Understanding America Through Art

Examining the Flag, Jennie Brownscombe (early 1900s)
GLOSSARY

**Art periods** – historical eras when art pieces had a prescribed style; the periods that influenced American art are neoclassic, romanticism, rococo, realism, impressionistic, post impressionistic, modern and contemporary

**Art piece** – any painting, sculpture, or crafted item made by an artist

**Balance** – the equal distribution of color or importance, creating overall harmony

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Wooded Landscape with Watermill by Meindert Hobbema, 1660s

Balance through color is one principle that unifies this composition. Although the canvas is filled with grayed tones of blue and green, orange (the complement of blue) is a secondary theme and can be seen on the roofs, the cattle and in the grass. Our attention is drawn to the figure in the red jacket, showing that a small area of warm color can offset a larger area of cool color.

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**Color Theory** – the interrelationship of hues and tones used in all aspects of art and crafts

| Color Wheel – a regular progression of all the colors in the visible spectrum |
| Primary colors – red, yellow, blue |
| Secondary colors – orange, green, violet, a mix of primaries |
| Tieriary colors – a mix of primary + secondary |
| red + orange = red orange |

| Complementary colors are opposite each other on the color wheel, such as green / red or orange / blue. |
| Monochromatic colors are shades of one color. |
| Analogous colors are adjacent to each other on the color wheel |
| Pastel colors are any colors that have been mixed with white to achieve a pale color. |
| Cool analogous | Warm analogous |
**Contrast** – the degree of darkness and lightness that marks the edges or prominence of subjects

**Form** – the three dimensional shape of an art piece

**Medium** – the material used by the artist; paintings are produced with oils, acrylics, watercolors, chalk, pastels or charcoal; sculptures may be made with clay, metal, wood or cloth; craft items use leather, cloth, minerals, beads, wood, and just about anything found in nature or manufactured

**Realistic Paintings** – paintings that followed a European style of representing the subject with accuracy and details replicating real life

**Shape** – the outline of an art piece when seen in silhouette

**Space, positive and negative** - Positive spaces are those occupied by the main subjects of the work. The negative spaces are the areas around and behind the positive spaces. Negative space can also be referred to as the background. For a demonstration of artists at work who created the pieces below, where black is the negative space, and for a world of information on the general topic of creating your own art, type the following address into your Internet browser:

http://www.artsconnected.org/toolkit/encyc_balancesymmetry.html

Click on the yellow half circle on the left, titled *See Artists In Action*. You may click to play each of the videos, or click to view the video transcripts. Explore other areas on this engaging website.

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**Subject** – the main focal point of the piece

**Vanishing Point** – the place in a landscape horizon where the distance becomes indistinguishable; imagine walking into the painting until you have walked so far that you cannot be seen – you have vanished

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**On The Cover:** The oil painting (artist Jennie Brownscombe) depicts George Washington viewing a flag made by Betsy Ross. A young girl stands between Washington and John Ross, standing. Robert Morris is seated. Historians dispute the legend that Ross made the first flag of our nation, officially adopted by Congress on June 14, 1777, but the design is still called the "Betsy Ross Flag."
What Can We Learn About America Through Arts and Crafts?

Art is the result of creative expression. We create art to express emotions, to experiment with colors, shapes and textures, to experiment with design, to give tributes of honor, and to tell stories of the past, present and future. Many make a living through the production of their artistry, and many more spend leisure hours enjoying creative expression of arts and crafts.

Paintings, textiles and crafts of all varieties give us endless clues to cultural values and beliefs. Early man drew pictures of animals of the walls of caves to express interest in the food supply so necessary to sustaining life. Egyptians buried their dead with art treasures so that the spirits of the dead would have them in the afterlife. American Indians crafted canoes from tree bark, and decorated clothing with minerals. Modern parents proudly display their children’s drawings on the refrigerator. Art expresses what is important to a society.

In the study of America through its artwork and crafts, we follow a zigzagging timeline of development that begins in the 1600s with the voyages of the first Pilgrims and continues to present day. In each time segment, we take a closer look at one or more aspects of art and craft that reveal important clues to the makeup of America, its history, values and beliefs.

