



Feathers and Beads: Exploring Heritage through the Mardi Gras Indians

Curriculum Unit 11.04.12, published September 2011
by Barbara Biesak Wesselman

Overview

Do you remember watching your children or yourself, for that matter, transform when a Halloween costume was put on? The costumes with masks made you totally uninhibited. Being able to choose between a superhero or a monster or your own alter-ego, costumes transform the wearer. If you are an actor, costuming is a part of your life. It helps to transcend the here and now, brings you to another place or helps you become another entity. For the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans, masking, the wearing of Mardi Gras Indian suits, enables them to connect with ancestors long gone and enter the spirit world, an act vital to their heritage and culture. It is also a way to stay connected to each other and share with others. Mardi Gras Indians are African Americans from New Orleans who dress up for Carnival (celebration leading up to Lent) in elaborate handmade costumes. Their traditions are rooted in Caribbean and African folk art. With their costumes they are honoring the Native Americans who harbored their ancestors, many whom were fleeing slaves. It is an art form worthy of and finally gaining attention around the world. This unit is about the costumes, craft and understanding of the Mardi Gras Indians.

By focusing on Costume Design, this will be an interesting unit for design students, cultural studies, American history, art and practical math calculations. Our costume unit will cover the use of technical sewing skills as well as story telling through bead work and the effectiveness of color in the three dimensional costumes. We will look at how a tangible can represent an intangible and what makes it so. What is worthy of the designation: "Living Treasure"? We will explore New Orleans and the factors that make something eligible to be designated an intangible heritage site following UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) protocol. Many years of research undertaken by UNESCO on the function and values of cultural expressions and practices have opened the door to new approaches to the understanding, protection and respect of the cultural heritage of humanity. This living legacy, known as intangible heritage, provides each bearer of such expressions a sense of identity and continuity, in so far as he or she takes ownership of them and constantly recreates them. As a driving force of cultural diversity, living heritage is very fragile. In recent years, it has received international recognition and its safeguarding has become one of the priorities of international cooperation thanks to UNESCO's leading role in the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. (UNESCO.org)

As we discuss the intangible heritage and culture of New Orleans, we learn the intangible heritage of Native Americans and their right to keep ceremony and traditions confidential for tribal preservation. We will look at the economy behind heritage and see how tourism has had an impact. We will discuss whether Mardi Gras Indian suits should be copyrighted, whether they are works of art and whether "selling" them degrades that art. Determining the link or differences between fashion and art, in legal terms is an issue currently being explored. Counterfeit Chic founded by Susan Scafidi, Fordham Law Professor specializing in Fashion Law, is bringing to light the legalities of copyright and copying and I believe this will ultimately raise the issue of this type of scenario. At his last Jazz festival before his death prominent MGI Tootie Montana spoke in an interview about the resentment of others using photographs of him and publishing them for profit.

The parade that New Orleans is most noted for is separate from that which I am discussing here. When you look at advertising of New Orleans the historic structures of the French Quarter, the festive colorful party of the Mardi Gras parades and the Mardi Gras Indians are all there. The history of the parading and the real significance of the Black Indians can't be learned in brochures. These people have held this tradition and art form for hundreds of years.

To understand costumes, costuming, masking, carnival, parades, Mardi Gras, Sunday's, feathers, beads and color I am exploring the culture of a diverse group of people, rich in tradition. In an interview by Leslie King Hammond, she states that "craft is the center of all things", "in African American tradition, embracing the craft is an American story; how America was built. ¹ It's reclaiming these things that made this country what it was, the crafts and traditions." But, most importantly that "all of the stories of the people reflect back to the ancestral traditions of all of the global cultures", and I couldn't agree more. Of the craft, Cherice Harrison-Nelson, Big Queen of the Guardians of the Flame tribe and founder of the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame, says, "When you participate in any indigenous tradition, it's almost like a spiritual calling. So you do it from a place somewhere deep in your soil and spirit. There's a spiritual need to do it, so you find a way to do it out of no way." "Harrison-Nelson cautions that it's not enough to simply learn the skills of beading or sewing an Indian suit. You have to become immersed in the community. 'To be a Mardi Gras Indian is a way of life'." ²

Rationale

I have never been to New Orleans. Until I started my research I thought of New Orleans just as a big party place with great Jazz, amazing fun costumes, divine cuisine and Mardi Gras. My quest has been to explore and understand what the feathers, beads and the exquisite craftsmanship of the amazing costumes are all about. Heritage can and should be introduced to students in all areas of study. This is an area so rich in cultures and traditions that ooze out in the music, the food, the architecture but especially through the Mardi Gras costumes. As a colleague recently asked, "What can I do to get the attention of the Glitter Group"? Those students whose interests is piqued only through glitter and pizzaz. This unit will address what is tangible and what is not in an art form that has big rough men sitting around sewing "suits" that are so detailed and glorious there are examples of them in the Smithsonian Institute. This sewing, the art of creation, has replaced blooded with beauty through feathers and beads.

I want my students to first understand the diversity of New Orleans and it's importance. It was the first place in America that African Americans could own property. It has the first integrated church, still in existence. We will do that through selected readings in *Mardi Gras, Gumbo and Zydeco*: Marcia Gaudet, *Why New Orleans*

Matters: Tom Piazza, *All Saints*: Brenda Marie Osbey, and *Mardi Gras Indians* by Michael Smith, *Cities of The Dead*: Joseph Roach, as well as watching You Tube videos of street personalities and performances, along with the background information presented in this unit. Using the Common Core Standards for Literacy in History / Social Studies and Science and Technology, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas # 7, # 8, and # 9. Gathering relevant information and drawing evidence through analysis, reflection and research, will aid in the exploration of this rich culture and lead to discussions on culture and heritage. In addition students will create a representation of a chosen culture applicable to a school production, personal heritage or an area of interest (including Mardi Gras Indians) in varying forms of three dimensional design.

Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes inherited from past generations, presently maintained and bestowed for the future. Preservation or conservation is the act of keeping heritage alive. Intangible heritage are non physical aspects of a culture, social customs, behavior, social values, traditions, costumes, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, artistic expression and others forms of human activity.

Background

I teach at a public magnet program for the arts. Dance, music, visual arts and theatre arts are the interests of the majority of our students. Apparel Development and Costume design are my areas of speciality. I have learned and grown into my role over ten years through countless (literally) costumes and theatre productions, four "Fashion Tours of New York City", ten runway shows and a recent show at The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Charlotte, North Carolina where my students designed and built garments inspired by a piece from the museum's collection (the culmination of my first Charlotte Teachers Institute unit-The Influence of Modernism on Fashion-2010).³

My school has an audition process and is open to all Middle and High School students in our district. Approximately 1,000 students attend. There are 13 shuttle stops for students needing transportation (two years ago we had district wide busing involving 32 buses arriving with students daily).Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools has more than 133,600 students in kindergarten through 12th grade in 178 schools. Our school population is: 43.7% economically disadvantaged, 71.4 % limited English proficiency, 46.4% Black, 41% White, 5.3% Hispanic, 5% Multi-cultural, 2.2% Asian and .4% American Indian. My particular program attracts 92% female. 92% of Mardi Gras Indians are male (Joe Roach), and interesting contrast.

Costume Design students are required to research the background of a play, interpret the characters, understand their social status, explore colors and their effect on the characters role as well as the textiles and adornments used on costumes. The Apparel curriculum introduces similar concepts with the exception of: character interruption. With this unit I will try to show the cultural and artistic relevance of the craft creating costumes for the parades of the Mardi Gras Indians. I will present my students the opportunity of creating something that is meaningful to their culture using the model of the people of New Orleans. Lessons are adaptable across curriculums.

Masking hides ones essence within a socially acceptable way. What Jean Baidrillard (French sociologist) suggests is that costumes have the power to influence not only contemporary society or fashion but also history. The significance for costume in fashion and power can be understood in three main ways:-the power of costume to influence society and history,-the power of costume to influence fashion,-the power of costume

to function as art, where roles and conventional boundaries are tested. ⁴ We can also look at masking as an important form of self expression.

Turkey and chicken feathers were first used as Mardi Gras costume decoration. Beads, feathers, velvet, satin, sequins and gems make up Mardi Gras Indian suits today. We will look into some of the oldest parade participants and compare and contrast differences in costumes, techniques and leadership. Every night for ten days before Mardi Gras, parades take place with different groups being focused. The celebration culminates with Carnival (good bye to the flesh) Day. It is the big blow-out before lent. At twelve o'clock midnight the celebration abruptly ends. Period. Crowds are cleared, streets are cleaned. The suits; "Invoke a heightened, otherworldly consciousness and an alternative experience of power." ⁵

Apparel and Costume Design use textiles. Textiles / fabrics represent the threads that are woven together as the foundation. Adding style and details create the effect. I will relate this to the culture of a society and its people. Mardi Gras Indian (MGI) costumes can weight up to 150 pounds, cost up to \$10,000, and are made of beads, feathers, sequins, jewels, satin and velvet. They are assembled, sewn by the skilled hands of a black man whose occupation might be, mechanic, postal server or dish washer. Learning about New Orleans is "like pulling a string on a sweater", stated Tom Smith author of: *The Crescent City Lynchings*, in a recent phone interview as we discussed my experiences of discovery. Relating this culture and especially that of the Mardi Gras Indians within the realm of textiles and quilts is so appropriate.

I planned to focus of this unit on New Orleans culture and costumes without addressing hurricane Katrina, before and after, since the after seems to have overshadowed the before. For months I have been trying to interview our school custodian, Mr. Johnson who came to Charlotte, North Carolina, being forced out of New Orleans because of Katrina. "Because of Katrina", it's said as naturally as "9-11." A part of American history; and what is history but a record of the past that is left to be discussed, analyzed, taught and learned from others (hopefully). It's what we do from here that really matters. When I finally pinned Mr. Johnson down before school ended he apologized to me but said he would not be able to talk with me because this time of the year (early June) was too painful for him. The beginning of hurricane season has him fighting depression and breaking down easily at news of natural disasters around the country, especially if they involve water. He stated that the memories come alive this time of the year and though he will never forget, he struggles to put the memories aside. When I told him I wanted to only discuss his annual return for Mardi Gras and his knowledge of costumes and the Indians, he eased up. When I mentioned Tootie Montana-he lit up and the information I sought was no longer threatening.

With this, I realized that I have to address Katrina. I've found through that it is the essence of what I am seeking. Survival, building, rebuilding, a blending of people in a city unlike any other. People rebuilt bead by bead and the city continues, six years later, to weave together its foundation. Music and craft brought the city back to life. The struggle continues as re-gentrification threatens to change forever what was once there as the poor are forced further from their homes and homeland. After Katrina is the city and the people now. The cultural will survive, with changes. Like the housekeeper from Peru, Monica told me one afternoon, "It is the tourists that want things to remain the same, our people believe that culture grows and changes with the people and the times". (Monica was the president and remains active in "Somos Peru", an organization of Peruvian people in New Haven Connecticut whose mission is to share the culture of Peru through dance and music) and I unfortunately do not have her last name.) ⁶ Mardi Gras Indians exemplify the soul of this city. Through beauty, determination, craft, artistic excellence and healthy competition.

