Art and Technology Project: Making Mud Cloth, Learning about Mali

This fifth grade art and technology project was designed and conducted by Liz Napolitano (art), Margaret Holtschlag (technology), and Chris Worland (fabric artist).

**Duration of project:** Two class sessions in technology class, followed by three class sessions in art class.

**Introduction:**
Using the process of making mud cloth is an engaging way of teaching and learning about Mali and other West African countries. Mud cloth is hand-woven and hand-dyed cloth, with patterns of symbols that tell a story, teach lessons, and are an integral part of life for the people of Mali. Mud cloth is usually made in the village, with men weaving long strips of cotton, followed by women painting a design of symbols on the mud cloth. To make mud cloth, the cloth is first soaked in a mixture made from leaves and water to prepare it to take the mud dye. The mud is collected from the center of the pond after it has dried up. The cloth is painted in reverse from what would be expected, with the negative space painted out and the marks or symbols left unpainted. With this process of painting the background and leaving the design untouched, the artist repaints the cloth several times to get the rich black color of mud cloth.

**Background Information about Mali and Mud cloth:**
Introduce Mali and other West African countries to your students, using the resources available in this website and other sources.

- Michigan State University Global Access website (msuglobalaccess.com), a portal to information, data bases, and other resources about countries around the world.
- Exploring Africa website (exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu), curriculum units and resources for the study of Africa.

**Art and Technology Project:**
After the learning about Mali and other West African countries, students participate in two technology lessons, followed by sessions in art class.

**Lesson One: Home Assignment—Connecting the study of Mali to students’ countries of origin**
Students will learn about their own heritage and compare this to the information that they are learning about the traditions of mud cloth. Invite students to research their family history, origins, and traditions. This list of questions can be a starting point for the home assignment for students:

- What is your country of origin?
- When did you, your parents, or your ancestors come to America?
- What is important to your family? What are some of the things that your family values?
- What are the lessons or advice that your parents or grandparents tell you?
- What are some of your family traditions?
Lesson Two: Technology class—PowerPoint, writing text and drawing mud cloth symbols

Students will produce a PowerPoint presentation with several slides, writing text and drawing with the Paint program.

Invite students to use their notes from the home assignment to write the text for several PowerPoint slides. Each slide can address a topic: (1) country of origin; (2) immigration to America; (3) family values; (4) lessons or advice; (5) family traditions.

Next, show students a collection of mud cloth designs, along with their meaning. Invite students to use the language of Mali mud cloth to tell their own family story. Students may use traditional mud cloth symbols, or may choose to create their own mud cloth designs.

Finally, show students how to use the Paint program within the PowerPoint program. Demonstrate how to draw mud cloth designs with the painting of the background and leaving the designs untouched. Allow enough time for students to practice drawing at the computer.

At the completion of these lessons, students are ready to bring their PowerPoint designs to art class.

Art Lesson (three sessions):
The last part of the mud cloth project is completed in the art room.

Invite students to draw their mud cloth symbols on a piece of canvas (1 x 2 foot canvas). Students will need to work in reverse, keeping in mind that the marks and symbols they make will not be painted, but that they will apply the mud-paint to the area around the symbols.

The mud is a mixture of dry, red clay, water, Elmer’s glue, and some tempera paint. The teacher will want to experiment with the mixture until the right color and consistency is achieved. The consistency should be like runny pudding, thick enough so that it will not run but thin enough so that it can be painted on with a brush or a stick.

Students can use sticks, skewers, or small paintbrushes to apply the mud to the cloth. If time, students can do multiple applications, but one coat is sufficient for this project.