As we advanced through the 1600s to present day, painterly art evolved from a strict realistic style where the goal of the artist was to replicate an exact likeness of the subject, to an abstract impressionistic style where the goal became the expression of feelings. As students of culture, we are grateful for that early practical vantage point. We can trust the likenesses of work produced in the time prior to the mid 1900s to be a sincere effort to recreate a picture of history as it happened. For us, that attention to realistic detail is a happy accident. Imagine if we had begun our study of artistic expression with nothing more than abstract cave drawings that we might never have been able to decode! We are also greatful for photography, a replacement for, or supplement to, the realistic artistry of painting, that continues to provide information through the camera lens as it encourages painters to explore new styles of expression.
Here is a unit-by-unit list of topics and time periods:

Unit I  
*Understanding American Through Art*  
Portraiture, furniture, art terms  
1600s – 1776; mid 1800s

Unit II  
*Patchwork Comfort*  
Quilts, design  
1800s - present

Unit III  
*The Truth Tellers*  
Black and White Photography, cropped photos  
mid to late 1800s

Unit IV  
*Landscape Painters of the Wild Frontier*  
Landscapes, color theory  
late 1800s, early 1900s

Unit V  
*American Modern Painters of the 1900s*  
Portraiture, characterization  
1900 – 1935

Unit VI  
*Contemporary Art*  
Paintings, murals, environmental art, sculpture, commercial art, abstract art  
1935 – present

Unit VII  
*Folk Art*  
Paintings, sinage, scrimshaw, wood carvings  
1600s- 1900s

Unit VIII  
*Handcrafted History*  
Black cloth dolls, face jugs, cowboy leather, totem poles  
mid 1700s – 1800s

Unit IX  
*Monuments and Memorials*  
Monuments, statues, war memorials, terrorism  
1700s – present

Unit X  
*Art of Craft*  
Decorating containers, leather crafts, rag crafts, scrapbooking, bead crafts  
1900s – present

In this unit, we use the fine art paintings from masters and scholars who researched our nation’s earliest days, to gain a better understanding of the incredible voyages, settlements and governances that formed the first colonies that would become the United States of America. We also look at early furniture making in a land where the only materials were those that nature provided, and learn a bit about the craft of Iroquois Indians who helped us settle New England.

The study of art, like any subject, has a set of vocabulary terms that will be important in the appreciation of the topic. Each unit has a glossary devoted to that task. In addition to the glossary, we begin the unit with a general discussion of how to appreciate works of art.

As you study this unit, ask yourself:

- What do the paintings reveal about the lives of the early Colonists?
- Did the early American crafts survive and evolve through the history of our nation?
- What do we know about the Iroquois Indians?
Art Appreciation Simplified

Viewing works of art, we may ask ourselves why something is considered a valuable piece of art work, or what it is about the piece that we should be looking for. The task can be divided into five steps: description, interpretation, relationship, analysis and evaluation. Each step has a series of questions to help you understand what you are looking at. The highlighted questions are illustrated and explained by the representative picture.

Description

- What kinds of things do you see in the painting, sculpture or craft piece?
- What words would you use to describe it?
- How would you describe the lines in a picture? The shapes? The colors? What does the painting show? How does the sculpture depict the event, object or person? What appeals to you when you look at the crafted item?
- How would you describe a painting, sculpture or crafted item to a person who could not see it?
- Are the people in the picture like you or different?
- How would you describe the place depicted in a painting?
- How does the artist imply movement in the painting? Are some things moving faster than others?

In *A Brush for the Lead* by Currier and Ives, three important aspects of the painting show movement and give the viewer a sense of excitement:

- the horses manes and tails are flying in the wind
- the horses hooves are off the ground and their legs are stretched out
- the stillness of the house and the people in front of it, along with the frozen still trees, contrast with the horses in the race
**Relationship**

- What does this painting, sculpture or crafted item remind you of?
- What things do you recognize in this work of art? What things seem new to you?
- How is this painting, sculpture or crafted item like ones you have seen before? What are some important differences?
- What do paintings or art objects have in common?
- How is a picture different from real life?
- What interests you most about this work of art?

