

ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

CULTURAL ARTS 1 & 2 CURRICULUM: SEWING



**Yup'ik or Inupiaq Sewing Kit,
c. 19th century**

Bone, hide, sinew
1983.153.034AG

**Yup'ik or Inupiaq Fish Skin Mittens,
date unknown**

Fish skin, seal skin, grass
1976.053.001AB

This curriculum was created on Eklutna Dena'ina homeland. It is dedicated to all Indigenous peoples working to share their knowledge and culture, striving for a more inclusive future for western education. This resource addresses how to create and implement culturally-competent arts curriculum that uplifts Indigenous voices and ways of knowing. In the creation of this curriculum, we acknowledge and honor all Elders—past, present, and emerging—for their stewardship of the lands, plants, waters, and animals across Alaska. We thank them for sharing their lifeways, experiences, and cultures with students and the wider community. This curriculum would not be possible without their efforts.

We would like to express our gratitude to Aaron Leggett, John Hagen, and Emma Hildebrand for sharing their time and knowledge to refine this curriculum. Thank you for your guidance and support.

UNIT AT A GLANCE

Investigate sewing tools and techniques used in Alaska Native cultures and develop sewing skills.

Cultural Arts 1: Students will focus on sewing tools and techniques. Students will view sewing kit examples from the Anchorage Museum collection, learn more about basic sewing stitches from culture bearers in the classroom or through videos, and sew a felt bag.

Cultural Arts 2: Students will learn about sewing fish skin. Students will view fish skin objects from the Anchorage Museum collection, learn about waterproof stitching from culture bearers in the classroom or through videos, and sew a wallet.

Note: This unit can stand alone, or it can precede the adornment unit so that students adorn the projects made in this unit.

A NOTE ABOUT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION FOR EDUCATORS

In this unit, students learn about and develop an appreciation for culturally specific art-making techniques. Cultural appropriation occurs when students replicate culturally specific techniques or designs from a non-dominate culture. To avoid cultural appropriation, student projects do not use traditional materials or techniques. Instead, students gain inspiration from cultural artwork and practice skills that are not specific to one culture.

Educators are encouraged to invite an Elder or culture bearer into the classroom to share their cultural practices related to this unit. Elders and culture bearers should receive financial compensation for their time and expertise. Consider grants from the Anchorage School District or the Alaska State Council for the Arts to help cover this cost.

If an Elder or culture bearer visits your class, discuss what they will share and how they want students to use this information. In this case, it may be appropriate for students to use traditional materials or techniques (e.g. an Elder provides salmon leather for students or wants students to copy a specific design).

STANDARDS

Alaska Visual Arts Standards:

VA:CR1a&b

VA:RE7a&b

VA:CN11a

VA:CR2a&b

VA:CN10a



STANDARDS CONTINUED

Cultural Standards for Students:

- B.1 acquire insights from other cultures without diminishing the integrity of their own
- C.4 enter into and function effectively in a variety of cultural settings
- D.1 acquire in-depth cultural knowledge through active participation and meaningful interaction with Elders
- D.3 interact with Elders in a loving and respectful way that demonstrates an appreciation of their role as culture-bearers and educators in the community
- E.8 identify and appreciate who they are and their place in the world

MATERIALS

Cultural Arts 1:

- Felt
- Needle
- Embroidery thread
- Optional: button, straight pins or binder clips

Cultural Arts 2:

- Felt
- Needle
- Embroidery thread
- Extra wide double fold bias tape
- Optional: straight pins or binder clips

