

Suitcase, Parfleche and 'Isaptakay

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Summary

Students learn about the parfleche and explore how Nez Perce people used natural materials to derive colors for their artwork.

Grade level

Third

Time required

Two hours

Materials

Items for dye experiment such as spoons, Styrofoam cups, hot water, mortar and pestle, and scissors

Mineral powder paints/other powder paints

Natural items for making dyes and paints such as minerals and plants

Parfleche or [photos of parfleches and paints](#)

[Parfleche patterns](#)

Heavy paper for making parfleches (paper bags can be used)

Science journals

[Satellite image of the Lewiston, Idaho area](#) – see Resources

Map of Lewiston, Idaho area

Goals

By completing this lesson, students will

- 1) learn about ways that the Nez Perce people traditionally made paints and dyes,
- 2) learn about the parfleche,
- 3) develop inquiry process skills and
- 4) gain experience in interpreting satellite images and maps.

Science standards addressed

National Science Standards

- Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry
- Properties of Earth materials
- Science and technology as a human endeavor

American Indian Science Standards

- Properties of Earth, air, fire, and water and how they served as a basis for traditional American Indian production of clothing, housing, tools, and food.

Teacher tips

If located in the Lewiston/Lapwai area, the teacher could go to Lewiston Hill and find some red dirt for the painting of 'isaptakays. Bring back photos and some red dirt to the classroom to see if color can be obtained from it. Rocks suitable for making paints are difficult to locate, but many soils or clays, rich in color, will work.

Anticipate the types of materials that students might require during the exploration – hot water, mortar and pestle, spoons, etc. – and have them available for student use. Many types of dyes and paints are obtained by chopping or grinding natural substances into small pieces and mixing them with hot water.

Students can create their own parfleche 'isaptakay from brown parchment paper or paper bags (the thicker the paper, the sturdier the 'isaptakay). Real rawhide, glass beads and buckskin can be purchased for students to create 'isaptakays, but paper, string and plastic beads also work nicely. Powdered paints can be used in place of real rock earth paints. An 'isaptakay pattern and directions for making an 'isaptakay are attached to this lesson.

Background information

Plateau Tribes of the Northwest utilized many different materials from nature in their everyday lives. Animals were an especially important resource for the people of the Plateau region. One use of animal skins was to make a type of processed hide called “parfleche”, or rawhide. Nez Perce people, like many other indigenous people of the Plateau region, used rawhide to make a type of carrying case also known as a parfleche. It was a flat container with flaps that folded. This was made from the hide of an animal, such as a deer, elk, or moose. The hide was not processed to be soft and pliable like buckskin; instead, it was hard and sturdy like plastic or a hard-cased suitcase, and thus provided protection for its contents. The Nez Perce people called such a carrying case an 'isaptakay. Rawhide carrying cases were made in several different shapes and sizes. They also carried several different things. Clothing items, pipes, flutes, men's headdresses, and foods were a few of the things you might find in an 'isaptakay.

The paints used to decorate an 'isaptakay were derived from minerals found in rocks. The paint was ground into a powder. The colors of paint from rock included red, white, yellow, green and blue. Nez Perce people decorated their 'isaptakay with geometric designs. These geometric shapes included straight lines, squares, rectangles, and triangles. Some designs are special. For instance, a family may have a specific geometric symbol on their carrying case. This would distinguish it from other families, like a last name or initials of a name.

Plant dyes were used in cornhusk weaving, and other basketry making. Bone was also dyed. Tea creates a brown-antiqued bone, while different species of huckleberry can create red or purple colors. Dyes used by the Nez Perce for decorating were obtained

from natural materials such as plants and minerals. Wild carrot roots, black tree lichen, and charcoal were used to make a black dye, while meadow grass and algae were used to produce a green dye. Alder bark and sunflower root were used to make a yellow dye. Indian paintbrush, huckleberry, mountain blackberry and chokecherry were used to obtain red. Some colors were also obtained by boiling pieces of Hudson Bay blankets.

Procedure

Engagement

- 1) Tell your students that they are going to pack a suitcase to spend a week with a friend. What would they pack? Now ask them to imagine that they are a Nez Perce child living in the area prior to European contact. Their father tells them to pack their things because they are preparing to move to their seasonal home. What items would they pack in an 'isaptakay?
- 2) Generate a KWL chart with students about suitcases and designs and colors on suitcases before pioneer time. Show a parfleche or pictures of parfleches. As a class, compare and contrast those suitcases to the luggage used today.
- 3) Ask students to predict where the paints for parfleches came from. Show a satellite image and map of Lewiston, Idaho. Ask students to locate Lewiston Hill and Troy, Idaho, two areas where dirt for dyes was traditionally gathered. Show the dirt gathered there to students.
- 4) Allow students to make paper parfleches using the attached pattern. Save them for decorating later.

Exploration

- 1) Divide the class into small groups and take them outside to collect natural items for making dyes and paints (e.g., grass, dirt, flowers, berries, and rocks).
- 2) Back in the classroom, assist students in creating a data table in their science journals and have them list their predictions of the color that each item will produce.
- 3) Allow the groups time to experiment with the items and discover how the color may be obtained from each. Ask students to record in the data table the colors that are actually obtained from each item.

Explanation

- 1) Facilitate a discussion in which students show and report the results of the dye/paint making experiment.
- 2) Give some background information on items traditionally used by the Nez Perce to obtain dyes and paints. Record this information on the KWL chart.
- 3) Ask students to summarize their results in a few sentences in their science journals.

Elaboration

- 1) Discuss the use of rock paints by Nez Perce to decorate their parfleches. Discuss the geometric designs used. Show photographs of paints, designs, and decorating parfleches.
- 2) Allow students to decorate their paper parfleche. Encourage them to try out the mineral paints provided or that the students produced during their experiment.

Evaluation

- 1) Observe students as they design and perform the experiment. Look for evidence of process skill use.
- 2) Review student science journals for their data recording efforts, and explanation of their results.

Follow up activities

- 1) Visit your local museum, tribal or other, and find items made from plant materials. Challenge students to find items that have been painted or dyed.
- 2) Invite a basket or cornhusk weaver to class. Have students make plant dyes to use in the making of a basket or cornhusk bag.

Instructions for making a paper 'isaptakay

- 1) Trace the 'isaptakay pattern on your paper and cut it out.
- 2) Hold the paper vertically and fold the sides in to create a long rectangular shape. Turn the paper horizontally, and fold in the last two sides. You should have two even square shapes.
- 3) Hole-punch the paper in order to insert the string to tie their 'isaptakay shut.

Decorating the 'isaptakay:

- 4) On each square, create a geometric design using a ruler and pencil. Make the same design on the other side to create two matching images. Paint the designs.
- 5) Use pieces of string to tie the inner and outer portions of the 'isaptakay shut. Add beads to the string for decoration.
- 6) Create small scale items to place inside your 'isaptakay.

Plants that can be used for making dyes

The Nez Perce used indigenous plants, such as huckleberries, chokecherries and elderberries to make dyes. The following are examples of general plants (not specific to Nez Perce) that can be used to make dyes.

Orange: Sassafras leaves

Brown: Sumac leaves, walnut hulls, tea bags, juniper berries, coffee grinds

Pink: Strawberries, cherries, raspberries

Green: Lily-of-the-Valley leaves

Red: Dandelion root, beets, rose hips, red onion skins, chokecherries

Blue-Purple: Red cabbage, elderberries, grapes, blueberries, cherry roots

Resources

TerraServer web site – Satellite image of Lewiston, ID

<http://terraserver-usa.com/image.aspx?t=1&s=14&x=155&y=1605&z=11&w=2>