



Bold and Beautiful: A Lesson About Kente Cloth

Grades K-2

Time: 45-60 minutes

Objectives

Students will identify, describe, create, and extend patterns using lines, colors, and shapes, as they create Kente cloth designs. Students will demonstrate beginning skills in using oil pastels and will follow simple oral directions. Students will explore and discuss the design and use of a common object from another culture.

Instructional Materials

Image/s of Kente cloth, or actual examples of Kente cloth
World map or globe

Art Materials

Strips of white paper, approx. 3-4" wide and 2' long
(such as adding machine tape)
Oil pastels, markers, or crayons in bold colors
Newspaper
Damp paper towels (for cleaning fingers)



Akan Peoples, Ghana, West Africa,
Kente Cloth.

Procedure

Introduction

Have the students look closely at the clothes they are wearing, as well as any other fabrics in the classroom. Invite them to suggest how the fabrics might have been created - what materials and tools were used, who might have made them, and so on. Ask whether fabrics and clothing are the same in other parts of the world, how they might be different, or why they may be different. Announce that they are going to learn about a very special type of fabric that was worn by kings in Africa. Point out Ghana on the map or globe in relation to the United States and explain that they are going to learn about a kind of cloth that comes from Ghana, a country in Africa.

Object-based Instruction

Display the images. Guide the discussion using the following questioning strategy, adapting it as desired. Include information about Kente cloth from the background material during the discussion.

Describe: What are we looking at? What colors and shapes do you see? How would you describe them? What kinds of lines are there?

Analyze: What colors or shapes repeat? What are some patterns? Where do the patterns seem to change? How do you think this was made?

Interpret: How do the colors in this cloth make you feel? Why do you think the weaver chose these colors? What other decisions did the weaver need to make while creating this piece of fabric? What else does this remind you of?



Judge: What do you like most about this artwork? What don't you like? Do you think this would be a good fabric for clothing? Why or why not? Who might wear cloth like this? How does looking at this piece help you know more about people from Africa?

Connect: Do people work as weavers in the United States? What do they make? How do you think their work is the same or different from weavers in African countries?

Procedure

Students will use paper and pastels/markers/crayons to create a repeating pattern that imitates Kente cloth. Demonstrate all of the steps of the project before the students begin, emphasizing that each design will be unique. Provide cues for the steps on the board, either with simple written directions (i.e., "fold the paper") or with visuals (i.e., attach a folded strip of paper and an oil pastel to the board).

1. Have the students fold their paper strips in half, then in half again, and then in half one more time. When they unfold them, there will be eight equal sections.
2. In the top section, each student will create a unique design of either horizontal or vertical stripes. (Starting at the top helps keep students from smearing their designs.) Suggest that the stripes be in different widths. One stripe can include a repeated shape - three red triangles in a yellow stripe, for example. The design needs to fill the entire section.
3. In the next section, each student will create a second unique design, with the stripes going the other direction. (If the top section has vertical stripes, the second section will have horizontal stripes.) If the top section doesn't have a stripe with a repeated shape, this section should include one. Again, the design needs to fill the entire section.
4. As the students create their designs, remind them to press firmly so the colors will be bold. Placing a pad of newspaper under the paper helps make the colors more solid and allows the students to color to the edges of the paper without coloring their desks. Remind them to try to avoid smearing the colors, but don't make them overly concerned. If they're working with oil pastels, using the paper towels to wipe their fingers when they change colors can help.
5. The third section of each strip will be a repetition of the first. Encourage the students to duplicate their design as exactly as possible.
6. The fourth section of each strip will be a repetition of the second. Again, encourage the students to duplicate their design as exactly as possible. Ask them what they think comes next; the fifth and seventh sections will contain repetitions of the first design, and the sixth and eighth sections will contain repetitions of the second.
7. Use the finished projects to decorate the classroom: Place them end to end to create a border, or attach them side by side to replicate the cloth. Groups of students could create panels that identify their groups.



