

## Arpilleras

Tell a textile story and try a faux felting technique that's safe and finger-friendly

(art + social studies)

Art can provide a way for a person to tell about their experiences even when they are afraid to speak out. Art can provide a voice for change, even when one's voice has been silenced.

In Santiago, Chile, in the 1970s, a group of impoverished women gathered in secret to create dimensional, appliquéd tapestries using whatever fabric scraps they could find. Their country was in turmoil, and their families torn apart, so they met to share their sorrows and express their stories through the communal art of sewing. These tapestries, known as arpilleras, showed scenes of the oppression, loss, fear, and poverty that filled their lives.

Despite the threat of censorship, the arpilleras were smuggled out of the country by human rights organizations. The world learned of the Chilean peoples' hardships through these textile stories, and the compensation received became a vital source of income for the women who created them. Other nations have adapted similar styles, creating arpilleras that tell visual stories about what it's like to live in their part of the world.

With scraps and stitches came change.

Inspired by arpilleras, students can envision changes they would like to see brought about in their own surroundings, and solutions to problems that they experience. Using a variety of fabrics and textile materials, students can express ideas in images that are cut, glued, stitched, and assembled in the style founded by the women of Santiago.

This lesson plan introduces Craft Fluff, a colorful polyester fiber that resembles wool. It can be used to add dimension and texture by forming and "felting" pieces with a non-skid paper clip.

**GRADES 3-12** Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed

### Preparation

1. Plan the story that each arpillera will tell. Students can begin by writing their story first, or making sketches to plan what the imagery will reveal. Students may thoughtfully consider changes they would like to see, or present a problem or envision a solution through art.

In the example above, the problem identified was an empty, overgrown lot. The artist envisioned replacing it with a community garden.



### Materials (required)

**Craft Fluff**, 20 oz assorted colors (65354-); share 4-5 colors across class

**Brightly Colored Burlap**, 10 oz, 46" x 36", assorted colors (63202-); share 2 yds across class

**Felt Sheet Assortment**, 25 pieces, 9" x 12" (63232-1023); share one across class

**Design Works Unbleached Muslin** 45" x 1 yd (63987-1001); share one across class

**Delta Sobo Craft and Fabric Glue**, 4 oz (23820-1004); share 6-8 across class

**Mountain Mist Fiberloft Polyester Stuffing**, 16 oz (23949-1006); share one bag across class

**Blick Studio Brush Markers**, set of 12 (24532-1129); share 2-3 sets across class

**Assorted Metallized Beads**, 8 oz mix (60776-1008)

**Styrofoam Block**, 1/2" x 12" x 12" (60928-1013)

Non-skid paper clips, regular size

### Optional Materials

**Creativity Street Embroidery Floss**, set of 24 skeins (63100-1009)

**Blunt Tapestry Needle**, package of 12 #18 (66903-1009)

**Kunin Corduroy Felt**, assorted colors, 9" x 12" (60893-)

**Kunin Glitter Felt**, assorted colors, 9" x 12" (60894-)

**Roylco Felt Shapes**, package of 500 (65308-1500)

**Felting Needles**, package of 4 (63122-1004)

**Clover Needle Felting Mats** (63236-)



## Process

1. Select a background fabric, approximately 9" x 12". Original Chilean arpillerists used burlap from flour and potato sacks as a background for their tapestries. In fact, the word "arpillera" means sack cloth or burlap in Spanish. Other options for backgrounds may include felt, unprimed canvas, or heavy fabrics such as denim.
2. Build the story with forms cut from felt, muslin, and fabric scraps. These can be secured to the background using glue or stitching.
3. Add details with yarn and embroidery floss, or draw onto forms using markers. Outlines and borders can be created by stitching. Beads can also be added by stitching or gluing.
4. Create areas of dimension. The arpillerists of Chile frequently created elements in their scenes that did not lie flat. Animals, plants, and water areas were stuffed or folded to make them stand out more. Human figures were the most important part of the scene, so they were cut out and stuffed first, like small dolls, then attached to the background. If a woman had poor eyesight, she contributed to the arpillera by stuffing elements.
5. Because the arpillerists of Santiago lived in impoverished urban areas, their materials were limited to scraps from clothing and bags. In more rural areas where animals were present, arpilleras may have included dyed and felted wool.

Felting is a process that condenses wool fibers by either a "wet" method using water and agitation or a "dry" method, which involves sharp, barbed needles.

The following "faux felting" procedure is a safe and easy way for students of all ages to experience the application of wool-like fiber to a background without needles or glue.

## Paper Clip "Felting"

1. Choose a burlap color for the background.
2. Prepare a piece of styrofoam to be used as a work surface. Sheets of foam can be cut on a paper cutter into 4" x 4" pieces and distributed across a classroom. Cover the edges with duct tape to keep them from crumbling.
3. Pull or cut a section of Craft Fluff away from the full skein, and divide that piece in half. To help secure fibers, a knot can be tied in the fluff section.
4. Place burlap on the styrofoam and unwind one loop of a non-skid paper clip. It's very important to use non-skid paper clips as they have notches to catch the fibers, while smooth paper clips do not.
5. Holding onto the section of the clip that is still curled, push through a section of the fluff through the holes in the burlap into the foam. Repeat again and again until the fluff is secured to the burlap. Pull away from the foam and view small sections of fluff protruding through the back side of the burlap.
6. Fluff fibers can be gathered and twisted between paper clip punches for a variety of texture effects. Fiber colors can be mixed by punching them together or on top of one another. Edges of the fibers can be left naturally extended for soft hair or cloud forms.
7. Once the "felting" is complete, glue a piece of felt or fabric behind the burlap to permanently secure the fibers.



**Step 1:** Build the story with forms cut from felt, muslin, and fabric scraps. Add details with stitching and markers.



**Step 2:** Use stuffing to make important parts of the story (such as figures), stand out.



**Step 3:** Try "felting" with craft fluff and a non-skid paper clip on burlap.





### Options

- Once an arpillera is complete, it can be prepared for display by gluing a dowel or thin strip of wood to the top and bottom, then tied with a piece of twine for a hanger.
- Craft Fluff can also be manipulated with barbed felting needles to secure it to craft felt or to form dimensional shapes. A felting mat is recommended instead of foam, to protect the needles. Use caution when punching fibers with needles, and wear puncture-resistant gloves to protect fingers.

### National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

#### Creating

**Anchor Standard 1:** Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

**Anchor Standard 2:** Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

#### Responding

**Anchor Standard 8:** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

#### Connecting

**Anchor Standard 10:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

**Anchor Standard 11:** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

