use organizational principles and functions to solve specific visual arts problems.



Content Standard #4 — Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

- K-4** Students demonstrate how history, culture, and the visual arts can influence each other in making and studying works of art.
- 5-8** Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures.
- 9-12** Students differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art.