KEY TERMS

<i>Sewing</i>	act of making or repairing something using needle and thread
<i>Couching</i>	sewing technique that stitches thread, grass, or similar to the main material to increase the strength of the seam or for decoration
<i>Cultural appropriation</i>	the act of taking aspects—such as intellectual property, cultural expressions and artifacts, and traditional knowledge—of a less-dominant or colonized culture that is not your own, without proper permission, for your own benefit, and without giving something of reciprocal value in return
<i>Halukuĕ</i>	Unangaĕ for (s)he sews
<i>Miquqtuq</i>	Iñupiaq (North Slope Dialect) for (s)he is sewing
<i>Killaiyaqtuq</i>	Iñupiaq (Kobuk Dialect) for (s)he is sewing
<i>Mingquq</i>	Yup'ik for (s)he is sewing
<i>Iqruq</i>	Yup'ik for (s)he is sewing a waterproof seam
<i>Iqraa</i>	Yup'ik for (s)he is sewing a waterproof seam on it
<i>Tamategtuq</i>	Yup'ik for (s)he is sewing skins together for a parka



CULTURAL ARTS 1 & 2: INTRODUCTION TO SEWING

TIME FRAME Approximately 30 minutes

MATERIALS *Photograph 1:* Lu Liston Collection; Anchorage Museum, B1989.016.401.1
Photograph 2: Reverend Samuel Spriggs Collection; Alaska State Library, ASL-P320-60
Photograph 3: Carrie McLain Papers, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, UAF-1972-157-6

DIRECTIONS 1. Begin by looking closely at provided photographs. Use the questions below to guide discussion.

[20 min.]

CLOSE-LOOKING: Look closely, quietly at the objects for a few minutes.

OBSERVE: Share your observations about each photograph.



1998.016.401.1

PHOTOGRAPH 1

ASK: *What do you notice?
What is happening in this image?
What do you notice about the tools and materials in this image?
How would you describe the individual's expression?
How would you describe the setting of this photograph?
What does this remind you of?
What more can you find?*

SHARE: *This is a photograph of Mrs. Lee sewing mukluks from the mid-twentieth century, possibly at the Eklutna Vocational School.*

Lu Liston Collection; Anchorage Museum, B1989.016.401.1



ASL P320.60

PHOTOGRAPH 2

ASK: *What do you notice?
What is happening in this image?
What do you notice about the materials in this image?
What do you know about possible techniques used make this object?
What does this remind you of?
How would you describe the setting of this photograph?*

SHARE: *This early twentieth-century photograph shows women in Utqiagvik (called Barrow when this photograph was taken¹) sewing bearded sealskins together for an umiak, a large open boat from the Inupiaq and Yup'ik cultures. The photograph's record states: "After [the skins] are sewn together using special waterproof stitch, men will stretch skin cover across wood frame and lash them to it. This unusually large boat requires 7-8 skins....They are covering the boat in the summer, which is unusual. They could be recovered anytime, but the skins dry quickly in the summer becoming clear and yellow. If done in March/April the skins bleach in the sun, becoming white. Sometimes a boat was recovered in the summer, because it needed repairing and was needed for summer hunting. These skins don't all look new, so they could be mending old ones, instead of stretching new skins onto the frame for whaling."*

Reverend Samuel Spriggs Collection; Alaska State Library, ASL-P320-60

¹PLACE NAMES

Place names reveal how people refer to, relate to, and know a landscape. Alaska Native place names are highly descriptive and communicate observed characteristics of the land and its inhabitants with succinct insight. As outsiders arrived in Alaska, they displaced and marginalized Alaska Native peoples, including by renaming places.





UAF 1972.157.6

PHOTOGRAPH 3

ASK: *What do you notice? What is happening in this image? What do you notice about the tools and materials in this image? What do you notice about the writing on the blackboard? How would you describe the individual's expression or feeling about the task they are doing?*

SHARE: *This photograph of a boy with a sewing machine is from the early- to mid-twentieth century and the Nome, King Island, and Diomed Island region of western Alaska. A blackboard behind the boy reads "Sew the sleeves on the shirt. The shirt is made of calico. [?] any buttons? [?] machine needle."*

Carrie McLain Papers, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, UAF-1972-157-6.

DISCUSS: Use the [20 Questions Deck](#) for more group discussion questions about the photographs.