Assessment

Before they begin, be sure the students understand the following expectations for the project:

1. Create two unique designs using lines (stripes), colors, and shapes that fill the designated space.
2. Alternate the designs in a repeating pattern, duplicating the designs as precisely as possible.
3. Demonstrate careful, thoughtful work.
4. Explore and discuss the design and use of a common object from another culture.

Asses the students' mastery of the first two lesson objectives based on their meeting expectations 1-3 above.

Assess the students' mastery of the fourth objective by asking them to describe where Kente cloth comes from (made by weavers in Africa), and what it's used for (usually clothing). Encourage developmentally appropriate oral communication.

Adapting and Extending

The following are some suggestions for adapting this lesson to other grade levels or extending it to other lessons.

- Read one or more Anansi stories to the students. Share the Ashanti legend (found in the accompanying background information) that connects the invention of weaving Kente cloth to the observation of Anansi spinning a web.
- Show a video of Kente cloth weaving; many are available on YouTube.
- The colors used in traditional Kente cloth are full of symbolic meaning, many of which are described in the background material. The cloth often includes elaborate patterns as well; there are many websites that illustrate and describe them. Older students could research the patterns online and then create more complex designs, making artistic decisions about colors and patterns based on the symbolism to make their designs more personal.
- Watch for Kente cloth patterns in books and elsewhere. For example, many of the illustrations in Margaret Musgrove's picture book *Ashanti to Zulu* include people wearing them.
- Base a writing lesson on the experience by asking students to describe their designs, reflect on their choices or on the images and/or artifacts they viewed, imagine what it would be like to be a weaver, and so on.
- Base a math lesson on the experience by incorporating measurement, classification, computation, and so on.



Kente Cloth Background Information

Kente (“ken tuh” or “ken tee”) cloth is a brightly colored fabric of the Akan peoples from Ghana in West Africa. It is hand woven on wooden looms, traditionally by men. Highly esteemed and carefully crafted, the cloth was originally reserved for royalty; in modern times, it is widely used.

Weaving in Africa has ancient roots but Kente cloth weaving is relatively modern. According to legend, it was born when two friends observed Anansi the spider spinning a web. They imitated his actions to create a beautiful cloth, which was taken to the chief. He liked it so much that he declared it the royal fabric and wore it on special occasions. The Kente cloth as we know it today with its bold colors and striking patterns was developed by the Ashanti (one of the Akan groups) in the 17th century. Other nearby Akan peoples weave Kente cloth as well, with varying colors and patterns typical of each group.

The yarns used over time in the making of Kente have been of various types. In the past, locally grown cotton was spun into yarn, and sometimes yarn was obtained by unraveling cotton and silk cloths imported from Europe. Today, most of the yarns are produced by factories.

Kente cloth is woven on a loom in four inch strips of varying lengths. Strips are then laid carefully side by side and hand-sewn together to create panels of cloth, which are usually used for clothing. Wearing Kente wrapped and draped around the body, a piece of men’s clothing typically needs 24 strips, and a women’s, 14.

Kente is more than just a cloth; the colors and patterns are imbued with symbolic meaning. There are over 300 identified pattern symbols, representing moral values, philosophical ideas, historical events, proverbs, individual achievements, attributes of animal life, and so on. Thread colors are chosen by the weavers to enhance the design and to convey meaning; the list below describes what various colors represent.

Yellow (and Gold) – royalty, prosperity, wealth (from egg yolk and the mineral gold)

Red – death, funerals, sacrifice, struggle (associated with blood)

Pink – femininity (associated with females)

Maroon – Mother Earth, healing (from the color of earth)

Purple – similar to maroon and pink (a feminine color associated with healing)

Blue – peace, harmony, love (associated with the sky)

Green – growth, vitality, crops, spiritual renewal (associated with plants and herbs)

Black – maturity, spiritual energy, rites of death (things darken as they mature)

Grey – healing rituals, cleansing rituals (associated with ash)

Silver – peace, purity, joy (associated with the moon)

White – purity, balance, ancestral spirits (used in festivals)

For a pre-K-2nd grade lesson using Kente Cloth, please see [Bold and Beautiful](#) .