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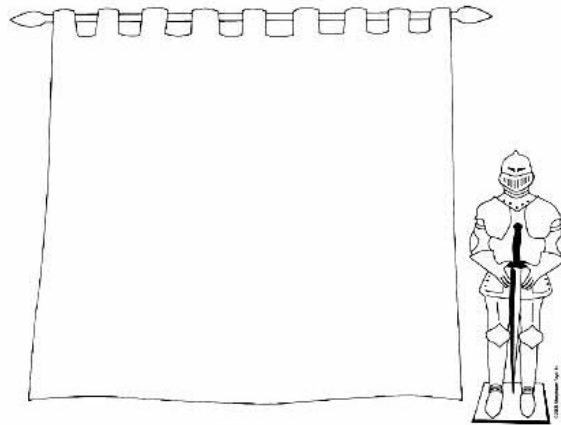
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Medieval Tapestry Lesson Plan: Tell New Stories by Designing Old-Fashioned Tapestries

Brief Description:

Students learn the history of tapestries, and apply their knowledge by designing medieval-style tapestries of their own. In the process, the students will learn about classical allegory and the role of art in our culture.

This lesson plan is suitable for grades 1-9 and many subject areas, including Arts & Humanities (language arts, foreign languages, art history, etc.) and Social Studies (U.S., state & world history, anthropology, civics). It is especially recommended for Gifted & Talented, After-School, and Sunday School programs.

Keywords:

Tapestry, warp, weft, embroidery, Middle Ages, medieval allegory, "The Hunt of The Unicorn", "The Lady and the Unicorn", "The Bayeux Tapestry", "The Acts of the Apostles", Raphael, tapestry cartoons.

Materials Needed:

Tapestry template (see above), colored pencils, crayons, or markers. ArtHouse is recommended.

Lesson Plan - Motivation:

Imagine you're rich and powerful, but your castle is drab and gray. Your people are forgetting their common history and values. You feel they need to be reminded of important facts, events or folklore. Why not design a medieval-style tapestry and communicate an important message to everyone who sees it?

Lesson Plan - Background and Historical Information:

Tapestries are woven ornamental wall-hangings. An art form of their own, like paintings or sculpture, tapestries can show lifelike images of people, animals, and plant-life in vivid color and detail.

Tapestries are made by weaving threads together on a loom. In simplest form, a tapestry loom must simply hold parallel "warp" threads in tension, so "weft" threads can be woven back and forth between them. More elaborate looms facilitate making larger tapestries.

Warp and weft threads have two different purposes. Warp threads are a thin and strong foundation. They're traditionally un-dyed wool or linen. In medieval tapestries, weft threads were usually vat-dyed wool yarn. On the finest tapestries wool was sometimes supplemented by more expensive silk or fine metallic (gold and silver) threads. It's important to realize that weft yarn provides all the color to the tapestry!

One of the most specialized skills for making medieval tapestries was dyeing wool. Dyes were made as needed from squashed bugs, berries, fruit, roots, and secret combinations of other ingredients! The three most important dye plants were "weld" (yellow), "madder" (red), and "woad" (blue).

The earliest tapestries were made by the ancient Greeks. Greek tapestries from the third century BCE have been found in the desert of Turkistan. However, the art of tapestry weaving really flowered in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. Tapestry designs became more elaborate. They were conceived, planned, and refined before the tapestry loom was strung with warp threads.

Why tapestries? Tapestries have tremendous practical advantages over paintings for decorating castles, cathedrals, and other public buildings. They're much more durable and they're portable. Tapestries can be rolled-up and moved with comparatively little fuss. They can be made in a workshop, and transported very long distances to be displayed. Try that with comparably-sized frescos! They're easier to clean. During the Middle Ages, taking tapestries along on trips was surprisingly fashionable among the noble classes. Like ArtHouse, tapestries make great gifts! On the other hand, tapestries can easily be hung up and taken down as seasons change. This was a big benefit in medieval churches, where tapestries were used to illustrate Biblical stories and moral lessons.

Some people believe tapestries were made to insulate cold stone buildings. This explanation defies common sense. Tapestries are thin, and provide negligible value as wall insulation. Tapestries were not supplemented with batting or fur on their back sides. They'd have been less effective for blocking drafts or preventing convection than much less expensive materials. Their primary purpose was clearly decorative.

Example Medieval Tapestries:

(click to enlarge)



The Hunt of the Unicorn
(The Unicorn at Bay)



The Hunt of the Unicorn
(The Unicorn in Captivity)



The Lady and the Unicorn
(To My One Desire)



The Bayeux Tapestry
(Coronation of Harold)



Acts of the Apostles
(The Miraculous Draft of Fishes)

It's interesting to think about specific tapestries. Who was the artist? Who commissioned the design? The most popular themes for medieval tapestries were Biblical stories and classical allegory. (Allegory is the artistic use of fictional characters and symbols to tell a story and to present truths or generalizations about human existence.) Hunt scenes, battle scenes, and landscapes were also popular medieval tapestry themes, as were verdureis A verdureis a tapestry that depicts plants and trees. Sometimes medieval tapestries were commissioned for specific walls. Often they were commissioned in sets.