The History

The Creole (black influence/French heritage) people came to the area, intermarried with the Native Americans and began a blended culture that has flourished for hundreds of years. The area also became a slave port, with Creole people owning slaves. Sunday afternoons were a time when the slaves were allowed to socialize with the Haitians and Creoles (the free people of color) in Congo Square, today's Louis Armstrong Park. They shared rhythms and beats. It should be noted that the city was built by the Creole people before slaves. It was a city built by free men of color. New Orleans had more free men of color than the rest of America before the Civil War. The segregation of races began after reconstruction.

Congo Square, currently called Louis Armstrong Park, is where African slaves were first brought for sale in New Orleans. Law mandated (Black Code of 1685) that slaves could not gather, except for religious days. The forced Catholic religion resulted in the mixing of spiritual beliefs that resulted in secretive ceremonies. Free men of color (mostly Haitians) and slaves gathered each Sunday at Congo Square where they were allowed to interact. They played their homeland drum rhythms. European brass music could be heard in the distance. Combined with the drum rhythms-American Jazz was born. The music and chanting became a way to communicate.

For over 150 years in New Orleans the African American people have been using music, food and craft to come together and survive. New Orleans was Indian territory. Slaves fled through the area and were helped by the Native Americans. They intermarried, learned each others customs and cultures while growing to appreciate one another. Spanish, French and Polynesian peoples inhabited the area. Eventually Europeans drove some of the native peoples into the swamp lands which resulted in rich folk lore, cuisine, and a new interruption of Catholicism/Christianity making Voodoo a powerful belief. Cultures were woven together, bead by bead, piece by piece, like a quilt of humanity

The French brought Mardi Gras to America in 1699; it had been celebrated in Paris since the Middle Ages. French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville set up camp 60 miles south of what is today New Orleans and named the spot Point du Mardi Gras. During the 1700s masked balls were popular before Lent. Spanish rule stopped that and banned mask wearing. In 1827 masking was legalized again. Mardi Gras masking was thought of negatively in the 1840's-50's due to the street violence that arose while people were masked. A group of white men formed an organization to oversee parade activities, The Comus organization resulted and coined the term "krewes." They started the custom of a secret carnival society, themed parades, beauty, floats and mythological characters that tradition has continued through today. The white Mardi Gras celebrations and parades that are widely publicized are not the focus of this paper. When ordered to allow blacks to participate (1992), many krewes stopped their activities and no longer participated. Those main street parades are a huge tourist draw to the city and today involve all people. The history and activities of Comus are well documented, and I encourage interested people to further explore this organization.

In contrast, gangs, tribes or groups of Indians (African American men) make costumes (or suits) to share their stories and traditions. The making can take up to a year, the sharing occurs during the ten day celebration of Mardi Gras. It is not well publicized. Those "in the know" get up early and look for the Indians. It is not Main Street staged. Suits may also be seen during the annual Jazz and Heritage festival on a designated stage and once or twice more during the year during specific celebrations. Some hire out for parties, but I will not address that aspect in detail. Their beautiful suits change from year to year. There is a science to beading, the various sizes, what works best in which areas, what will fit. It is painting with beads.

The design is conceived and the beading starts at the center of the panel. They are works of art. Materials are also recycled by disassembling the suit. Damien Roberts (photographer, builder and New Orleans friend) shared the story of visiting a Mardi Gras Indian while he was working on his suit. The house was a small cottage, not very well maintained, but clean. Inside there was a table, two chairs and a bed. That was it. That and thousands of feathers, beads and sewing supplies. The beauty and value of the supplies was a stark contrast to the living conditions. Tribes will hold fish fries and raise money in a number of ways. Recent recognition of the art has resulted in some available grant monies and display of suits after their use. Children grow up learning that supplies for suits are a priority in their households. Many do without for the sake of supplies. The local power company is known for cutting some slack for some Chiefs as Carnival gets near, bills come second to beads, feathers, sequins and jewels! The shift has gone from guns and revenge to the competition of patience, sequins and hems. It is no accident that competitive stitchery, beadwork and opulent adornment have edged out violence in the confrontations between rival gangs." (Cities... p.206-) Some of the Mardi Gras Indians have begun filing for copyright protection for their suits, worth thousands of dollars in glass beads, rhinestones, feathers and velvet and hundreds of hours of sewing. What may be most tricky of all is pushing the Indians themselves to start thinking about the legal and financial dimensions of something they have always done out of tradition. In American copyright law, clothing designs usually cannot be protected because they are more functional than aesthetic.

Indian culture was never, ever meant to make any money. The issue is exploitation and being taken for granted. "The message they share has roots as deep as memory, but it must reinvent itself a new every year in hosanna of feathers, beadwork, gesture and song. In Japan such messages would be revered as Living National Treasures. In New Orleans, they are still harassed by police for parading without permits." ⁷

Copyright laws are being perused by some tribes to keep outsiders from profiting from their hard work. Indians welcome personal photos being taken but do not want books and videos used for profit being able to "sell" their images. The suits are being categorized as sculptures because clothing cannot be copyrighted. Suits worn are not the primary clothing but cover clothing and extend in all directions beyond normal clothing. They are dimensional. Suits use to be burned each year, today that is rare. Some are donated to museums, sold to private collectors or used for private ceremonies and parties. Native American are noted for their beautiful and elaborate bead work. The Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Washington has great examples of beaded bags that tell stories, as do the breast plates of the MGI suits.