ASK: *What are similarities between these photographs?*

2. Define sewing and give context to sewing and Alaska Native cultures.

[10 min.]

Sewing is the act of making or repairing something using needle and thread.

Alaska Native peoples have been living sustainable lives in Alaska for thousands of years. Ten major Alaska Native cultures and 20 Indigenous languages are found in Alaska. Alaska Natives developed different sewing tools and techniques, using materials found in the regions of Alaska where they live. Over time, after western-contact, Alaska Native peoples traded for manufactured materials, such as metal needles, and adopted new technologies, such as sewing machines, to continue to sew clothing and other materials.

LEARN MORE

[Photographs](#) from sewing a seal skin boat at the Iñupiat Heritage Center in Utqiagvik in 2007

Watch "[Reviving the art of making Iñupiat Mukluks](#)" on Indie Alaska to learn how contemporary artist Mary Lou Sours connects to and shares her culture with others through sewing mukluks

Read this [news story](#) about the village of Barrow changing its name back to Utqiagvik in 2016



CULTURAL ARTS 1: SEWING TOOLS

TIME FRAME Approximately 60 minutes

MATERIALS *Unangan Sewing Kit*; 1979.001.005
Yup'ik Sewing Kit; 2002.025.113
Yup'ik or Inupiaq Sewing Kit; 1983.153.034AG
“Sewing Bag-Alutiiq Word of the Week”
Elder discussions for sewing bags: [Kakiwik](#), [Sugpiaq \(Alutiiq\)](#), [Kakivik](#), [Yup'ik](#), [Imguġ daġ](#), [Unangaġ \(Aleut\)](#), [Immusrfik](#), [Iñupiaq](#)

DIRECTIONS

1. Close look at photographs of sewing kits from the Anchorage Museum collection.

[15 min.]

CLOSE-LOOKING: Look closely, quietly at the objects for a few minutes.

OBSERVE: Share your observations about the objects.

ASK: *What do you notice about these objects? What materials might be used? What do you know about potential techniques and processes used to create these objects? What do these objects remind you of? What else can you find?*

2. Offer students more information about the objects and their materials.

[15 min.]



1979.001.005

Unangan Sewing Kit; 1979.001.005

This sewing kit is thought to be Unangan circa 1900 because of the diamond pattern and small loops. It is made of seal skin and seal gut sewn together with sinew. This gut bag also features a commercial cloth backing and is decorated with strips of painted leather and embroidered with both thread and sinew.



2002.025.113

Yup'ik Sewing Kit; 2002.025.113

This Yup'ik sewing kit from the early twentieth century features reindeer hide along with cotton and woolen cloth. It was donated to the museum by the Huffmon Family. Betty Marie Huffmon (1920-2008) grew up in Goodnews Bay, in Western Alaska, and the surrounding area. Her parents, Joe and Paulina Jean, ran the Goodnews Bay Trading Store. Many of the objects donated by the Huffmon family reflect Betty's Yup'ik heritage as well as life in Western Alaska during the mid-20th Century. Notice the tools inside this sewing kit: needles, thread, and thimbles.



1983.153.034AG

Yup'ik or Iñupiaq Sewing Kit; 1983.153.034AG

This sewing kit is either Yup'ik or Iñupiaq from the nineteenth century. It consists of a carved bone tube or holder with simple incised line decoration. A piece of hide secures the bone needle, plus a thimble, comb, and thimble guard. There are also two long flat pieces with carved and notched knobs on one end.



3. Read [“Sewing Bag-Alutiiq Word of the Week”](#) in Alaska Native News to learn more about sewing in Alutiiq culture.

[20 min.]

Different Alaska Native cultures have their own versions of sewing bags. View examples and read Elders’ discussions about these sewing bags in the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center’s collection.

