

## The Circle Unbroken: Gullah Baskets Metaphor and Tradition

**Key Skills:** cultural valuing, research, contrast and compare, measurement and patterning, analytical writing.



**Community Connection:** To develop an appreciation of the Gullah tradition of sweetgrass baskets and understand the economic and creative contribution this honored craft has made to our community life. The unit will be cross-disciplinary with the Science classes. Gullah Scholars, Ervena Faulkner and Louise Cohen will present the tradition of basket making in the Gullah community within the science classes.

**Big Idea:** The sweetgrass basket has been a traditional art form in the South Carolina Lowcountry for 300 years. Its history parallels the rise of the rice culture on the southeastern coast. Utilizing the natural materials of the new environment, Africans brought their basket skills with them creating tens of thousands of industrial baskets for the processing of rice. From the establishment of rice plantation in the Americas to the present, sweetgrass baskets have become a metaphor for both the conservation of a tradition and the creativity of resilient change that characterizes the aesthetic beauty of the baskets today.

**Overview:** The children's book, *Circle Unbroken* by Margot Theis Raven provided a literary thread for our unit. We believe that utilizing our visual arts TA and our Gullah scholars to plan a cross disciplinary unit inclusive of art, science, SS, Math and ELA standards would assist the students to link the multiplicity of aesthetic, ecological, economic and cultural legacies of the sweetgrass baskets and their makers.

### Artist credits:

Melba Cooper – visual artist ([melbacooper@mac.com](mailto:melbacooper@mac.com) 828.506.7559)

### Essential Questions:

1. What does the "circle unbroken" represent in Raven's story?
2. What was the economic value of the sweetgrass basket in the Colombian Exchange period?
3. How has the economic value and the marketing of the baskets changed over 300 years.

4. Why has the sweetgrass basket survived as both an economic and cultural metaphor for the lowcountry culture?
5. How has the economic value and the marketing of the baskets changed?
6. Why has the design of the baskets evolved?
7. How is the tradition of basket making being shared with future generations?
8. What are the treats to continuance of this tradition today?
9. What is the metaphorical meaning of the baskets for the lowcountry culture today? Environmental? Cultural?

**pictured here:** beginning of a fanner basket.



### **Objectives:**

1. Engage: Read *Circle Unbroken* and view DVD *Grass Roots: The Enduring Art of the Lowcountry Basket*.
2. Build Knowledge: Discuss the use of metaphor in the story.
3. Build Knowledge: Research and discuss the economic and aesthetic changes from the Colombian Exchange until present day.
4. Build Knowledge: View examples of baskets and the raw local materials used to create the row upon row of basket pattern.
5. Build Knowledge: learn to use a compass to create a radial design based on basket sewing techniques.
6. Apply: Make a radial design drawing of a fanner basket pattern.
7. Reflect: Compare the economies and the designs of the 1700's and 2010.
8. Reflect: Self-Evaluation of a Fanner Radial Design

### **Teacher Preparation:**

1. Discuss the economy of the Rice Trade in the Colonial Period.
2. View DVD "Grass Roots:
3. Plan 5 integrated lessons with the Teaching Artists
4. Plan cross discipline experience with the science teacher.
5. Develop assessment tool.

### **Visual Teaching Artist:**

1. Collect basket examples and local materials for classroom exhibit.
2. Provide art resources.
3. Plan design lesson.
4. Develop assessment tool.

### **Vocabulary:**

Social Studies/ELA: metaphor, economy, tradition, preservation, mortar/pestle, winnowing, money crop, basket house, winnowing, chaff, long staple rice, Visual Art: artisan, basket sewing, fanner, sweetgrass, bulrush, palmetto, long leaf pine, nailbone, coil, compass, radial design, concentric pattern, value.

**Process:**

Use the worksheets below — “Fanner Basket Radial Design Problem + self-evaluation” and “Evaluation of Sweetgrass Basket Experience” (2 pages.)

Student activities that support the Big Idea:

1. View DVD and participate in a discussion with TA and teacher.
2. Record vocabulary and information in journals.
3. Create a fanner concentric circle design.
4. Complete a comparison chart of 1700's/2010.
5. Complete self-assessment.
6. Write a reflection.
7. Take multiple choice tests.