Contour beading requires first sewing the design onto a surface then the background beads are filled in creating a swirling effect that gives dimension. Sometimes the pictures are sketches onto the surface then the beads applied. A heavy canvas must be used to stand up to the weight of the beads. A variety of techniques are used to achieve the designs. Single beads, strands of multiple beads, then secured, the type and color of the beads, the thickness of the thread all attribute to the skill needed to accomplish these magnificent design panels. Designs are applied within a certain area to a large canvas. They must be backed up with a stabilizing fabric so the canvas does not fold. Once completed the extra canvas surface is either trimmed or folded back for additional stability. Plumes and boas are added along with jewels and sequins embellishments. The panels can cover the front breast plate area, the back, legs and arms. Heavy duty threads and needles are needed to complete this work. Fingers are pricked raw. The work is hard. Most chiefs do the work by themselves, others are helped by apprentice youth or other tribe members. Headpieces also display beaded storied images and elaborate plumes of vibrant meaningful color. Rhinestones and other embellishments may be applied with prong devices. People need help getting into their suits and the techniques of dressing and balancing to wear the suit requires precision and expert engineering.

This group, so down trodden and continually harassed by police, hold the key to a rich and intriguing cultural heritage of New Orleans. "Kneeling before graves, he asks the spirits of the past to enter his body so that he can become their living vessel, joining his soul with theirs as he takes to the streets. Later, at sunrise, he emerges in full costume, calling out and waking up the Treme neighborhood with his group ... which has followed the Carnival tradition for decades." ⁸ "Poverty and discrimination are social pressures that sociologists and historians will cite as metaphorical lumps of coal that produced diamonds like social aid and pleasure clubs and Mardi Gras Indian tribes. At the same time, those conditions produced social instability and violent crime. Social Clubs were established to lend support. Traces of those elements can be found even in the cultural jewels." ⁹

The Mardi Gras parades started when a Russian Prince visited New Orleans and the people wanted to impress him, so they had a parade and threw trinkets to the crowd to create excitement. Mardi Gras begins two weeks before lent. There are ten days of parades, all of different themes chosen by the krewes. The events end with Carnival (good bye to flesh) Day, it's the big blow out before lent begins. Rex is the King of the Carnival- a Cumos creation. The Blacks answered back with the creation of the Zulu's. That white designation with black faces and grass skirts making fun of the 1920 s minstrel black faces. Most gangs are now known as Tribes, though a few still hold onto the gang designation. It is widely seen as an outlet for the oppressed and impoverished. A way to honor the past and to let off steam. Such an unusual celebration of community, creative imagination and international carnivalesque-all within the revolutionary "devil may care", "in your face", "anything can happen" context of the New Orleans Mardi Gras-must have been an inspiring occasion for the black leaders, and a nightmarish vision for the white supremacists." (p.20 Mardi Gras, Gumbo and Zydeco)

In 1885, along with the Cotton Expedition, the Buffalo Bill Wild West show came to New Orleans. The Wild West show stayed through the winter, long after the Expedition left. There are a few version of how the Mardi Gras Indians came to be. One belief is that they were inspired by the Wild West Show. This excerpt from the local paper reports on its impact; "Buffalo Bills' wild West Show caused great excitement for amusement seekers whenever it performed its representation of 'Life Among the Red Man and Road Agents on the Plains and Prairies" In 1884-85, the show stayed in New Orleans through the winter. Cody (Buffalo Bill) found Anne Oakley when her husband brought her in to audition. Chief Gall, the great Sioux war chief was the special guest of the Pawnee and Sioux Indians who appeared in the show. These ceremonies were noteworthy since the Sioux and Pawnee Indians were natural enemies. The Sioux viewed the Pawnee as mercenaries for services as scouts for the U.S. Army. Gall or Poza was a war chief of the Hun-papa Sioux. He was the adapted younger brother of Chief Sitting Bull. Gall had been responsible for turning back Major Marcus Reno's surprise attack on the Indian village of the Battle of Little Big Horn 1876. ¹⁰

More widely accepted is the belief that Mardi Gras Indian culture is an expression of Black resistance to white supremacist environment. The Indian represented the warrior spirit that resisted European domination. The Maroon Spirit is the mixing of Indian and Black living in the swamps and forests too difficult to colonize. Local tribes in the area offered refuge to runaway slaves forming bonds of friendship and marriage. Parading in Mardi Gras means to enter the spirit world of possession. Dancing with a spirit is not just dancing but being embodied by a spirit Indian suits vary in style whether from uptown or downtown. Downtown Indians have a more abstract sculptural style of dress. Uptown suits are more reflective of the Native American Indian look. The differences are less obvious today than in the past. "But, it's complicated. The history of Mardi Gras come out of a history of shared oppression and marginality between the Black and Native residents, or some stories point to a desire to honor Native communities who took in escaped slaves." ¹¹ Mardi Gras costumes vary greatly for the whites and blacks. To this day the whites (krewes) costumes reflect the costumes of the 1800s

royals. The Indians, African Americans, Native Americans, Haitian, Creole gangs, now known as Tribes (though a few gangs still go by that title) began their tradition of costumes using turkey and chicken feathers to honor the Native Americans who welcomed them and shared their culture and traditions. To honor the American Plains Indians, feathers a common adornment in Nigeria and beadwork reflective of the Native American craft, are most prominently used. This art form and process has been documented for over one hundred years. Before then very little documentation of African American activity can be readily found.