[Kakiwik, Sugpiaq \(Alutiiq\)](#)

[Kakivik, Yup’ik](#)

[Imguġ daġ, Unangaġ \(Aleut\)](#)

[Immusrfik, Iñupiaq](#)

4. Discuss [“Sewing Bag-Alutiiq Word of the Week”](#) and the Elder discussions.

Ask: *what have you learned about sewing tools and these cultures? What about these tools are similar across these cultures? What is different? How is sewing connected to daily life?*

[10 min.]

LEARN MORE

Watch [“Making a Caribou Needle”](#) from Cook Inlet Tribal Council

Watch [“Ĺinay’sduġkaas de’ Beading Items”](#) to see examples of items kept in sewing bags and hear Ahtna words for these items

Lesson Plan from Chugachmiut [“Clothing: Kakiwik ‘Decorated Bags’, Thimble, and Sinew Thread”](#)



CULTURAL ARTS 1: SEWING TECHNIQUES

TIME FRAME Approximately 45 minutes

MATERIALS Felt
Needle
Embroidery thread (separated into sections of only three strands)
[Running Stitch](#) - Start at 0:38
[Whip Stitch](#)
[Blanket Stitch](#)
[Couching Stitch](#)

DIRECTIONS

1. Invite an Elder or culture bearer into the classroom to talk about sewing bags, tools, cultural practices, and demonstrate basic sewing techniques. Encourage students to observe closely and practice the techniques.

Or, if unable to host an Elder or culture bearer:

1. Invite students to familiarize themselves with sewing tools and materials.
[5 min.]

2. Introduce basic sewing stitches with these videos and invite students to practice on felt scraps.
[40 min.]

[Running Stitch](#) - Start at 0:38
[Whip Stitch](#)
[Blanket Stitch](#)
[Couching Stitch](#)

LEARN MORE

[How to Make a Kakiwik](#) (decorated sewing bag) from Heritage Chugachmiut

Learn how artist Coral Chernoff sews salmon skin together to make a waterproof seam in [Sewing Salmon \(5 of 10\): Stitching Salmon Skin](#)

Lesson Plan from Chugachmiut [“Clothing: Learn the Waterproof Stitch with Gut”](#)

St. Lawrence Island [sewing curriculum](#)



CULTURAL ARTS 1: SEWING A BAG

TIME FRAME Approximately 75 minutes

MATERIALS Felt
Needle
Embroidery thread (separated into sections of only three strands)
Button (optional)
Unangan Sewing Kit; 1979.001.005
Yup'ik Sewing Kit; 2002.025.113

A NOTE ABOUT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND THIS ACTIVITY

This project takes inspiration from Indigenous sewing kits, but students are not copying or replicating these sewing kits to avoid cultural appropriation. Instead, students will practice basic sewing skills by making a bag that is not culturally specific.

DIRECTIONS

1. Return to the *Unangan Sewing Kit* and *Yup'ik Sewing Kit*. Invite students to look closely at the objects again, focusing on construction and stitching. Ask students how they think the sewing kits were made.

[5 min.]

2. Explain students are going to make a felt bag. Have students sketch their design and identify which stitches they want to use.

[15 min.]

Steps for making a bag:

a. Cut a piece of felt the width you want your final bag by three times the height you want your final bag. Suggested size: 7 inches x 13 inches

b. Fold the felt into thirds. Cut the top flap to the desired shape.



c. Select a stitch to sew both sides closed. Add a button or other decorative stitching if desired (or use the Adornments and Embellishments unit to decorate bag).



4. Allow students time to work on their projects. As they work, discuss the techniques they are utilizing for their piece and any ways they have adapted their approach to sewing through experience.

[45 min.]

5. Invite students to share their finished bag with the class. Discuss as a class: *how did your skills and approach grow as you gained more experience? What did you learn about sewing through this experience? How do you view the Unangan Sewing Kit and Yup'ik Sewing Kit differently now that you have made this bag?*

[10 min.]

