

Up-cycled Leather and “Turquoise” Cuffs

(art + social studies)

The leather cuff bracelet has a long and interesting history. Worn in battle by Spartans, gladiators and swordsmen of the Middle Ages, leather cuffs strengthened the wrists to better support heavy weaponry and to offer protection from life-threatening wounds. Workers wore them as well, to support their wrists while performing manual labor. Native Americans wore leather cuff jewelry for beauty, status, and also to show what family they belonged to.

Many Native Americans embellished their jewelry with turquoise. To the Pueblo and the Navajo, turquoise is sacred — they believe it obtains its color from the sky and symbolizes the power of healing. Indigenous people of the Southwest carved turquoise into beads or animal fetishes such as birds or bears.

In this project, students will make a cuff from old or discarded leather belts, and then fashion “turquoise” embellishments from polymer clay. Additions of beads, leather embossing and design work with permanent markers combine to make spectacular “up-cycled” adornments!



Grade Levels 3-12

Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Gather leather belts and cut lengths of approximately 8-9" each.
2. For embossing, gather containers for water and sponges, and small wooden boards to lay the leather pieces on while hammering.



From belts to bracelets!

Materials

Leather belt; one belt makes four or five cuffs

Basic Leather Stamping Tool Kit, (61438-1009); share two across class

Steel Hammer (35136-1016)

Suede Lace (63014-) share one spool across class

Staedtler® Fimo® Polymer Clay, 2-oz; share three packages each across class:
 - Turquoise (33224-5113)
 - Transparent Blue Effect (33236-5013)
 - Granite Effect (33228-2623)

Ticonderoga® RediSharp® Plus Permanent Marker, 4-color set (21311-0409); share four sets across class

Fiskars® Hand Punch, 1/16" circle (58923-1001); share

across class

Fiskars® Recycled Scissors, Bent, 8" (57097-1108)

Royal Sponge Set, set of four (32934-0009); share across class

Containers for water and sponges

Wooden boards for embossing leather

Optional Materials

Leather Wristbands, package of 8 (63007-)

Blick® Bead Assortment, 100-piece package (60708-1000)

Creativity Street® Embroidery Floss, 24-skein set (63100-1009)

Wooden Handle Awls, (12842-1000)

Aleene's® Original Tacky Glue, 8-oz (23884-1004)



Process

1. Scour closets or thrift stores for old leather belts. Thin leathers are easiest to work with if beading is done, but thick leathers hold embossing well. One belt makes 4 to 5 cuffs.
NOTE: Vinyl or faux leather belts will work for all embellishing methods except the leather embossing. Experiment with permanent markers on vinyl surfaces.
2. Cut the belt to a length slightly longer than the diameter of the student's wrist. Incorporate the buckle and other belt details if desired.
3. To make a clasp or fastener for the cuff bracelet, use the belt buckle or loop a piece of leather lacing through a belt hole on one end. If belt hole is unavailable, secure a loop to one end with glue. The loop can then go around a bead or button glued to the other end to form a clasp. Leather lacing could also be attached to both ends of the cuff and it can simply be tied onto the wrist.



Methods of Embellishing/Designing the Cuff

1. **Embossing:** Practice on a scrap piece of the belt first, then wet the cuff with a sponge, using just enough water for the leather to change color. Place the cuff on a board and position an embossing tool perpendicular to the leather. Strike the end of the tool with a hammer a few times so that the design is imprinted.
2. **Adding "turquoise" beads or buttons:** To make faux turquoise, use a 1/2" diameter ball of each color, conditioning the clay by rolling it and warming it between the hands. Make "snakes" or coils of each color and lay them side by side. Roll the three coils randomly so they form one "cane" of clay. With scissors, cut small pieces from the cane and shape them into buttons, beads, or even animal-shaped fetishes. Use an awl or large needle to make holes. Place the polymer beads on a foil-lined baking sheet and place the sheet in the oven for 20-30 minutes at 230°F. After baking, use a fine-tip black or brown permanent marker to make the characteristic veining of real turquoise. Attach beads to the cuff by stitching them on with embroidery floss or by attaching them with suede laces through the belt holes.
3. **Lacing:** Make holes for lacing and stitching through thicker leather using a leather awl and hammer. Thin leather can be penetrated with a hand-held hole punch. Stitch with embroidery floss or suede lace.
4. **Drawing Symbols:** Embellish the cuff with Native American designs, using permanent markers. Research the meanings of different symbols, designs and animal totems.

Options

- Instead of belts, use [Leather Wristbands \(63007-1001\)](#)
- Make matching choker necklaces using the same method.
 - Make pet collars (omit beads, to avoid choking hazard).
 - For perfectly shaped beads, use the [Amaco® Professional System Bead Roller \(33073-1001\)](#)

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes

K-4 Students use art materials and tools in a safe and responsible manner.

5-8 Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas.

9-12 Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques and processes they use.

Content Standard #4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

K-4 Students identify specific works of art as belonging to particular cultures, times and places.

5-8 Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts.

9-12 Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times and places.