The most famous series of tapestries in an American museum is "The Hunt of The Unicorn" at The Cloisters (part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.) These seven tapestries depict the sequence of the hunt, ending with the caught unicorn tied up pathetically in a too-small corral. There's no consensus on what all the elaborate symbolism in these tapestries means. The unicorn appears to die in the sixth tapestry, so many people try to relate the unicorn's plight to the Passion of Christ, but it would be wrong not to recognize the secular understanding of unicorns as a symbol for beguiled lovers.

Probably the most artistically important tapestries in Europe are a series of six called "The Lady and the Unicorn". Each tapestry in this series is said to represent a different sense: taste, hearing, sight, smell, touch, and love. One very interesting thing about these tapestries is that they were discovered bundled-up, hidden, and extensively damaged by rats. They have been carefully restored.

Many of the greatest tapestries ever made were destroyed during the French Revolution. People who appreciated the artistic value of medieval tapestries tried hard to hide and protect them. Because they were a symbol of undemocratic privilege, angry revolutionaries were determined to destroy them. Opportunists realized they could remove the gold metallic thread from tapestries and convert it to quick cash. Art suffers in wartime too.

Would you believe the most famous tapestry of all isn't really a tapestry! The "Bayeux Tapestry" isn't technically a tapestry because its design was applied by embroidery, not woven in.

The Bayeux Tapestry was commissioned around the year 1070 to record the story of the Battle of Hastings (of 1066). The Norman (French) army defeated the Saxon (English) army, and subsequently Norman kings ruled over England for many years. One thing that's impressive about the Bayeux Tapestry is its length: two hundred and thirty feet long! Where would you hang it? Curiously, it's only about twenty inches tall. Because it was hard to display, the Bayeux Tapestry was kept rolled-up in storage for hundreds of years, and it's in good condition. Historians have learned an incredible amount of history by studying the design. The tapestry includes 626 images of people (only three female), 190 images of horses, and 35 images of dogs. One key character, Harold of Wessex, appears eleven places! Fifty seven different inscriptions were embroidered into the Bayeux Tapestry. All of them were written in Latin.

What's the difference between a craftsperson and an artist? During the Middle Ages, tapestry designs generally weren't conceived, planned, or refined by the weavers. Large tapestries spent months, if not years, on the loom. Usually four or more weavers at a time would work as a team to weave together one tapestry. How did they know what they were doing? They worked from drawings or informal paintings called "cartoons". No kidding! They would start by placing the cartoons behind the warp threads, right on the tapestry loom. Then, using a quill pen and ink, they would trace the designs over to the threads.

The most famous remaining medieval tapestry cartoons were the ones painted by Raphael for "The Acts of the Apostles", a series of tapestries commissioned from a Brussels tapestry shop by Pope Leo X in 1515 for the lower level of Rome's Sistine Chapel. We remember Raphael's name... he's a very famous artist. No one remembers the names of those countless Belgian weavers (Other particularly famous tapestry cartoonists include Bernaert van Orley, Peter Paul Rubens, and Francisco Goya.)

Lesson Plan - Activity:

In this lesson, each student is challenged to artistically create a cartoon that someone else could make into a tapestry. They will use the template illustrated above and whatever pencils, crayons or markers they like. (Raphael used inexpensive tempera paint.)

Students must fill the tapestry up with ideas! Authentic medieval tapestries feature border-to-border detail. Imagine that characters are actors on a stage: the students are responsible for the set and the props too. Students must draw in whatever supporting details they need to communicate a story. They should use symbols. The challenge is to capture as much of a story as possible with just one tapestry cartoon. (We call them storyboards!) How cleverly can they capture the personality of a character or the essence of an event? Characters or the overall scene may be labeled with whatever inscriptions the student likes. They don't have to be in Latin.

Lesson Plan - A Few More Project Ideas:

Have students design medieval-style tapestries for whatever political or historic events they're studying. Have them illustrate the stories they've been reading, boiled down to just one tapestry or spread over a series of tapestries. Have students write inscriptions in Latin (or whatever languages they're studying.) You're Queen (or King) and ArtHouse is your castle, so commission whatever tapestries you like.

Lesson Plan - Assessment

Make students stand up and present their medieval tapestry designs. Ask them to interpret each other's designs. ArtHouse is ideally suited for displaying student artwork for classroom presentations and discussions!

Follow-up on the lesson by having students write essays on related themes such as "Allegory: How Artists Use Symbols and Fictional Characters to Present Truths or Generalizations about Human Existence."

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