ASSESSMENT

Students will be assessed based on participation in class discussion and practice with the Elder or culture bearer, completion of artwork, and artwork presentation to the class.



CULTURAL ARTS 2: FISH SKIN OBJECTS

TIME FRAME Approximately 60 minutes

MATERIALS *Yup'ik or Iñupiaq Fish Skin Mittens*; 1976.053.001AB
Yup'ik Fish Skin Parka; 1982.048.003
[**Iqertagnek Piliat**](#) (Things Made of Fish Skin)
[**Fins of Fashion: The Alaskan Artist Creating Salmon Skin Stilettoes**](#)

DIRECTIONS

1. Close look at photographs of fish skin objects from the Anchorage Museum collection. Focus on these objects' construction and stitching.

[15 min.]

CLOSE-LOOKING: Look closely, quietly at the objects for a few minutes.

OBSERVE: Share your observations about the objects.

ASK: *What do you notice about these objects? What materials might be used? What do you know about potential techniques and processes used to create these objects? What do these objects remind you of? What else can you find?*

2. Offer students more information about the objects and their materials.

[15 min.]



1976.053.001AB

Yup'ik or Iñupiaq Fish Skin Mittens; 1976.053.001AB

These fish skin mittens have seal skin palms. Fish skin mittens are waterproof, and woven grass inserts add warmth. Mittens like these are often worn while kayaking. This pair of fish skin mittens comes from the Bering Sea coastal region of Alaska.



1982.048.003

Yup'ik Fish Skin Parka; 1982.048.003

This is a Yup'ik child-sized parka from circa 1900. It is made of salmon skin sewn together with sinew. The parka is colored with ocher and features rawhide fringe along the bottom hem. Fish skins are waterproof, making them an excellent material for clothing such as summer mukluks, kayaker's mittens, and waterproof parkas. Salmon skins are particularly sought because they are especially oily, making them more flexible and watertight. Bags are also made from fish skin.

3. As a class or individually, look at the webpage [Iqertagnek Piliat](#) (Things Made of Fish Skin) to learn about other Yup'ik objects made from fish skin.

[15 min.]

4. Watch [Fins of Fashion: The Alaskan Artist Creating Salmon Skin Stilettos](#) to learn how contemporary Alaska Native artist Joel Isaak creates fish skin objects today.

[5 min.]

5. Discuss the [Iqertagnek Piliat](#) (Things Made of Fish Skin) website and [Fins of Fashion](#). Ask: *what have you learned about fish skin? What qualities of fish skin make it a desirable material? What are other examples of waterproof materials (natural and man-made)?*

[10 min.]

LEARN MORE

Waterproof mittens from the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center's collection

[Arilluuk, Yup'ik](#)

[lookk'e leġ gets, Athabascan](#)

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

The Anchorage Museum refrains from using the terms Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut and instead uses language identified by the Alaska Native language groups. Due to these words' complicated history, the Anchorage Museum does not use these terms. However, it is important to note that Indigenous communities and individuals are at different places of healing and self-identity and may use these terms.

The largest Indigenous language family in North America is the Dene language family, which is commonly identified as 'Athabascan'—a word that is not native to any of the Indigenous languages to which it refers. Dene is a word for Indigenous peoples belonging to several cultures whose languages belong to the Dene language family with traditional homelands in Interior Alaska and into Western Canada; the word Dene means 'people' in several Dene languages.



CULTURAL ARTS 2: INTRODUCTION TO WATERPROOF STITCHING

TIME FRAME Approximately 45 minutes

MATERIALS [Basic couching stitch](#)
[Sewing Salmon \(5 of 10\): Stitching Salmon Skin](#)
[Sewing Gut \(13 or 13\): Sewing a Model Gut Window](#)

A NOTE ABOUT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND THIS ACTIVITY

Students will learn about waterproof stitching techniques and develop an appreciation for these methods. Students will not try this stitch or use it in their project because it may be considered culturally appropriative by some to replicate culturally specific techniques and materials without consulting an Elder or culture bearer. These are the same reasons students are using felt, rather than tanned fish skins, for their projects. Instead, students will learn and use stitches that are not culturally specific.

