First Americans Museum
OKLAHOMA

Parfleche Drawings in Chalk

Activity Length: 20–30 min.
Recommended Ages: 8 and up
Key Content Areas: Visual Arts

Activity Description:
Parfleche painting is a longstanding creative practice among First American artists. Treated rawhide surfaces require quick application of paint, similar to a fresco technique. Parfleche engage concepts of abstract design and functionality.

Supplies Needed:

- Sidewalk chalk
- Appropriate surface for drawing
- Printed images of parfleche or computer with projector

Instructions:

1. Instructor shares slides, photos and images of historic parfleche while sharing tribal culture or group origin.
2. Explain and discuss that parfleche were painted on hide and dried quickly and used as storage containers.
3. Elaborate that parfleche ornamentation is abstract and non-representational, and that it does not depict object, people, or places realisticly. Instead, it engages with the qualities of a person, thing or place.



Harvey Pratt (Cheyenne). Parfleche Pouch, c. 1990s. Courtesy of Harvey and Gina Pratt.

4. Share that sidewalks share unique commonalities with parfleche. The surface is functional (you walk on it), and sidewalks are already pre-divided into rectangles.
5. Assign a student or group one sidewalk rectangle in which to create their parfleche. Together, they should identify a concept to illustrate abstractly.
6. During the project, bring attention to creating positive design elements while preserving negative space.
7. Facilitate a student gallery walk, asking them to share about the process of creating parfleche and provide insights into the design choices that guided its creation.

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Parfleche Drawings in Chalk, cont.

Key Concepts:

- The abstract elements in parfleche represent the conceptual qualities of a person, place, or thing, such as “strong,” “large,” or “permanent.”
- Because parfleche paint dries quickly, it requires the artist to pre-plan a composition before beginning work.
- Parfleche design preserves negative space around and in between the positive elements that the artist create.
- Parfleche are functional—they are made to be used, used up, and recycled. This does not detract from their importance within Native fine art. It’s OK for art to have a finite life span.

Adaptation/Extension Ideas:

- Provide a time limit to the creation of a parfleche, keeping in mind that the rawhide surface dries quickly.
- Provide students with flexible material, such as cord or willow branches, to allow them to create smooth curves. Native artists use these materials as templates or guides, in the same manner that Western artists use a French curve.

Author Credit:

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