

Trapped in Stone

Carolyn Braden

For years, I tried to find a great lesson for teaching about totem poles. When I received an art book from my cousin that included a soft stone recipe, I knew I had found what I needed.

First, I needed to motivate my fourth-grade students to help me make the project a reality. For them to be able to make the stones, I asked them to save as many school lunch milk cartons as possible.

Discovering Totem Poles

Students viewed and discussed a presentation I created on Native American art styles and the materials used to make them. We mainly focused on Native American totem poles, and students learned that totem poles are large relief sculptures carved from trees, typically Western Red Cedar, along the Northwest Coast of North America.

I showed students examples of modern totem poles from various artists' websites. After learning that totem poles were carved to illustrate stories and represent families and clans, students drew totem designs in their sketchbooks to represent themselves and their families.

I asked students to design a human-like head, an animal-like head, or a combination of both. To help them understand how their heads would be transformed from their two-dimensional drawing into a three-dimensional form, I had them practice carving their heads out of squares of oil-based clay. While they carved, I reminded them that Native Americans used wood for their totem poles, but we were making them out of clay and soft stone since we couldn't use sharp tools to carve wood.

The Mess Begins

I measured $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of plaster and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of vermiculite into individual throw-away containers for each student.

Next I measured out $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of water for each student in clean yogurt cups.

When students were ready to start working with the plaster, we first covered their tables in newspaper. I gave each student a container of water, the bowls of plaster and vermiculite, a rinsed-out milk carton, and a stick. I had students pour the water into the bowls of plaster and vermiculite and stir away. Once it was well blended, each student poured the mixture into the milk carton and let it sit for forty-five minutes. After forty-five minutes, students peeled away the milk cartons and sealed the forms into individual plastic bags so they wouldn't dry out.

Freeing Faces from Stone

I introduced Michelangelo at this point, showing students pictures of his sculptures and explaining how Michelangelo would see something trapped in the block of stone, waiting to be freed. I wanted students to carve their heads out of the stone, not their heads into the stone. I gave each student a 3" (7.5 cm) stainless steel nail, a plastic spoon, and a knife, and let them go to town! They kept their sketchbooks out on their tables while they carved their heads, carving out the front, sides, and back of their heads to invite a viewer to walk around and see all the sides.

The Results

Once all the heads were freed from their blocks of stone, we left them uncovered to dry. Once dry, the heads were stacked into small stone totem poles made of two-to-three heads.



Materials

- vermiculite
- plaster of Paris
- clean milk cartons
- 3" (7.5 cm) stainless steel nails
- plastic spoons and knives
- newspaper
- plastic bags
- various sizes empty, clean plastic containers
- clean-up items: broom, sponges, paper towels

Students also wrote short stories to accompany their designs when displayed at our school's art show at the end of the year. I love this project and know that it can be adapted to many age groups and many other projects!

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students use different media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas, experiences, and stories.

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users.imag.net/~sry.jkramer/nativetotems/default.html
www.alaskanative.net