

Costume Identity

Devil Kitty Heart Tapestry by Women's History Museum



Devil Kitty Heart Tapestry, 2018

Women's History Museum (United States, established 2015)

Fabric, 40 3/8 x 29 1/8 x 1 1/8 inches

THEMES

- Women's History/
Gender equality
- Cross-industry Collaboration
- World History
- Textile and Fashion



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) COMPETENCIES

Self-awareness: Linking thoughts and feelings, Identify and recognize emotions, Integrating personal and social identities

Social awareness: Perspective taking, empathy, respect for others

Relationship skills: Communication and active listening

Responsible decision-making: Reflecting

Objectives

What will students do/experience/think about, etc?

What is the overall goal of the lesson plan?:

Students will explore how artists work in multiple media and utilize different forms such as sculpture, clothing, and performance

Students will understand how artists use histories to inspire their artwork

Students will consider labor practices and manufacturing processes

Students will explore how artists work collaboratively across fields and how they work in collectives

Essential Questions

What is the big question that this lesson plan seeks to explore or have students grapple with?

How do artists use history and social issues in their work?

How do artist collectives work together?

What type of labor is valued and why?

What counts as art? And who decides?



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Devil Kitty Heart Tapestry, 2018

Fabric, 40 3/8 x 29 1/8 x 1 1/8 inches

Gift of the Alex Katz Foundation, 2018.29.5

Image courtesy of Gavin Brown Enterprise

Materials Needed

- Multiple pieces of plain paper
- Clothing and textiles
- Pencil or other drawing utensil
- Optional alternative: magazines, scissors, and glue
- Access to the artwork (See previous page or visit collections.portlandmuseum.org)

Instructions:

Look

Take a few minutes to look closely at this artwork.

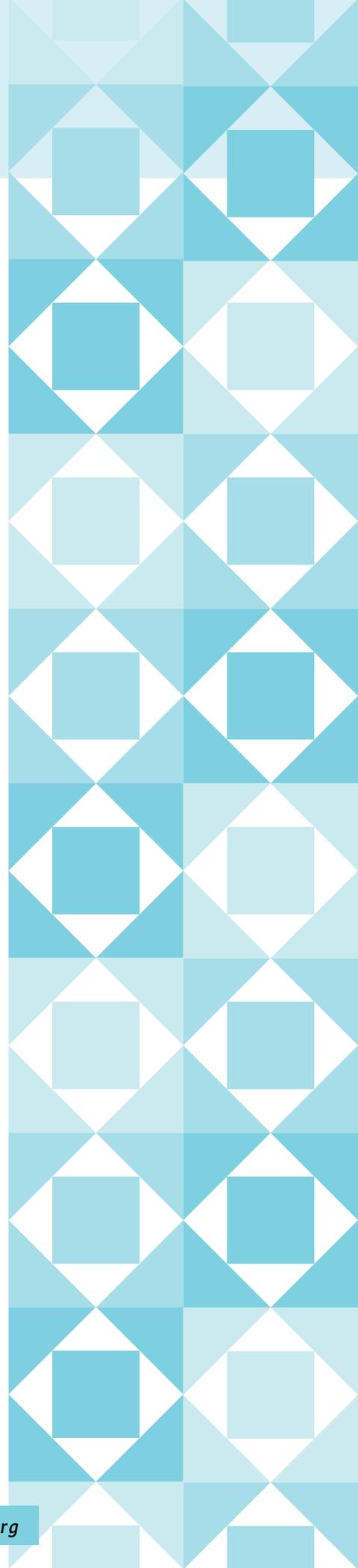
Respond

Think to yourself:

- What do I see happening here?
- Would I describe this as abstract or representational art? What am I seeing that is making me answer that way?
- What materials do I think the artists used?
- What do you think of the artist collective's name: Women's History Museum? Why do you think that they might use this name?
- Which of these shapes or forms are recognizable/familiar to me? Which ones are unfamiliar?
- What are some of the details within this artwork? Does it remind me of anything?
- What mood am I feeling from this object?
- How are space and visual elements organized in the work?
- What art forms and crafts have been used to make this object?

Respond to the questions posed above.

Write your responses down using your paper and writing utensil, share them with someone in your house, or discuss.



Learn

Use this section to learn more about the artist, the process, and the subject.

An art collective and a fashion label, Women's History Museum (WHM) defies easy categorization of authorship and genre. Rotating collaborators help produce WHM projects with founders Amanda McGowan (b. 1990) and Mattie Rivkah Barringer (b. 1990). They are known for their "underground" fashion shows and performances. Domestic space, garments, and the art of dressing are major themes within their work. Women's History Museum explores the idea that the art of dressing has historically been understood as a frivolous, feminine pastime, reserved for young girls and housewives. Combining performance, image making, clothing design, and production, their work explores a space for femme creativity, socialization, and care. Women's History Museum examines how fashion and dress culture is a space to reimagine and recreate our identities.

Each project begins with textiles that have what the artists refer to "a past life," which allows them to propose an imagined conversation with the women who wore and created the reclaimed garments. They use antique fabrics and patterns, honoring the history of women's clothing production and making connections to those who wore them. Each of WHM's new collections starts out as a performance. The artists often work from home in their NYC apartments utilizing their own furniture and emptying their closets.