Teaching Procedure:

1. Circle Unbroken is read in science class and discussed with Gullah Scholars.
2. Social Studies teacher discusses the economy of the rice trade in the Colonial period. Shows DVD Grass Roots.



3. Teaching Artist shares basket examples and raw materials.
4. Teaching artists provides radial design problem for a fanner basket design with step by step instructions and an example.
5. Students create a fanner basket design using math tools.

6. Students complete comparison charts.
7. Students self-assess their design and answer multiple choice questions.

**Materials:** poster board (8"x8" square), compass, rulers, pencils, colored pencils.

**Resources:**

- DVD: *Grass Roots: The Enduring Art of the Lowcountry Basket, Row upon Row*, Dale Rosengarten,
- *Circle Unbroken*, Margot Thesis Raven, E.B. Lewis
- Book: *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*, Dale Rosengarten, Theodore Rosengarten, Enid Schildkrout
- [www.dnasweetgrassbaskets.com](http://www.dnasweetgrassbaskets.com)

**Teaching Artists Commentary:**

I believe the unit was effective and memorable for the students as a cross-disciplinary and arts integrated unit. *Circle Unbroken* captured the imagination of the students. The DVD, *Grass Roots* provided them with a connection with the source of the baskets from Sierra Leone. They were really fascinated with the colors that are used in Africa.



The concept of comparing the tradition of the baskets and the changes of the basket design and purpose over the 300 years fit the objectives of the teacher for the students to understand the market economies of the times and how they changed. They also demonstrated how aesthetic symbols can embody a metaphorical idea.

The students enjoyed the use of measuring tools and yet maintained a creative freedom within that design structure. They were intent on the details of the patterns and looked forward to working on them each day. 100% of the students completed a design.

The art skills in this unit could be replicated by a classroom teacher. Having access to visual resources and examples of baskets was important to the success of the unit. The teachers connection with the Science teacher added to the depth of understanding and connection for students and teachers. They planned the unit to incorporate scientific learning and traditional information from the Gullah scholars about the local plants harvested for the baskets.

**Teacher Response:**

In retrospect, I would have the students make all the designs in graphite pencil so that the final products would be unified in gray tones. I think doing that would unify a collective product that we

could use to create a modular mural. I would like to have a sweetgrass basket maker to come in as well as the Gullah scholars.

### **2011 Standards:**

#### ELA

7.1.6 Create a response to a literary text through a variety of methods such as drawings, written works, oral presentations, and media productions

#### SS

7.1.3 European economic influence in the Americas. Establishment of plantation colonies

7.1.4 Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Its need in the colonies and its effects.



#### Math

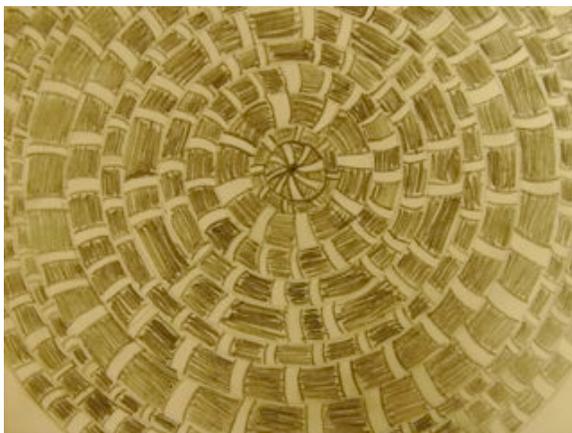
7.3.1 Analyze geometric patterns and pattern relationships.

#### Visual Art:

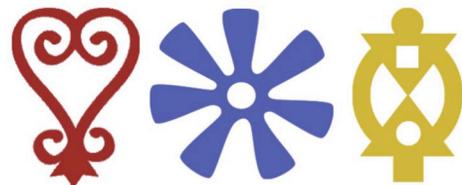
II. Demonstrate a knowledge of the elements and principles of design and show an aesthetic awareness of the visual and tactile qualities in the environment that are found in works of art.