The Indians of New Orleans, the tribes that mask, (their are between 30-40 tribes) are a strong culture born from extreme oppression of the Black resistance to a white supremacy. Masking is the ultimate way to self expression. It is traditional to wear on Mardi Gras Day. Wear one instead of a costume, or with a costume. For one day you can be anonymous. Many Hollywood celebrities come to New Orleans and mask because for one day they can be truly free. Masks can express your inner secretive personality or your or your later ego. That kind of freedom is why people come to Mardi Gras. Masks (and costumes) are also used at the parades and in the French Quarter to get attention from the float riders and the balcony revelers, so they will throw more stuff if they like your costume. Couples often color coordinate or deliberately contrast. Groups of friends can all wear the same mask. Men dress as women and women dress as men.

New Orleans and Mardi Gras are synonymous with a good time, partying, dancing and music in the streets. It's a colorful celebration unlike any other. Even after Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the city, the parade resumed without a delay. Hurricane Katrina displaced so many people, especially in the poor neighborhoods that Carnival is a time for people to go home for a visit. Locals tribes and gangs worry that much of the tradition and understanding will be lost. Barnes says, "They come home but its not the same as being home. For the young ones coming up, they're not going to have the same viewpoint of it because they just come in for a day visit or a weekend visit. It's a visit for them." ¹² After the storm many tribe members were scattered all over the country, for their homes were in the hardest hit areas. However they have rallied. Those still local didn't miss a beat although most lost all of their supplies and many lost suits from previous years, they made their suits and masked for Mardi Gras for the first celebration after the storm. They continue to march from their spiritual home, 7th Ward those the area is still in the aftermath of devastation and walk the path to honor the Chief of Chiefs, Tootie Montana. Treme is their center and they gather under the Clairborne Street bridge, a bridge built over their territory.

Parades became a venue for local gangs to settle scores and the violence was deadly. The most famous Big Chief was Tootie Montana. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he turned parades from violence into a competition of craft and beauty. Simple chicken and turkey feathers were replaced by elegant ostrich feathers. Crowns, breast plates, entire suits were (and continue to be) hand made works of art, beaded and feathered to follow themes and tell stories. People replaced the violence with admiration, to protect the beauty of their costumes.

It became "strut your stuff," rather than kill each another." Contemporary Big Chief's point out that the object of the confrontations now is to show excellence in costume and performance style, to make the enemy Chief "Bow" by superior displays." ¹³ Craftsmanship and beauty continue to be the most significant element of the parades along with pride and status for individuals and Tribes. "For the urban underclassmen in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, violence is one of the few forms of excess expenditure available in lieu of money. People spend their own and other's blood. For this kind of investment, however, Mardi Gras Indian suits offer themselves a substitute. In the year of exhaustive labor that it takes them to make them, their designers 'sweat blood'." ¹⁴ It is noted that, "The Mardi Gras Indians exemplify the creolization at the heart of the Pan-Caribbean and North American influences converging to create a fresh aesthetic is similar to

what occurred in the West Indies. Although variations appear in Toronto, Brooklyn, London, Trinidad, St. Kitts-Nevis, Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, Bermuda and the Bahamas, nowhere else is it accompanied by quite the same musical refrains, aesthetic form, and artistic technique that characterized New Orleans' Black Indians".¹⁵ Music and dance have set the Mardi Gras Indians apart from any other suitings in the world.

Tootie Montana was the only Chief of Chiefs of New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians, Tootie received the National Endowment for the Arts Lifetime Honors in 1987. He was the first Mardi Gras Indian to become a National Heritage Fellow. The NEA site notes "his individual artistry is recognized by all. He is a gifted costume designer, a brilliant dancer and song leader, and an eloquent artist and director of his group. Folk Art is defined as "self taught, non-institution sponsored, seemingly craft centered artisans".¹⁶ He traces his tradition back to 1880, when his great uncle, Chief Becate founded the Yellow Pocahontas Tribe. The fantasy-filled interplay between the African-American cultural studies and American Indian motifs. The "Spyboy" runs ahead of the Chief to scout for other tribes and signals back to the "Flagboy who carries the tribes banner and relays signals to the Chief. Earlier times, tribes were known as gangs, there use to be physical trouble, often bloodshed. Damien Roberts has attended Mardi Gras Indian parades for more than thirty years and recalls being behind a group of people on three separate occasions when someone was shot. Montana is credited as being the one who changed the direction of the parading Indians for the better. He is known as "The Prettiest-ever! With his guidance, the gangs became more tribe oriented, working together for the good of the reputation of the group to create the most beautiful suit at the parade. The focus became beauty rather than settling a score.

March 19, 2005, a celebration of Mardi Gras Indians celebrating was broken up by the New Orleans police department. This St. Joseph's Night celebration has gone on for at least a century. The Indians either had to take off their costumes or face arrest. Parades require a permit and even though this is thought of as a tradition, in 2005 the police force felt it necessary to break up the gathering. There has been tension for many years between the New Orleans police force and the Indians. Perhaps years of violence amongst the gangs or years of misunderstanding by the police force and others in New Orleans, whatever the reason not everyone values their contribution to the area. Tootie Montana was 82 years old. Along with a group of Indians, he attended a special City Council meeting to address police harassment. He approached the podium and spoke, "I want this to stop". With that said, he had a massive heart attack and died. It was a powerful and symbolic message from the man who was "The Prettiest", who changed the direction of a potentially violent tradition to one of craftsmanship, admiration, healthy competition and living heritage.

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina just missed New Orleans. Rains and winds pounded the city. Although a mandatory evacuation was ordered, many residents stayed in their homes or gathered at the sanctioned Super Dome. The aftermath of the hurricane caused the known faulty levee system to fail. The city is literally below sea level in a bowl like configuration and has always been at great risk. The flooding was unprecedented. Thousands of people were stranded and killed, billions of dollars in damage occurred. The devastation effected the poorer, minority sections of the city. People who could literally not afford to leave. Although the faulty levee system was a known factor, the city never devised an evacuation plan for its citizens. As an aside, animal shelters in the area had a plan and were able to successfully evacuate and maintain those animals. The response of the federal government, or lack of response, as people waited dying in the Dome and on their roof tops still resonates anger throughout the country. As the situation continues to be evaluated, many people remain displaced and in temporary shelters 6 years later. It is truly a travesty in the chronicles of our countries history.

Indians

Larry Bannock - Big Chief of Golden Star Hunter worked his way up the ranks through the tribe to the top spot. He left for Baton Rouge as Katrina approached to find his home destroyed. Everything was gone, but he had taken two suits with him so he was able to rebuild and redesign and mask for it is something that could not be taken away from him regardless. Even with the hardships suffered suits were as elaborate as ever, that first parade after the storm. It is a matter of pride for the Indians. Bannock believes, "This is our way of surviving. This is what we love. We don't come and go. We are Mardi Gras Indians until the last one. I live Mardi Gras Indians 365 days a year. My Indian suit and this culture is all I have." ¹⁷ In a discussion with Joseph Roach, Bannock explains that the costumes have coded meanings, sometimes apparent and of the inspiration, "The map has to be in your heart." Quoted in a Mardi Gras New Orleans website, Bannock calls the Indians the parade that white people don't see. ¹⁸ The ceremonial procession is loose, the parade is not scheduled for a particular time or route that is up to the Big Chief.

Bo Dollis is the recipient of the 2011 National Endowment for the Arts Lifetime Honors. He's been credited with sharing the cultures and traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians. In 1957 he masked for the first time with The Golden Arrows, not telling his family of his involvement with the Indians. He made his suit at someone else's house and told his folks he was going to a parade. Hours later his father discovered him, having recognized his son in the street, underneath a crown of feathers. Bo Dollis' name is virtually synonymous with the Wild Magnolias Mardi Gras Indian Tribe. He is clearly the most popular Indian Chief (chosen in 1964) in New Orleans, with everybody wanting to see him in his hand-crafted suit on Mardi Gras or St. Joseph's Day. Bo has been a legend almost from the beginning, because he could improvise well and sing with a voice as sweet as Sam Cooke, but rough and streetwise, with an edge that comes from barroom jam sessions and leading hundreds of second-lining dancers through the streets at Carnival time.

In 1975, Dollis and Monk Boudreaux, Chief of the Golden Eagles, recorded James "Sugarboy" Crawford's 1954 R&B hit "Jackomo, Jackomo". There is contrast in their vocal phrasing, and each swings the story line at a slightly different pace; nonetheless, the unity of spirit shines through. You can hear the closeness of these two childhood friends, the only two professional Chiefs performing in New Orleans. In 1970, they appeared at the first New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Shortly afterwards, they collaborated on the classic Mardi Gras song "Handa Wanda." Seldom do they sing together in practice.

The Wild Magnolias and The Golden Eagles have taken Bo Dollis and Monk Boudreaux from the ghettos and brought them to places like Carnegie Hall in New York City, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC, London, Nice and Berlin. Where ever they go, listeners will hear an authentic music to which New Orleans owes so much.

Victor Harris-once a member of Tootie Montana's tribe, Victor became the Big Chief of the Spirit of the Fy Yi Yi tribe after the split. Depressed over the separation, he prayed to the spirits for understanding and came out of his house chanting and yelling Fy Yi Yi, and thus the name of his tribe. The Museum of Arts and Design holds one of his costumes on display. It is made of cardboard, cloth, feathers, beads and sequins. His gang still refers to themselves as a gang and pride themselves as a loud, disturbing gang of Indians in a sort of in your face display. There are many interesting men who mask and students will have the opportunity to discover as much as they can about them. We have connections in our school with ties to New Orleans.

Crowns, breast plates, entire suits were (and continue to be) hand made works of art, beaded and feathered

to follow themes and tell stories. People actually replaced the violence with admiration, to protect the beauty of their costumes. Craftsmanship and beauty continue to be the most significant element of the parades along with pride and status for individuals and Tribes. Colors represent meaning; purple- justice, green- faith, gold- power. These are the three colors associated with Mardi Gras.

Indian Red Chant; I've got a Big Chief, Big Chief, Big Chief of the Nation Wild,
wild creation He won't bow down, down on the ground Oh how I love to hear him call
Indian Red When I throw my net in the river I will take only what I need Just
enough for me and my lover

Through the analysis of chants we can look deeper into the secret culture and imagine some of their spiritual nuisances. "The masks not just that we put on for others but that we put on others, the surprises that lurk so often around the corners of someone's seemingly straightforward identity. It is a lesson that one has to learn continually in New Orleans. Things are always more complex than they seem. The is true of any city, but in New Orleans it has its special flavors, as does everything in the crescent city. I probably could have learned it elsewhere, but I would have learned it more slowly, and wouldn't have been as much fun." ¹⁹ While attempting to make the unfamiliar familiar, I have come to feel familiar with the uniqueness of this city and it's quirks. I no longer wonder what is so special about New Orleans. It's the quirks. It's a place where each story told, each subject studied leads only to the desire for more understanding. It's an endless book of beauty, heritage, culture, craft and history. It forces one to address race. It forces one to appreciate. It forces one to hope. It forces one to be amazed.

Presenting this material and using the music of the tribes I will immerse the students in the spirit of the people as we explore this topic because the suits and the Indians are only complete with their music and chants.

Teaching Strategies

Explain the strategies that influence fashion: Social and Cultural, Religious, Historical and Economic. People in societies have been identifiable for thousands of years by the clothing they wear. Their customs, culture and heritage acquired over the years has influenced clothing / costumes. After the study of understanding fashion, through written and performance criteria students will research and document students will an influence related directly to their personal or chosen heritage. Utilizing Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects 6-12, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas a report will be written based on rubric assessment. Performance product will require producing a beaded panel that tells a story of their influence.

Materials Needed: text, you Tube videos, New Orleans natives, beads, feathers, sequins, canvas, sewing notions, miscellaneous embellishments.

Instruction: Understanding Fashion unit taught, basic sewing skills demonstrated.

Differentiation: Appropriate for all levels, degree of expertise and complexity will be varied.

Objective: The understanding of the Influences that effect clothing and the significance of the Mardi Gras Indians costumes. The creation of a three dimensional product that relates a part of the students heritage. To

give students and understanding of their ancestors experiences and history. Record information they have learned and express their informed opinions in written form.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge: 7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Range of Writing: 10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects 6-12 - Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: 7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge: 7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and over reliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

9. Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Range of Writing: 10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Subjects Covered: Apparel and Costume Design, Social Studies, American History, Writing

Duration: 4-7, 90 minutes block sessions, depending on the level of the students.

Recommended photographs to view: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/demian-roberts>

Please contact me for specific outlines and detailed lesson plans; barbara.wesselmancms.k12.nc.us or brbwesselmail.com.

I also recommend the review of all other curriculum units written under this topic: The Big Easy; The Intangible Heritage of New Orleans.

Students will employ skills of critical thinking and problem solving when translating their design into a dimensional product through their chosen application.

Day 1-Introduce students to the Mardi Gras Indians through the history of New Orleans explained in this unit. Present slide show about the city and the Mardi Gras Indians. Begin conversation about heritage and culture. Ask students to explore the following questions:

What do you know about your families' background? How far back can you go with historical information?

Do you talk with your parents about your ancestors? Do you talk with your Grandparents?

Select two stories you are willing to share. Prepare to share your heritage stories in class. Document that information. Each student will have four minutes to present.

Day 2-Heritage sharing day. Students will share a significant story from their heritage with the class, in four minutes. If the student elects to share further, questions may be asked and answered for two minutes. Oral Assessment explained and used.

Student will think about how to illustrate their story. I will use pictures of my quilt square created during the Yale National Initiative as one example of putting memories down on fabric. We will also view pictures of the Mardi Gras Indian suits as well as other creations that tell a story.

Students will bring drawing in the next class. Technique Rubric will be explained.

Day 3-Teacher will present images of Mardi Gras Indians suits (some included), historical bead works, tapestries, and canvas art to interrupt. Students will share their images with classmates for input and begin revisions. We will discuss various methods of creative expression and students will choose a method to complete. All students will be required to complete some bead work or dimensional element that required sewing.

Because sewing is a skill and an art, I would expect that the degree of difficulty will vary based on experience.

Day 4-Distribute materials and review techniques, allow time for the students to begin.

Students will have three weeks to complete their project. A percentage of class time will be given for student work and questions during the next 4 class periods. Technique Rubric will be explained and used.



With Permission from Demian Roberts- Mill Creek Studios, David Montana



With permission from photographer: Demian Roberts- Mill Creek Road Studios, David Montana

Oral Report Assessment

Score	4	3	2	1
Organization	Topic has a well presented purpose, beginning, middle and end.	Topic contains a least 2 of the following: beginning, middle, end	Little is introduced on the purpose of this topic	Unconnected topic
	strong supporting evidence	most information supported with strong supported evidence	little supporting evidence presented	no supporting evidence presented
	presenter is interested in the topic and has made the connection	some interest is apparent	little interest is present	no interest is present
Content	report documents specific examples- at least 5	report documents some specific examples- at least 3	report has weak supporting examples- 1	there is no support for the topic examples given
	5 or more choices of findings presented	3 or more choices of findings presented	1 choice of findings presented	no choices were apparent in the presentation
Presentation	Well presented with clear focus and conclusion	Well presented but no apparent focus or conclusion	Little focus or understanding	Neither focus or conclusion was present
Totals:				

Technique Rubric

Score	5- Excellent	4- Good Start	3- Getting There	2- needs Improvement
Design	Design represents heritage story well	Design has elements of story present	Vague representation	Not clear
	beautiful and unique	unique	presentable	not visually appealing
Materials	Materials used are challenging for students' level	Student has worked with these materials before, but design implementation is good	Materials are basic and present no challenge or new skill development	no variety of materials
Application	Hand sewing done correctly, stitches even and secure	Most stitches are correctly applied	All stitches vary	Noticeable incorrect stitches
Neatness	Design is visually appealing	Most work is done neatly	Obviously rushed and messy	Sloppy
Innovation	techniques and design- superior	good techniques	little new learned or attempted	nothing new attempted
Score Total:				

Key Terms

Tootie Montana-Mardi Gras Indian, made major innovations in the use of abstract geometric three-dimension figures and representational designs. His father taught him this skill using a egg carton as his base.The only designated Chief of Chiefs.

Downtown Indians-abstract sculptural style of dress

Uptown Indians-more "Indian" style (the difference in the styles from uptown to downtown is less obvious and distinct today)

Flour de lis; stylized lily, symbol of French Monarchy, symbol of New Orleans

St. Augusta Church; first integrated church in America

Treme-1st Place in America that Blacks owned property, just outside of the French Quarter, New Orleans, Louisiana

Octoroon-A person with one eight African ancestry

Second Line-most often associated with funerals, the second line follows the funeral procession and dances and ultimately sets the mood

Mardi Gras-the feast before the fast, "Fat Tuesday" the last day for Catholics to indulge before Ash Wednesday and Lent

Super Sunday: St. Joseph's Day

Backstreet Cultural Museum-

Masking-for Mardi Gras Indians this means to designing and creating new costumes yearly

Krewe-whites in charge of difference themed parades

Indians-African American's in New Orleans who dress in elaborate suits influenced by the Native American, for Mardi Gras

Cajan-Caucasians moved by the British from Canada, Catholics

Creole-black, influenced French heritage

Uptown-North of Canal Street

Downtown-East of Canal Street along the Mississippi River, down-river

Carnival-Public celebrations before lent

Rex-1872 krewe of Rex was introduced, also began the tradition of purple, gold and green as official

Jazz funeral-A distinguished aspect of New Orleans culture, a funeral with music and second line dancers

Zulu King-Introduced in 1809, Zulu King was the black peoples equal to parade Rex

Heritage-The customs and traditions passed down from predecessor

Thank you to Joseph Roach, Yale National fellows: Mika Cade, Amanda Davis-Holloway, Marilyn Dempsey, Matthew Kelly, Andrew Martinek, Patrizia Mauti, Molly Myers, Shanedra Nowell, Barbara Prillaman, Stephanie Shaudel, and Jeffry Weathers, and Damiem Roberts, Daryl Johnson, Tom Smith.

Bibliography: Teachers and Students

Roberts, Damien. Interview by author. Phone interview. Charlotte, NC-north of NOLA, June 28, 2011. *Thanks to Damien who shared and inspired me with answers to questions I needed to begin.*

Smith, Tom. Interview by author. Personal interview. Charlotte, NC - Cheshire, Ct., August 4, 2011. Interesting!

Cotton, Red. "Gambit New Orleans News and Entertainment." Gambit New Orleans News and Entertainment. <http://bestofneworleans.com/gyrobase/sacred-ground> (accessed August 5, 2011). *I recommend site.*

Eggers, Dave. *Zeitoun*. San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2009. *A must read account of Hurricane Katrina.*

Gaudet, Marcia, and James C.. McDonald. *Mardi Gras, Gumbo, and Zydeco*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. *Helpful chapters.*

Offbeat. "Injuns Here Dey Come." Offbeat. offbeat.copm/2006/03/01/injuns-here-dey-come (accessed July 20,2011).

Harrison-Nelson, Cherice. "Mardi Gras Hall of Fame." Reading, local journal publication from best of new orleans.com, New Orleans, June 6, 2011.

NY Times. "Mardi Gras Indians." History of Mardi Gras Indians. nytimes.com/slideshow/2010/03/24/us/0324ORLEANS.index.html?ref=us (accessed June 10, 2011).

Osbey, Brenda Marie. *All Saints: New and Selected Poems*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. *Useful resource for choosing selected poems.*

Piazza, Tom. *Why New Orleans Matters*. New York, NY: ReganBooks, 2005.

Roach, Joseph R.. *Cities of the Dead: circum-Atlantic performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. *A must read for historical understanding.*

Salaam, Kalamu Ya. "He's the prettiest": A tribute to Big Chief Allison "Tootie" Montana's 50 years of Mardi Gras Indian Suiting, July 12-August 31, 1997. New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1997. *Beautiful photographs.*

Smith, Michael P., and Alan B. Govenar. *Mardi Gras Indians*. Gretna: Pelican Pub. Co., 1994. *Te beest resource! This author earned the trust of the Indians and was the first to document them in depth, with permission.*

<http://youtube.com/user/craftinamerica2007> (accessed August 5, 2011).

"blogspot.com." Click. <http://fashionandpower.blogspot.com/2011/significance-for-costume-design.html> (accessed August 5, 2011).

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJUH4oe-X_8&feature=related (accessed August 5, 2011). *Mardi Gras Indians play various traditional roles. These include the "chief", the "spy boy" who goes out in front of the group.*

Endnotes

1. (<http://www.youtube.com/user/craftinamerica2007>)
2. (best of neworelans.com)
3. <http://teachers.yale.edu>
4. (<http://fashionandpower.blogspot.com/2011/04/significance-for-costume-design.html>)
5. (Mardi Gras Indians, Smith, p-17, par3)
6. <http://www.somosperu.us/html/slideshow.php>
7. (Cities of the Dead-Joseph Roach p.192 par 2).
8. (David Winkler-Schmit www.bestofneworleans.com/gyrobase/scared-ground January 22, 2008),(Bruce "Sunpie" Barnes, a member of the Skull and Bones Gang.)
9. (David Winkler-Schmit www.bestofneworleans.com/gyrobase/scared-ground January 22, 2008),
10. (Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 1975, Louisiana Historical Association, p.289 of 289-298, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show In New Orleans)
11. (<http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2010/03/24/us/0324ORLEANS.index.html?ref=us>)
12. (David Winkler-Schmit www.bestofneworleans.com/gyrobase/scared-ground January 22, 2008)
13. (Cities of the Dead- p.196, par 3)
14. (Bannock, personal interview by Joseph Roach- Cities of the Dead p.206, par2).
15. (He's the prettiest p.15- par 4)
16. (He's the Prettiest p 11 par 3)
17. (Injuns Here Dey Come::OffBeat::New Orleans and Louisiana Music, Food and Art News <http://offbeat.copm/2006/03/01/injuns-here-dey-come/> 6/28/11)
18. mardigrasneworleans.com/mardigarsindians.html,
19. (Why New Orleans Matters, Tom Piazza, p.55- par1)



With permission from Demian Smith: photographer, Mill Creek Studios

20.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use