



The Richness of Rattles:

A lesson in making and decorating clay rattles



Standards

NCAS VA: Cr1.1.6a

Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas for creating art.

NCAS VA: Cr2.1.6a

Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.

NCAS VA: Re8.1.6a

Interpret art by distinguishing between relevant and non-relevant contextual information and analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Form and decorate clay rattles.
- Incorporate art history, aesthetics, and criticism with a hands-on activity.
- Focus on ceramic sculptural techniques and important composition and design elements essential to working on a curved surface, color theory, painting technique, and fundamental technical skills for underglazing and glazing, as well as self-expression.

Background information

Rattles are not just toys for babies. They have been important musical instruments since ancient Egypt and have been significant to music, religion, and magic on all continents and all cultures. Rattles provide the background for many ceremonies. The mournful sound of a birch bark rattle was heard at Native American funerals; the Hawaiian hula is danced to the accent beat of a feathered gourd rattle; and seventeenth century Turkish rulers proclaimed their power with the elegant crescent rattle. Materials used to create rattles are as diverse as the cultures that make them. People from tropical climates use gourds and bamboo. Hopi Indians and the Congo Ubangi use turtle shells and baskets. Seashells, seedpods, and rocks are also used. Native Americans from the nineteenth century treasured the settlers' empty metal spice boxes. Bright painted colors, beads, feathers, fabric, and ribbons embellish these musical instruments to make them works of visual art also. In this lesson, we will create rattles from clay and decorate them using various glazing techniques.

Introduction and preparation

1. This project was originally created for high school ceramic students, but can be adapted for use with students on all levels from elementary to high school.
2. The art teacher should introduce an historical overview of rattles, focusing on the rich cultural history of rattles. Examples of all types of rattles should be shown including maracas, cabacas, African and Latin American calabash, Hawaiian Uli Uli, and baby rattles. Various forms made from a variety of materials should be shown. A special emphasis should be put on the uniqueness of creating rattles from clay.
3. Talk to students about the sculptural aspects of creating clay rattles and about the intricacies of working in the round. Discuss color theory and how it applies to glazes and glaze combinations, positive and negative space, and elements of design.
4. For students without previous ceramic experience, explain the equipment, materials, process, and techniques employed when working with clay and glazes.
5. Create several decorated clay rattles, showing a variety of techniques, as examples for your students.



Procedure

1. Have students draw preliminary sketches. It is suggested that students work on three rattles following a theme in either form or design.
2. Some shapes, such as a ball can be made by using a ball or newspaper crunched up in ball form and making two halves. Other shapes are made from slabs. All shapes must be hollow. Whether using a mold or slabs, the clay should be uniformly thick at approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ " depending on the size of the rattle.
3. Put the shapes together by scoring the edges and using slip and vinegar to seal the edges. Be sure the sealed edge is smoothed with a damp sponge. Drill a hole inside which is big enough to drop small pieces of clay. The small pieces of clay can be different shapes. These different shapes will cause each rattle to have a slightly different sound.
4. Once the small pieces of clay are inside the rattle, plug up the hole with clay and smooth.
5. Carve the design.
6. Using a needle tool, punch two or three small holes to prevent the piece from exploding in the kiln.
7. Students can use sgraffito to further decorate their rattles. Underglaze decoration can be applied when the clay is at the leather hard stage, or the piece can be bisque fired and then decorated with underglazes.
8. Once rattles are decorated and bisque fired, cover with lowfire clear glaze and fire again.

Additional suggestions

- Encourage self-expression, allowing students the freedom to create real or abstract scenes or designs. Both geometric and free form designs are effective.
- Encourage students to use different forms and shapes.
- Urge students to plan their drawings or designs, making a preliminary on a piece of paper.
- If students prefer, they do not have to carve designs into the rattle. They can attach clay shapes using the technique of scoring with slip and vinegar to secure.
- After firing is complete, students can add handles for maracas or string beads on the outside for a cabaca.
- Also after firing is complete, students can add colorful ribbons or feathers for further decoration.
- Encourage students to put different sizes and amounts of clay into the hollow rattles to achieve varying sounds when shaken.
- Rattles can be displayed in a variety of ways. Older students with throwing skills could create a clay container for the rattles. Also, shallow baskets make nice containers.
- Use stilts when firing the rattles. Setting the rattles directly on the kilnshelves will cause the glaze to adhere to the kiln shelves in firing. Always apply kiln wash to protect kiln shelves.

Follow up ideas

For elementary and middle school students, work with the music teacher and social studies teacher to create an interdisciplinary lesson. Students can read books and do research on various types of cultures and how rattles are incorporated into their musical and religious heritage. Listen to music in which rattles are played. With the help of the music teacher, have the students use their finished rattles as musical accompaniment. High school students can also benefit from the multicultural aspect of this lesson by doing research on types and history of rattles. Ask students to find and bring in various types of music that use rattles as accent rhythm.



Glossary

Bisque — clay fired once at a low temperature; unglazed, fired pieces of clay.

Ceramics — the art of making objects of clay which are hardened by firing at a high temperature in a kiln.

Cabaca — a gourd covered with a mesh of beads that rattle when shaken.

Calabash — same as a cabaca.

Craft — an occupation or pursuit that requires artistic skill.

Craftsmanship — work of consistently high quality.

Fire — a term used in ceramics; to heat the clay in a kiln at a very high temperature until it is dry and hard and becomes pottery.

Glaze — a special clear or colored liquid mixture applied to pottery that becomes a hard glass surface when fired to the right temperature in a kiln.

Kiln — an oven or furnace that reaches very high temperatures (2000° to 2300°F) and is used for drying, firing, and glazing ceramic ware.

Maracas — a pair of gourds filled with dried seeds.

Rattle — a hollow container filled with small objects which rattle when shaken.

Sgraffito — a decorative technique where an engobe coating on the surface of the clay is incised or scratched through to uncover the color of the clay beneath.

Sistrum — a u-shaped rattle with metal disks threaded onto crossbars.

Underglaze — a special type of color that is usually put on a ceramic piece before the glaze. It has no flux (glass former) in it so it stays where it is put when fired and is good for detail work. It is used for painting and decorating ceramic pieces.



Materials list

- AMACO® No. 25 White Art Clay, 25 lb. ([0800241](#))
- Mayco® Underglaze, set of 12 ([9735883](#))
- AMACO® Lead-Free Velvet Underglaze Classroom Pack #2 ([NE20282](#))
- AMACO® Semi-Moist Underglaze Decorating Colors ([9701422](#), [9701424](#), and [9715008](#))
- AMACO® Low Fire Clear Transparent Glaze, Lead Free (LG-10) [[9701455\(C\)](#)]
- Royal Brush® Natural Hair Ceramic Brushes, set of 7 ([9742734](#))
- Sponges ([9717865](#))
- Sketch Paper (to plan designs) ([9721250](#))
- Prismacolor® Premier Ebony Black Drawing Pencils, box of 12 ([9728151](#))
- Rolling Pins ([WA31559](#))
- Newspapers (to protect table surface)
- Vinegar