

## Building Baskets

**Grades:** Middle School (6-8)  
**Subjects:** Visual Arts  
**Time Required:** 45 minutes  
**Author:** Biggs Museum Curator of Community and Academic Programs

### Lesson Overview

Students will learn the function and historical context of different baskets in the exhibit “Rooted, Revived, Reinvented: Basketry in America.” They will apply this knowledge to answer questions about baskets from the exhibit and get a chance to design their own basket.

### Learning Objectives:

*Students will be able to*

- Determine the function or artistic intention of historical objects and works of art
- Describe how baskets are evidence of how a culture lived or how a basket conveys a message
- Design a basket for a specific purpose or with a specific message

### Featured Artwork

*Paiute, Water Bottle, 19<sup>th</sup> century, woods, mud, horse hair*  
*Gullah, Lunch Basket, circa 1970, sea grass, pine straw, palmetto*  
*José Formoso Reyes (1902-1980), Nantucket friendship purse with carved seagull, 1961*  
*Central California (possibly Yokuts), Coil Feather Basket, circa 1890*  
*Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band Cherokee), Preparing for the Fall, 2012*  
*Bryant Holsenbeck, Crows, 2014*

### Materials

Included worksheet  
Images of baskets  
Drawing or painting supplies

### Featured Vocabulary Words

**Symbol/Symbolic** – image used instead of a word to represent a quantity, position, relationship, direction, or something to be done

**Paiutes (pronunciation: pie-yout)** - three non-contiguous groups of indigenous peoples of the Great Basin.

**Gullah (pronunciation: gull-uh)** - the descendants of Central and West Africans who came from different ethnic and social groups. They were enslaved together on the isolated sea and barrier islands that span what is now designated as the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor – a stretch of the U.S. coastline that extends from Pender County, North Carolina to St. John’s County, Florida and for 30 miles inland.

**Yokuts (pronunciation: yo-cuts)** - North American Indians speaking a Penutian language and who historically inhabited the San Joaquin Valley and the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada south of the Fresno River in what is now California, U.S.

**Ceremony/Ceremonial** - a formal event performed on a special occasion

**Eastern Band Cherokee** - a federally recognized Native American tribe in the United States, who are descended from the small group of 800 Cherokee who remained in the Eastern United States after the Indian Removal Act moved the other 15,000 Cherokee to the west in the 19th century.

**Contemporary Artist** – artist living today

**Indian Removal Act of 1830** - was signed by President Andrew Jackson on May 28, 1830. The law authorized the president to negotiate with southern Native American tribes for their removal to federal territory west of the Mississippi River in exchange for their lands. The Cherokee worked together to stop this relocation, but were unsuccessful; they were eventually forcibly removed by the United States government in a march to the west that later became known as the Trail of Tears.

## Lesson Steps

1. **Introduce the Lesson:** Tell students that in this lesson they will learn about why baskets are made and what they can tell us about a culture, person, or era. Explain that many of the baskets were either made by or inspired by Native American baskets or baskets made by slaves. Ask students to define the word basket. Encourage them to list certain qualities something has to have to make it a basket. Challenge them to explain why or why not baskets belong in a museum. Explain that they will see three types of baskets in this exhibit: **1) Baskets used for everyday purposes, 2) baskets used for a special reason, 3) baskets used to convey a message or story.** Explain that at the end of the tour, they will get a chance to design a basket that could fit into one of these categories
2. **Baskets Used for Everyday Purposes:** Explain that the earliest use of baskets by Native Americans was to help with everyday tasks. Ask students to think of what some of those tasks may have been and how a basket might have helped.
  - a. *Gullah, Lunch Basket, circa 1970:* Explain that this basket is based on a traditional form made by slaves that were brought to South Carolina from the West Coast of Africa. This group of people were expert basket weavers and were called the **Gullah** people. Many of their descendants still live in South Carolina and this basket was made by one of those people. Explain that this basket is called a lunch basket. Ask students to describe why this form would be good for carrying lunch. Ask a student to read out loud the materials this basket is made from. Ask students why they think the artist used these materials.
  - b. *Paiute, Water Bottle, 19<sup>th</sup> century:* Explain that this basket was made by the **Paiute** tribe of Arizona. Do not reveal that it is a water bottle. Keeping Arizona and its habitat in mind, ask students to describe what everyday purpose this basket may have served. Ask them to defend their answers by identifying specific elements of the basket that lead them to this conclusion. Encourage them to think about the materials it's made from and how this basket might need different materials than baskets that were used for other purposes or made by groups of people in different parts of the country.

