

Native American Story Necklaces

(art + history; art + social studies)

These necklaces are one of the many rich crafts produced within the Native American culture that are unique to the United States. “Fetishes”, or story figures, and beads are made from clay to resemble those carved from shell or precious stones or introduced by traders from distant cultures. Each “fetish” or story necklace is designed to tell a tale by a storyteller with each creature representing a spirit or part of a legend.

Explore the history of daily life and use of native materials for adornment such as animal horns and claws, turtle shell, and deer hooves. Then expand classroom study to include trading between regions and cultures to discover more sophisticated materials, such as glass and metal beads, introduced in the 17th and 18th centuries from European, African, and Pacific traders.

Classroom-friendly Model Magic is recommended for this simile project for results that look like authentic story necklaces

Grade Levels K-6

Note: Instructions and materials based on a class of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Process

1. Discuss aspects of Native American and world history introduced above. Arrange with a history teacher to exchange information and possibly class time. Talk about animals that might be used for a necklace: fish, bears, snakes, horses, sheep, any animals living on the land in North America.
2. Each necklace can contain as many creatures and beads as desired. Often one large carved piece is centered in the middle of the necklace with even beads and figures on each side.
3. Give each student 24" to 36" of Rexlace. Although string is the traditional material, lightweight Model Magic will hang better off of Rexlace. Carefully check size or length of the necklace for each student. Put the lace around the neck, let it hang in place, gather together at back of the neck, then remove and twist a knot at that point. Leave excess on until the project is complete then trim.



Materials

Crayola® Model Magic®, assorted naturals (33214-1008); share one 2-lb bucket across class

Rexlace®, brown (60921-8000); share one 100-yd roll across class

Plastic Paint Trays (03090-1010); share two 10-tray packages across class

Golden Nylon Cannister, assorted round brushes (05134-1072); share one 72-piece set across class

Blickrylic® Student Acrylics, mixing colors, (00711-1039); share one 6-pint set across class

Sargent® Metallic Acrylics, Silver (00730-9335); share one 8-oz bottle across class

Opaque Glass E Beads, assorted colors (60726-); select 2-3 colors to share across class

Elmer's® Glue-All® (23810-1005); share two 7.25-oz bottles across class

4. No messy glue! Model Magic comes in natural clay brown tones and is easy and clean to use. Give students a ping pong size ball to start and keep the balance closed up in the bag; Model Magic cannot be reused once it dries. Gently pull off a small ball of the clay and form an animal around the Rexlace. Start with the center of the necklace then work to each side. Squeeze one or more small beads on the necklace between each animal. Leave about 1/2" between beads and animal allowing room to paint when the Model Magic is dry. Note: texture can be added to beads and animals by pressing into the soft Model Magic. Try dots (from pencil tip) or stripes. Model Magic starts to dry in 30 minutes and will be firm and rubbery in an hour.
5. Much Native American art is brightly colored. Blickcrylic paint works well to cover the surface of beads and will not wear off onto clothes as Tempera would. Permanent marker can also be used with bright results on white Model Magic. Paint each animal. Use pointed brushes for detail and to get into deep grooves. After once coat of color, apply any decorations. The silver acrylic will add a look of metal to beads.

Options

1. Use colored Rexlace rather than the more traditional brown.
2. Use ceramic clay; put holes in beads, fire and glaze. String on carpet warp.

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 employ organizational structures and analyze what makes them effective or not effective in the communication of ideas

Content Standard #4 — Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

K-4 Students select and use subject matter, symbols, and ideas to communicate meaning

5-8 Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

Content Standard #6 — Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

K-4 Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum

5-8 Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts