

## **What My Adinkra Symbol Means to Me**

introduction by artist Hank D. Herring

With the speed that technological advances are made, people are reading less and depending on symbols more to get them through their daily lives. Symbols are important in communication, directions, and saving time. Symbols get us through everything from phones, computers, places to eat, car repair, airports, hospitals, to school.

The Adinkra symbols are used to show that the symbols we are aware of seeing daily are not just for decorations or embellishment as we believe, but each has a meaning and or a proverb to go with it. We should be aware of the messages we send with the symbols we wear and the symbols others carry. Adinkra symbols are used especially for the fact that they all have positive meanings and promote unity.

### **Teacher reflection:**

St. Helena Elementary School Media Specialist Deborah Martin told the students: "That's your badge of honor. It represents who you are. So some of you might want to change!"

## What My Adinkra Symbol Means to Me

By learning about the batik process and Adinkra symbols from Ghana, students adorn their school t-shirt with a beautiful symbol that represents a positive quality (valor, learning from the past) to which they can aspire.

**Artist credits:** Hank D. Herring, (843) 812-6496, hdherring@gmail.com

### Instruction:

#### First, Engage and build knowledge

while the electric skillet is slowly melting wax.

Preview all the stations, materials, and handouts with the students. Consider personal connections and experiences (to Africa, textiles, gang signs and corporate logos) throughout the discussion.

Explain the wax resist process by stamping wax onto a coffee filter. As soon as the wax hardens, brush lightly with paint— Wax resists the new color!

Coffee filters are used because they are made with natural fibers, not synthetics such as polyester, which will not accept dyes. Ask students to review their own clothing and tags for natural and synthetic fibers.



Note the crackling of the wax on the filter. Discuss the aesthetics of handprinted textiles— collectors like the crackles and the handmade look. It's authentic.

Each student should stamp a coffee filter, to help them understand the proper way to handle the stamps— leave in skillet, shake off, do not set face-down on tables.

Note that most of the Adinkra stamps are cubist and symmetrical.



## Second, Apply:

T-shirt stamping time!

The electric skillet is keeping the bees wax warm and liquid.

Each t-shirt has the student's name written on the inside label.

Newspapers are on the tables, diluted acrylic paints are in small cups (half-filled), brushes are ready.

First, the students cut a piece of paper in half.

They trace the paper with pencil onto the front of the t-shirt to create a frame for their stamps.



The students insert a sheet of newspaper (4 sides) folded in half into the shirt, under the shape just traced in pencil.

Each student selects their stamps (2-3 fit nicely) and researches the meaning of the Adinkra symbol.



One by one, each student stamps with a teacher at the melted wax station:

1. stamp should soak in the hot skillet.
2. quickly shake off, stamp immediately and firmly.
3. do not set stamps face-down on tables.

Then, at the paint tables, each student paints his stamped area, painting around, across and over the wax stamp. Wax resists the new color! The t-shirts are yellow, so the stamp will remain yellow with the acrylic colors all around.



Sometimes more newspaper is needed inside the t-shirts; the shirts are stacked to dry with more newspaper between each shirt.

**Removing the wax-** To make the t-shirts wearable, iron the wax out of each shirt, using more newspaper between the iron and the shirt.

**Care of the Adinkra shirts-** The shirts can be machine washed but NOT machine dried. The acrylic paints will remain.

**Third, Assessment:** After this cultural discussion and hands-on experience, ask students to reflect by writing down their thoughts so that they can wear their personalized t-shirt with informed pride:

*Adinkra symbols are from:*

*Wax resist means:*

*The name and meaning of my Adinkra symbols are:*

*Symbols are also used by:*

*What I like best about this art project on my t-shirt is:*



**2011 Curriculum standards:**

Visual and/or performing arts:

- I. Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes Students will
  - A. Describe how different media, techniques, and processes evoke different responses in the viewer of an artwork.
  - B. Use a variety of media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas, experiences, and stories through their artworks.
  - C. Use art materials and tools in a safe and responsible manner.

**picture right:** artist Hank D. Herring prepping students for stamping, in the media center (that's right, paint in the library!) at St. Helena Elementary School, Beaufort SC.



III. Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas Students will select and use subject matter, symbols, and ideas to communicate meaning through their artworks.

Academic(s):

Standard 5.2 The student will read and comprehend a variety of informational texts in print and nonprint formats.

Standard 5.3 The student will use word analysis and vocabulary strategies to read fluently.

Standard 5.6 The student will access and use information from a variety of sources.

**Community connection:** Adinkra symbols are from Ghana, West Africa, where many Lowcountry Gullah families have ancestral connections. Students wear and see symbols every day of many kinds (gang, corporate) and now they have a better version of their own-making.

### Preparation

- **preface with:** Ask and discuss with students "How can I use a visual arts process to alter my own wardrobe to communicate a positive message?"
- **student prior knowledge:** a sense of where Africa is, basic art class skills (wielding a paint brush)
- **physical space:** large work tables (at least 4 stations)
- **materials & supplies needed:** Adinkra Stamps, beeswax and electric skillet, coffee filters, plain white paper, scissors, lots of old newspapers, all-cotton T-shirts, acrylic paints and brushes, a guide or print out of Adinkra meanings, clean up supplies.
- **staging:** clear and cover the tables for stations: stamps, hot wax, painting, drying and stacking.

**Vocabulary:** Adinkra, Ghana, bees wax, batik, symbols, resist, sankofa, represent, apply, natural fibers, synthetic, authenticity.

### Handouts & Informative Resources:

- A guide to the Adinkra symbols is necessary, there are many online resources too: <http://adinkra.org>
- google image search for ghana batik cloth
- adinkra stamps can be found online and Hank Herring also makes sets for schools. He's on facebook as Hank D. Herring.

~ end of "What My Adinkra Symbol Means to Me"

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