IV. Demonstrate a knowledge of artists, art history, and world cultures and will understand how the visual arts reflect, record, and shape culture.

VI. Demonstrate knowledge of the connections among the content of visual arts, other disciplines and everyday life.



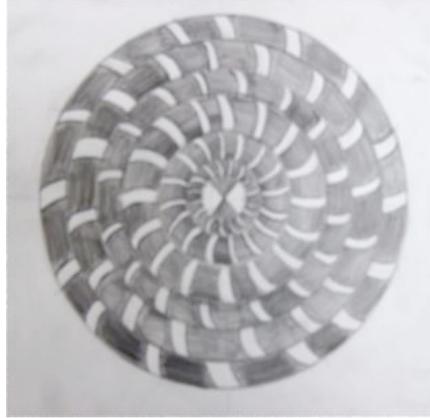
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## Fanner Basket Radial Design Problem

Make a circular design based on the patterns and materials used by artisans for fanner baskets.



### Design Elements/Principles:

1. Balance: Center the circular design in the middle of a square.
2. Line: Use repeated lines to create the texture of the materials.
3. Shape: Use repeated row upon row shapes.
4. Value: Shade the design using light, medium and dark values
5. Color: Choose colors to reflect the creative use of material.

### Steps:

1. Find the center of the 8" square poster board or paper. Draw a light line from corner to corner. Where they cross will be the center.
2. Use a compass to draw a 6" circle.
3. Start in the center and increase the settings on the compass by  $\frac{1}{2}$ " until the circle is filled with rows of concentric lines.
4. Draw a pattern of loops for the palmetto strips used to sew the coils together. Use repeated lines to make textures, knots and embellishments.
5. Shade or color with light, medium and dark values.

## Self Evaluation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Fanner Basket Design: Look at your design and check off what you did:

1. Craftsmanship:

- \_\_\_\_\_ accurately centered a 6" circle on an 8" square
- \_\_\_\_\_ measured concentric rows to fill the circle
- \_\_\_\_\_ used careful application of pencil

2. Design:

- \_\_\_\_\_ used lines to make patterns of basket sewing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ used textures to represent natural materials
- \_\_\_\_\_ used concentric circles within a square
- \_\_\_\_\_ used light, medium and dark values

3. Innovation:

- \_\_\_\_\_ thought of unique ways to create a pattern
- \_\_\_\_\_ thought of ways to show a basket like texture

4. Task Committed:

- \_\_\_\_\_ used what I learned about basket sewing
- \_\_\_\_\_ asked for assistance when needed
- \_\_\_\_\_ overcame problems
- \_\_\_\_\_ completed the design.

1. What did you learn when you created this design?

2. What did problems did you overcome?

3. Can your design be a metaphor for the Lowcountry? Explain.

## Evaluation of Sweetgrass Basket Experience • page 1 of 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

1. Compare the economic purpose of the sweetgrass baskets during the Colombian era of an agricultural based economy and today's urban economy.

Economy of 1700's	Economy of 2010

2. Compare the designs of the sweetgrass baskets of the Colombian era with today's designs. Include the types of materials used in the baskets.

Designs of 1700's	Designs of 2010

## Evaluation of Sweetgrass Basket Experience • page 2 of 2

Circle the letter by the correct answer:

3. A fanner basket was used to:
  - A. Keep people cool in the summer.
  - B. Store grain
  - C. Process rice
  - D. Hold babies
  
4. A combination of materials used to make a basket could be:
  - A. Palmetto, sweetgrass, pine, spartina
  - B. Palmetto, sweetgrass, bulrush, pine
  - C. Palmetto, bulrush, weeds, flowers
  - D. Palmetto, Spanish moss, sweetgrass
  
5. A compass is a tool used to:
  - A. Tell time
  - B. Measure the dimensions of a circle
  - C. Make a straight line
  - D. Create squares
  
6. Sweetgrass baskets a link between the Gullah people of the Lowcountry and the African country of:
  - A. Kenya
  - B. Nigeria
  - C. Sierra Leone
  - D. South Africa
  
7. Do you think this tradition will be preserved for the future? How might you be a part of that preservation?