**Analysis**

- Which objects seems closer to you? Further away?
- What can you say about the colors in the art?
- What makes this painting look crowded?
- What can you tell me about the person in the painting?
- What can you tell me about how this person lived?
- What do you think is the most important part of this picture or art object?
- How do you think the artist made this work?
- What questions would you ask the artist about this work, if s/he were here?

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**Portrait of Francis Slocum**
by Jennie Brownscombe

In *Portrait of Frances Slocum (ages 67 years)* by Jennie Brownscombe, students of Colonial America may be curious to know if Francis Slocum was a real person, and why a frontier woman living in a log cabin is portrayed wearing silver earrings like those made by American Indians. According to historical records, Slocum was abducted by Indians in Wyoming in 1778 at the age of five, grew to maturity, married two chiefs, was later discovered by her white brothers who had been searching for her for decades, and chose to remain with her adopted people. (From The Historical Record of Wyoming Valley, Vol. 13-14; by Frederick Charles Johnson.)
Interpretation

- What title would you give to this painting? What made you decide on that title?
- What other titles could we give it?
- What do you think is happening in this painting? What else could be happening?
- What sounds would this painting make (if it could)?
- What do you think is going on in this picture? How did you arrive at that idea?
- What do you think this painting is about? How did you come up that idea?
- Pretend you are inside this painting. What does it feel like?
- What do you think this (object) was used for? How did you arrive at that idea?
- Why do you suppose the artist made this painting? What makes you think that?
- What do you think it would be like to live in this painting? What makes you think that?

![British and American Troops at the Battle of Bunker Hill During the American Revolutionary War (unknown artist)](image)

From inside the painting, we can ask our five senses to describe the scene:

Sense of sight, or what we can see in the picture: fighting, death, carnage
Sense of hearing, or what we can imagine the people in the picture can hear: shouts, gunfire
Sense of taste, smell: acrid smoke from gunfire, fear
Sense of touch: body blows from fighting, bullets and sword wounds

Another sense, the sense of feeling, is intangible, intuitive and emotional. If you were a colonist fighting the British for your freedom, you might feel a sense of righteous pride and determination, and a sense of certainty that what you were doing was right. If you were a British soldier commanded by your leaders to defeat rebel colonists and reclaim British territory, you probably had much the same feelings as the colonists.
Evaluation

- What do you think is good about this artwork? What is not so good?
- Do you think the person who created this did a good or bad job?
- Why do you think other people should see this work of art?
- What do you think other people would say about this work?
- What grade would you give the artist for this work? How did you arrive at that grade?
- What would you do with this work if you owned it?
- What do you think is worth remembering about this work of art?

The painting shows the disciplined, orderly group of representatives who jointly agreed to the act of separation from Britain. The painting gives students insight into the process of democracy where everyone has a voice, and many voices must eventually reach agreement. The Declaration of Independence as a document is important because it states that a government exists for the benefit of the people and that "all men are created equal." Adopted by the thirteen American colonies on July 4, 1776, the document is regarded as the best-written statement of individual rights in history.

A. What do you think is the most important part of describing a painting? 

______________________________

______________________________

______________________________

Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull
Realism in Portraiture

The Pilgrim saga began in England with a group of religious dissidents who believed it was necessary to separate from the Church of England. Persecuted in England, these "Separatists" moved to Holland in 1607 and 1608. The group, joined by other colonists, prepared for their voyage with a group prayer, as portrayed in this painting by Robert W. Weir. The year was 1620.

Robert Walter Weir (1803 – 1889) was a painter from the Hudson River School of New York, an institution that taught the themes of discovery, exploration and settlement. Weir studied art in an historical context while living in Italy. He was named Professor of Drawing at the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY, a position he held for 42 years.

B. Did women and children accompany the men on the early voyages?___________________

How did the artist use contrast (dark against light) for emphasis?

___________________________________________________

Early Plymouth records refer to all passengers from the first four ships as "First Comers." There is no single definition of "Pilgrim" a term not generally used until the early 1800s. Many families, Separatists and non-Separatists and Separatist sympathizers alike, traveled to America in several ships in the 1620s, with the most notable being the Mayflower (1620), the Fortune (1621), the Anne and the Little James (1623).
Rough Passage

The *Mayflower* left Plymouth, England on September 6, 1620, and anchored off the tip of Cape Cod on November 11. During those two months crossing the Atlantic Ocean to America, many things happened on the *Mayflower.*

The first half of the voyage was actually fairly smooth. The wind and weather were good for sailing, and they made good progress. Aside from sea-sickness, the health of the passengers was generally very good.

After they had sailed more than half way to America, the *Mayflower* began to encounter a number of bad storms, which began to make the ship very leaky, causing many of the passengers below deck to be continually cold and damp. They fixed broken beams, caulked the leaky decks as best they could, and continued on.

C. How does the artist portray the dangers of a rough passage at sea in this picture?

____________________________

What observation can you make about the colors of the sail and the ocean?___________

The *Mayflower* dropped anchor near present-day Provincetown on Nov. 21, 1620, and 41 male passengers signed the Mayflower Compact, an agreement to enact "just and equal laws for the general good of the colony."

From their earnest postures we can assume that the signers of the Mayflower Compact were aware of the seriousness of their deeds. Their clothes bear testimony to their European origins.

D. How does the artist convey that the ship is made of wood?

____________________________

*The Signing of the Mayflower Compact* by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris

*They were encountered many times with crosswinds,* by Mike Haywood

*The Mayflower* by Mike Haywood
The Pilgrims finally landed at the site of present-day Plymouth, Mass., on Dec. 26, 1620. In this picture below by Nathanial Currier and James Ives we can see that the Pilgrims were grateful to have reached their destination. The Indian at left is watchful and possibly curious. The Pilgrims and even the sea appear peaceful.

E. What do you notice about the clothing of the child holding the woman’s hand on the right?
___________________________________________________________________________

In general, how did the Pilgrim’s clothing compare with what the American Indian is wearing?
___________________________________________________________________________

Artists often employ a balancing technique by adding small amounts of one color in strategic places throughout the painting. How many instances of bright red can you find?__________

The Landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, Massachusetts, December 22nd 1620
by Currier & Ives

Nathaniel Currier (1813 – 1888) and James Ives (1824 – 1895) were a team of famous lithographers during the late 1800s. Both were born in Massachusetts and had artistic skills they developed to run a successful printing and publishing business. They based their lithographs* on historical aspects of the middle class American scene.

Nathaniel Currier and James Ives at their printing firm, around 1857, New York City.
Lithography involves grinding a piece of limestone flat and smooth then drawing in mirror image on the stone with a special grease pencil. After the image is completed, the stone is etched with a solution of aqua fortis leaving the greased areas in slight relief. Water is then used to wet the stone and greased-ink is rolled onto the raised areas. Since grease and water do not mix, the greased-ink is repelled by the moisture on the stone and clings to the original grease pencil lines. The stone is then placed in a press and used as a printing block to impart black on white images to paper. Many prints are hand-colored to make them more interesting.

A First Thanksgiving Feast

Jennie Brownscombe (1850 – 1936) was born in Pennsylvania. Her mother, Elvira Kennedy, was a direct descendant of a Mayflower passenger. Brownscombe supported herself through teaching and by selling her oil paintings, the last of which she completed at the age of 81. She is recognized as the Norman Rockwell of the Colonial Era.

Captain Miles Standish, the leader of the Pilgrims, invited leaders of the Wampanoag Indian tribe, a division of the larger Iroquois, and their immediate families to join them for a celebration, but they had no idea how big Indian families could be. As the Thanksgiving feast began, the Pilgrims were overwhelmed at the large turnout of ninety relatives that Squanto and Samoset brought with them. The Pilgrims were not prepared to feed a gathering of people that large for three days. Seeing this, Massasoit gave orders to his men within the first hour of his arrival to go home and get more food. Thus it happened that the Indians supplied the majority of the food: five deer, many wild turkeys, fish, beans, squash, corn soup, corn bread, and berries.

F. How did the artist portray the attitudes or behaviors of the American Indians in First Thanksgiving?

What clues to the time of year can you find? Remember, it is the east coast.
Sense of Refinement

Life in the colonies was difficult and required great ingenuity. Colonists had to build communities with their own labor, using woods, minerals and other materials they could find in the new land. Although there was some trade with England and other places, the colonists had to rely on their own creativity to forge the elements of their lives that we find in photos.

Among the colonists, a few stood out as wealthy with high social standing. These fortunate few could afford to have their portraits painted. The style of painting was called British rococo, a style that portrayed people in fine clothing and jewelry, in scenes set up to feature objects of wealth or high social position, in graceful or commanding poses, gardens or parlor settings and ornate costumes. These portraits were not at all representative of a harsh new land, but a rather lavish life style, at least for some. Although the colonists fled British oppression, they embraced the portrayal of a social class order.

Painter Joseph Blackburn was born in England and immigrated to Boston where he worked from the mid-1750s through the mid 1760s. He was most noted for portraying wealthy colonists in high fashion settings (below), and for idealizing female beauty.

Thomas Sully was born in England in 1783 and came to Philadelphia at the age of nine. As a teacher at a Penn. art school, he was well known for painting pretty faces often disregarding reality. This pose at right against a landscape suggests a vast estate.

John Singleton Copley (1738 – 1815) was born in Boston to Irish immigrants. He studied engraving, and became renowned as a portrait artist who had a knack for painting lavish costumes of silks and lace.

In the portrait at left of Mrs. George Watson, whom do you think decided that she would be portrayed holding on to an expensive vase?
Not all portraiture was realistic. In Puritan America, families hired “limners” or outliners to create an image that would record the glory, the towering intellect and the majestic being of the individual. The portrait did not have to look just like the individual because life circumstances and facial expressions and composure changed and aged according to God’s design. More important were the things that an individual stood for.

Study the portrait of Mrs. Elizabeth Freake and her baby, Mary in the painting below, done by an anonymous limner in the 1670s. The portrait tells us a lot of information. What parts of the painting give us these insights?

Mrs. Elizabeth Freake and Her Baby, anonymous

G. This is Elizabeth in her Sunday best clothes. The lace collar, fancy dress and bracelet tell us she is going out, and when Puritans went out, they generally went to church.

She was a skilled at sewing and making lace.

She was a devoted mother.

She was frugal and able to live within her means in decorating her home.

Although she is dressed to go out, she is ready for household duty.

She likes a little “flash” in her fashion.
Practical Comfort

New England furniture among the colonies was the work of local craftsmen who had learned their cabinetry and joinery skills in England, and was made of oak, pine or hard wood such as walnut, cherry and imported mahogany. Geometric designs were carved as decoration. Closets were rare, so most clothing and linens were stored in chests.

Many households were without a source of heat in the bedroom; colonists kept extra blankets in chests like the one at left, and the chest was commonly found at the foot of the bed. This one has been decorated with carvings and soft green stain, and contains three panels that are typical of those made by Pennsylvania German furniture makers.

The form of the chest, a basic box, took shape in many size variations. One size, a coffin for burying the dead, was the source of the expression “coffer”, a synonym for chest, meaning a safe place to store something valuable.

The integration of the chest into colonial culture held a high degree of importance. The term “dowry chest” came from the tradition of taking the bride’s belongings and dowry (money or property) to her new home in her chest. From this tradition, the term “hope chest” evolved to describe the basic chest and the build-up of its contents for unmarried women in “hopes” it would one day become a dowry chest.

H. Imagine you are a young man or woman about to be married. What items would you want to find in a hope chest for your new life?______________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

This rocking cradle is similar to the one in the painting, *First Thanksgiving*, on page 12. Historians account for the presence of cradles as evidence that the Pilgrims intended to stay and make a new life in the new land.

Do you think this cradle is plain or fancy? Why do you think so?
___________________________________________
___________________________________________

Colonial cradle, 1650
Our American Indians

Painters, limners and lithographers drew on well-established European styles to portray two sides of North American Indians, as a primitive savage and a more romantic, enlightened noble being. These artists worked hard to show these opposing personalities in their pictures.

I. Primitive savages or enlightened noble beings?

Which of these portraits makes you think of the Indians as more primitive?

Which makes the appear more civilized and enlightened?

George Catlin (1796 – 1872) was born in Pennsylvania and specialized in portraits of Native Americans. Although trained in the practice of law, he was more fascinated with Indians having grown up listening to his mother’s stories of how she had been captured by a tribe when she was a young girl. Catlin was the noted artist who accompanied General William Clark up the Mississippi River into Indian Territory. His portfolio is on display at the Smithsonian Institute. Students will study more of Catlin’s art in Unit IV, Landscape Painters of the Wild Frontier.
The Iroquois Wampanoag (people of the dawn) were located in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. They crafted baskets, clothing, masks and blankets like the one on the warrior at left. These Native Americans greeted the first Pilgrims as they settled the area.

Native Americans did not practice art for art’s sake alone. They created works of beauty that had spiritual or cultural significance. The Turtle blanket on the right represents the Iroquois legend that the world was created on the shell of the Great Turtle. The Turtle was the only one with enough strength to support the earth on its back, says the legend. In another version, Sky woman fell to the earth and landed on a turtle’s back where she planted a garden which grew to become North American.

J. Are the colors in the Turtle Blanket complementary or analogous?___________________
Do you think the sun is represented by the yellow area through the center?______________

The Legend of the Corn Husk Doll

The Iroquois people have what they call the three sisters, the "sustainers of life". These sisters are called corn, beans, and squash. The corn Spirit was so thrilled at being one of the sustainers of life that she asked the Creator what more she could do for her people. The Creator said that a beautiful doll could be formed from the husks.

The Creator set to work to form the doll. When finished he gave the doll a beautiful face, and sent it to the children of the Iroquois people to play with, and to make them happy. The doll went from village to village playing with the children and doing whatever she could for the children.

Everywhere she went everyone would tell her how beautiful she was, so after a while she became vain. The Creator spoke to her and explained that this was not the right kind of behavior, and she agreed not to be this way anymore. The Creator told her that if she continued with this behavior he would punish her, but he would not tell her how he would do it. She agreed not to act that way again, but things went on as before.

One afternoon she was walking by a creek and she glanced into the water. As she admired herself, she couldn't help thinking how beautiful she was, because indeed she was beautiful. At this time Creator sent a giant screech owl out of the sky and it snatched her reflection from the water. When she looked again, she had no reflection. This was the punishment the Creator put upon her.

When an Iroquois Mother makes a doll for her child, she tells them this legend. This is to remind the child that it is wrong to think they are better than anyone else, and they must know that the Creator has given a special gift to everyone.

You can make your own corn doll by following the directions on the next page. Traditionally, an Indian child would fashion clothing for her doll similar to what was worn by her own culture. Hair would be made from horse hair or animal furs. The doll would have no facial features.
### How to Make A Corn Husk Doll

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Take four green (not dried) cornhusks, soak in water for 24 hours, remove and arrange them in a stack as shown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Using a small piece of string, tie the straight ends together tightly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Trim and round the edges with scissors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Turn upside down and pull long ends of husks down over the trimmed edges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Tie with string to form the &quot;head.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Take another husk, flatten it, and roll into a tight cylinder. If desired, follow the diagram below to form legs for the doll. Tie legs with small strips of husks as indicated. Finish off the doll by tying small strips of husk around the neck and waist to hide the string. Small scraps of cloth and beads may be used to dress the doll as pictured (a). A variation of a corn doll is shown in (b).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Tie each end with string. This forms the doll’s arms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Fit the arms inside of the long husks, just below the &quot;neck.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Tie with string, as shown, to form a &quot;waist.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Drape a husk around the arms and upper body in a crisscross pattern to form &quot;shoulders.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Take four or five husks, straight edges together, and arrange around waist. These form a &quot;skirt&quot; for the doll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Tie a string around the waist, and if you like, stop here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 13.  | a.  

![](image1.png)  

b.  

![](image2.png)
REFERENCES for ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

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