

Make Your Own Gorget

Time: 45 minutes

Materials Needed:

- ¼ lb of clay per student
- String
- Paper plates (students will build their gorget on this plate)
- Wax paper (to help prevent the gorget from sticking to the plate)
- Decorations (beads, sequins, mosaic tiles, stones, puff balls – anything decorative)
- Pencil (to poke holes in the gorget for string and for use in decoration)

This activity is designed to help the students express themselves through visual symbolism. Each student will use air-drying clay to make a clay gorget to take home that says something about them.

Introduction:

During the Mississippian period, there were many luxury goods being made for chiefs and high-ranking people of the mound complexes that developed. One of these items was shell gorgets. These items had different religious or personal symbols carved on them and demonstrated something significant about the wearer.

Activity Steps:

1. Tell the students about shell gorgets – what they were, when they were created, etc. Show examples through photos, videos, models, etc.
2. Have students brainstorm about stories, images, people, or objects that are important in their life. What could they represent using the clay and other materials?
3. Give each student a paper plate. Have them write their names on their plates. Also give everyone a sheet of wax paper to place on top of the plates (this will help keep the clay from sticking to the paper plate).
4. Give each student about ¼ a lb of clay apiece.
5. Have them roll the clay into a ball and flatten it out into a rough circular shape.
6. A little ways down from the top, use a pencil tip to poke two holes close together. This is where the string will go through so the students can wear their gorgets. Be careful not to poke the holes too close to the edge of the gorget or place them too close together. (Note – string will not be able to be put through until gorgets have become at least leather-hard.)
7. Have students decorate their gorgets with the materials provided. They can push items into the clay or draw pictures with a pencil.
8. The clay will now need to dry overnight. Students can either leave their projects in the classroom, or take them home to dry on their paper plates.

If there is time, let students pair up and try to interpret each other's gorgets. What does their design represent? What made them choose certain items/designs? Then, go around the room and talk about their gorgets. How many people interpreted correctly?

Background Information

Shell Gorgets

- What are they?
 - Native American artform made from polished, carved, and engraved shell
- What do they mean?
 - Many had images that represented stories, heroes, and ideas that were a part of their cosmological beliefs.
 - Common designs included: triple spiral, coiled rattlesnake, spider, chunky player, and Birdman
 - The gorgets could represent wealth, power, status, religious influence, military might, or be a protective object.



- When were they made, and where were they found?
 - Most common in Eastern Woodlands of the United States, during the Hopewell tradition (200 BCE– 500 CE) and Mississippian cultural period (ca. 800–1500 CE)
 - Found at sites such as the Garden Creek site in North Carolina, and Etowah Mounds in Georgia

Etowah Mounds



- How were they made?
 - Cut from whelk shell
 - Used stone flakes and drills to engrave and bore holes



Steps in Creating a Shell Gorget



Further Information:

- Video - Mississippian shell neck ornament (gorget) by Smarthistory - <https://youtu.be/Aucz5MpYtc>
- Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian - <https://americanindian.si.edu/static/exhibitions/infinityofnations/woodlands/150853.html>
- McClung Museum of Natural History & Culture: Dates for Shell Gorgets and The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex in the Chickamauga Basin Of Southeastern Tennessee - <https://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/2001/03/01/shell-gorgets/>
- 3D models of Shell Gorgets - Research Labs of Archaeology, University of NC - <https://skfb.ly/6SVJP>