If an Elder or culture bearer visits your class, discuss what they will share and how they want students to use this information. In this case, it may be appropriate for students to use tanned fish skin and/or incorporate waterproof stitching into their project.

DIRECTIONS

1. Invite an Elder or culture bearer into the classroom to talk about waterproof objects, cultural practices, and demonstrate waterproof stitching techniques. Encourage students to observe closely and practice the techniques.

Or, if unable to host an Elder or culture bearer:

1. Learn a [basic couching stitch](#).

[5 min.]

2. Learn about waterproof stitching techniques, which are types of couching stitches. [30 min.]

Watch [Sewing Salmon \(5 of 10\): Stitching Salmon Skin](#) to learn how artist Coral Chernoff sews salmon skin together to make a waterproof seam. Observe how she folds the salmon skin to create a “gutter” to make the seam waterproof.

Watch [Sewing Gut \(13 or 13\): Sewing a Model Gut Window](#) to learn another stitch for creating waterproof seams. Notice how the grass is used to reinforce the gut so the stitching does not rip the gut.

3. Discuss these waterproof stitching techniques. Ask: *what have you learned about waterproof stitching and these cultures? What about these techniques are similar or different on fish skin versus gut?*

[10 min.]

4. If an Elder or culture bearer is unable to visit your class, explain why students are not trying these stitches.

LEARN MORE

Lesson Plan from Chugachmiut [“Clothing: Learn the Waterproof Stitch with Gut”](#)

[Sewing Gut \(12 of 13\): Sewing a Gut Basket](#) (foldover seam)



CULTURAL ARTS 2: SEWING A WALLET

TIME FRAME Approximately 90 minutes

MATERIALS Felt
Needle
Embroidery thread (separated into sections of only three strands)
Extra wide double fold bias tape
[“How to Make a Kakiwik”](#)
Yup’ik or Iñupiaq Fish Skin Mittens; 1976.053.001AB
Yup’ik Fish Skin Parka; 1982.048.003

DIRECTIONS

1. Return to the *Fish Skin Mittens* and *Fish Skin Parka*. Invite students to look closely at the objects again, focusing on construction and stitching. Ask students if they can identify any stitches used in these objects.

[5 min.]

2. If not already discussed, explain why students are not using fish skin or waterproof stitching (see note under Cultural Arts 2: Introduction to Waterproof Stitching). Explain students are going to make a wallet using non-culturally specific stitches instead to further their sewing skills.

[10 min.]

Steps for making a wallet:

a. Cut a piece of felt the width you want your wallet by four times the length you want your final wallet. Suggested size: 5 inches x 10 inches (finished wallet will measure about 4 inches x 3 inches)

b. Fold the felt as shown so there are two pockets.



c. Cut bias tape 20 inches long. Watch [“How to Make a Kakiwik”](#) to learn how to sew the bias tape (note your wallet will look different from the sewing project in this video).

2:45-4:40 Running stitch to sew first edge of bias tape

7:15-8:22 Final corner and finishing

8:22-10:35 Hidden stitch to sew second edge of bias tape



d. Add decorative stitching if desired (or use the Adornments and Embellishments unit to decorate wallet).



4. Allow students time to work on their projects. As they work, discuss the techniques they are utilizing for their piece and any ways they have adapted their approach to sewing through experience.

[60 min.]

5. Invite students to share their finished wallet with the class. Discuss as a class: *how did your skills and approach grow and change as you gained more experience? What did you learn about sewing through this experience? How do you view the Fish Skin Mittens and Fish Skin Parka differently now that you have made this wallet?*

[15 min.]

ASSESSMENT

Students will be assessed based on participation in class discussion and practice with the Elder or culture bearer, completion of artwork, and artwork presentation to the class.