3. **Baskets Used for Special Purposes:** Explain that some baskets were not used for everyday uses like food and basic storage, but acted as special pieces of people’s homes or were used to commemorate special occasions. Ask students what some of these uses might have been.
  - a. *José Formoso Reyes (1902-1980), Nantucket friendship purse with carved seagull, 1961:* Describe where Nantucket is and that it has a long history of maritime business tourism. Ask the students to define the word **symbolic**. Explain that in the 1960s, an artist named José Formoso Reyes adapted a traditional style of basket called a Nantucket lighthouse basket, into a purse shape that women could wear. He called these purses “friendship baskets,” and they acted as a symbol of the wearer’s “friendship” with Nantucket. For a period of time, young women graduating from Nantucket High School also received them as a commemorative gift. Ask students to provide examples of objects like this in their lives.
  - b. *Central California (possibly Yokuts), Coil Feather Basket, circa 1890:* Explain to students that this basket was made for two special purposes. One: it was used to store special, valuable objects. Two: it was used as a ceremonial basket that could contain rattlesnakes during special ceremonies. Ask the students to specifically compare this basket to one of the ones they saw for everyday use. Explain that scholars must sometimes make educated guesses about objects. Ask students to explain how a scholar might guess how this basket was used based on its materials and form. Pose a special occasion to students (wedding, birth, graduation etc.) and ask them to imagine/design a basket that could be used in those occasions.
4. **Baskets Used to Tell a Message or Story:** Explain that many **contemporary artists** – artists living today – use basket making techniques and materials to create pieces of art that convey a message or story. Ask students what messages or stories art can provide.
  - a. *Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band Cherokee), Preparing for the Fall, 2012:* Explain that many Native Americans today use the basket making techniques of their ancestors to tell the history and struggles of their tribes. Explain that in this example, the Cherokee artist, Shan Goshorn, used a traditional weaving technique from the Cherokee nation, but she wove the basket from modern materials to tell a story. On the inside of the basket, the weaving materials are made from strips that feature the text of the **Indian Removal Act of 1830**. Ask students if they’re familiar with this act or if they can make an educated guess about what this act said. With this knowledge in mind, ask them to look at the image on the outside of the basket, determine what the scene is, and describe the message the artist is trying to convey. Ask them if they think this is an effective way to convey the story and challenge them to describe why or why not.
  - b. *Bryant Holsenbeck, Crows, 2014:* Explain that many of the basket weavers in this show created baskets that don’t look like traditional baskets. Ask students why they think this work can be called a basket. Explain that all the materials in this work are made from things that normally would have been thrown away, like garbage bags, cloth, and broken records. Ask the students to discuss what the artist is trying to convey by using these materials. Ask students to describe another way to convey this message in basket form.

5. **Activity:** Use accompanying “Basket Brainstorm” worksheet to have students start designing a basket. Each student should pick one use (everyday, special reason, to tell a message or story) and answer the three accompanying questions. After they’ve completed their worksheet, they can begin to draw or paint a design for their basket. If time allows, ask students to present their basket to the group and describe their thinking process.

### **Assessment**

Assess students on their participation in the discussion of the various uses of baskets.

Assess students on their ability to explain how their basket is related to the use they’ve chosen.

Assess students on their understanding and ability to execute basic art concepts like scale and modeling.

### **Extensions**

As an advanced option for this activity, students can create their basket from available materials like basket reed, wire, clay etc.

### **Standards Addressed**

#### Visual Arts

##### Grade 6

VA: Cr1.2.6a – Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.

VA: Pr6.1.6a – Assess, explain, and provide evidence of how museums or other venues reflect history and values of a community.

VA: Re7.1.6a – Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

##### Grade 7

VA: Cr1.2.7a – Develop criteria to guide making a work of art or design to meet an identified goal.

VA: Re8.1.7a – Interpret art by analyzing art-making approaches, the characteristics of form and structure, relevant contextual information, subject matter, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

VA: Cn11.1.7a – Analyze how responses to art are influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

## Grade 8

VA: Cr1.1.8a – Document the early stages of the creative process visually and/or verbally in traditional or new media.

VA: Re7.1.8a – Explain how a person’s aesthetic choices are influenced by culture and environment and impact the visual image that one conveys to others.

VA: Cn11.1.8a – Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

### **Educator Resources**

*Exhibition Website:* <http://americanbasketry.missouri.edu/>

*Gullah Culture:* <https://www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org/>

*The Yokuts:* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yokuts>

*Eastern Band Cherokee:* <https://ebci.com/>

*The Paiutes:* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Paiute>

*The Indian Removal Act of 1830:* <https://guides.loc.gov/indian-removal-act>