Devil Kitty Heart Tapestry is part of a larger body of work, *OTMA's Body*, which explores the lives of the Romanov Grand Duchesses. The Romanovs were the Russian Monarchy before the communist Russian Revolution took over in 1918. *OTMA* references the self-given acronym of the Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia Nikolaevna. *OTMA's Body* is a collection of one-off clothing, furniture, jewelry, and accessories that range from ready-to-wear to abstract textile, and was presented by the New York gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise in 2018 rather than in a more traditional venue for a runway fashion show. It is believed that the Grand Duchesses led stilted, sheltered lives due to patriarchal

"We are always thinking of dolls—nothing is more a symbol for a kind of stereotypical and unattainable placid "femininity." What a good image to subvert and deconstruct. I think my obsession with collecting dolls is in jest, but also a serious commitment to save them from a life of being misunderstood as simple emotional comfort objects, as feminine people are often treated."

—Amanda McGowan



Mattie Rivkah Barringer and Amanda McGowan photo by Tyler Jones

inheritance laws of the Romanov dynasty. The Romanov family was exiled during the Russian Revolution in 1917. In 1918, the Russian Imperial Romanov family was executed, and the young girls' lives were cut dramatically short. The Women's History Museum resurrects the story of Grand Duchesses to shed light on the importance of femininity and the domestic sphere. During their lives, the Duchesses were only seen as useful for how they could be married off to princes. OTMA left their stories behind through their diaries and the pictures they took of each other. The photographs of the Duchesses wearing Edwardian-period fashion have gained cult status and are fashion inspirations. Edwardian-period fashion was luxurious, expensive and formal. For women it often included a corset under a frilly blouse that was tucked into a long skirt. A full outfit would include an umbrella and gloves, topped by a fancy feathered hat.

Women are often left out of histories and have historically been denied the same rights as men. Throughout history, women's labor has been less valued as men. Historically, society has seen labor such as sewing, child rearing, nursing, and education as predominately women's work. This work often receives less pay and less recognition. (This is also the case for other oppressed groups in society). When you search "Women's History Museum" online, what first comes up is the National Women's History Museum, a proposed Smithsonian museum that hasn't yet built a physical building but has been around for over 20 years as an organization that puts together virtual exhibitions. Their mission is to "tell the stories of women who transformed our nation." Why do you think there is a need to have a museum specifically for Women's History? Why do you think the collective might have chosen this name, especially considering the difficulty in finding information?

WHM said that their exhibition at Gavin Brown helped validate their artistic careers in many people's eyes. While they view themselves as artists, their unconventional approach regarding materials and presentation has as Rivkah said, been dismissed as "not art" Do you think that fashion is art? What makes something art?

"Fashion was our mutual obsession and so we went from there. In college, our work was dismissed as 'not art.'"
—Rivkah Barringer

"I'm interested in many different mediums of making and we both create when we feel excited about a specific idea or project and don't really concern ourselves with labels for it."
—Amanda McGowan



Pieces by Women's History Museum on display and for sale at Gavin Brown's enterprise. Photo by Lance Brewer

Act

Found Textile Costume

WHM uses found textiles and materials to make something new. When making a project or object, they are often inspired by the people who created and used the materials and objects that they transform. Mirroring the WHM's process, you will create a costume using found materials and objects and create photographic documentation. This activity also connects to recognizing stories that are often unheard.

You have multiple options for how to start this project. One option is to let the materials inspire you first and find clothing and textiles to utilize for your costume. If you start this way, start by collecting your materials. Find things that appeal to you for their texture, color, or that you feel have a story. Assemble them into a costume by layering and attaching things together temporarily using tape or potato-chip-bag clips.

The second option is to think about a person in the past or the future, real or imagined, and create a costume for that person. Think about a person whose story may not be one that is typically glorified or shared in history books or media. Choose materials that you feel reflect this character's personality, environment, and life story.

The third option is a combination of the other two options in that you start out by thinking about the materials and character simultaneously. However, in this option, you will do some historical research. Find a functional object either in the PMA collection or where you live. For example, a bowl, a vase, a toy, or a pair of shoes. Do some research about the company that made this object and find out where they are located. Learn about the manufacturing process of this type of object. Imagine the person or people that came together to craft this object. Now create a costume for this person inspired by the object or material that you were initially researching.

Regardless of which approach you choose to creating your outfit, take at least a dozen pictures of this outfit. Consider the background and what setting you create in order to visualize the story you want to tell. How would your character pose? What expression might they make? Choose your favorite picture.

Now, think about the character that would wear this outfit. Think about why you decided to tell their story. Start by listing some facts about them. Write down a 200-word biography of the person. What is their name, what do they do with their time, what is their life mission, have they faced any hardships?

OPTIONAL: If you are having a difficult time sourcing textiles, there is an alternative option of making the costume using collaged magazine pictures on paper. Or, get creative in what materials you use to create your costume! Think about materials we often recycle or throw away, such as plastic bags, food containers, paper towels, etc.

Reflect and Share

Think about your process of creating your outfit and character. What came easily to you? What was more challenging? What did you learn through this process? If you were to do this process again, what might you do differently?

The last step in interacting with art is to share your experience with others. Share your writing with the PMA! Or, share your writing with others in your home or class.

Resources

www.culturedmag.com/womens-history-museum/

www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/a-total-rebuke-of-fashion-a-qa-with-womens-history-museum-on-view-at-gavin-browns-enterprise-55248



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