

# AMERICAN INDIAN ART HISTORY DETECTIVES

## LESSON PLAN

Parfleche boxes were an essential storage container for the nomadic American Indians of the Great Plains that followed the herds of bison that once occupied large sections of the United States. Using a variety of maps, plus their powers of observation and critical thinking, students will become art history detectives and discover the tribe that inspired the Box on display at the Denver Art Museum!

**Intended Age Group**  
Elementary (grades K-5)

**Length of Lesson**  
One 50 minute lesson

**Standards Area**  
Social Studies

## Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

- describe the uses of a parfleche;
- identify items commonly transported in a parfleche;
- read various types of U.S. maps;
- explain why certain American Indians were nomadic; and
- synthesize information from different sources.

## Lesson

1. *Warm-up:* Display the image of *Box (Parfleche)*: say “par-flesh”) and invite students to look carefully and share what they observe. Ask: *What do you notice? Do you think this piece is old or new? Why? What do you think American Indians might have kept in boxes like this one? What materials do you think the artist used to make this?*
2. Share with students that the object they see is a modern day version of a traditional rawhide box called a parfleche. Although the artist, Debra Box, uses traditional techniques and bases her designs on objects in museum collections, photographs, and books, *Box* is her own unique artistic creation. Historically, plains and western Indians made parfleches out of treated animal hides to store or carry items like moccasins, clothing and dried food.
3. Tell the students that today they have been invited to become art history detectives! By using their powers of observation and critical thinking skills, the students will deduce the name of the tribe that inspired *Box*. Explain that the American Indians who used parfleches were nomadic, meaning they followed the herds of buffalo that used to roam large areas of the United States. Display the [map of the original range of the American bison](#) and give each pair of students a copy of the map to share. Tell students that this map is their first clue as the makers of parfleche boxes traditionally used bison hides.
4. Next, display the [map](#) (or distribute copies) showing the historic territory of North American Indians. Point out several locations (such as the location of your state, the Great Lakes or other locations you’ve recently discussed in class) on each of the two maps to help students orient themselves. Ask students to work together to write the names of the tribes shown in the North American Indians map that live in the shaded area on the Original Bison Range map. Students can write the tribe names directly on their copy of the bison range map. Instruct students to only write the names of the major tribes (those in larger print) whose territory overlaps with that of the bison and to ignore the other tribes shown on the map.
5. Once students have finished creating their new maps showing the tribes that occupied the same lands as the bison, gather the class back into a group to compare notes. Write a list of the tribes the students labeled on their maps. This

list should include Blackfoot, Crow, Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshone, Pawnee, Apache, Ute, Shawnee, Cherokee and Choctaw.

6. Next display the image of *Box* . Tell the students that the decorations on *Box* will provide more clues to help them figure out which tribe from the list they created inspired this modern day example. Ask: *What colors do you see on this box?* Share with students the symbolism behind Debra Box's decorative choices. In the traditional art of this tribe, blue symbolizes mountain slopes and big predatory animals like the grizzly bear, wolf, and coyote; red signifies spring, bodies of water, and the weasel's domain; and yellow represents summer or the mountain lion's domain. The black outline stands for winter and the rattlesnake's domain, while the white background represents the sky and the eagle's domain. Ask the students to help you create a list of the animals represented in the decoration of *Box* . Ask: *How do you think we could use this list of animals to figure out which tribe inspired Parfleche?*
7. Select an animal from the list and find a map showing the range of this species to help students zero in on a tribe whose location would include mountains, water and the animals on your list. For example, the [historic range of the grizzly bear](#) will eliminate tribes in the eastern U.S.A, and a [physical map of the United States](#) will help students identify tribes that live close to mountains.
8. Once your class has narrowed the list down to just a few tribes like the Shoshone, Ute and Navajo, it's time to examine some examples of parfleche artwork from these tribes. Share with students that the Navajo were a semi-nomadic tribe that was not known for creating parfleches, so the class will just examine Shoshone examples and Ute examples to look for clues. Many examples of Shoshone parfleches can be seen [here](#). Ask: *How would you describe this style of decoration? Does it remind you of the parfleche we're trying to identify? Why or why not?* Draw student's attention to the way the Shoshone art features 3 vertical divisions which is different from the parfleche they're trying to identify. At the end of the activity, your class should be left with one tribe name left on the board: Ute! Nice work, detectives!

## Materials

- one copy of the ["Bison Original Range Map"](#) for each pair of students
- one copy of the ["North American Indians Map"](#) for each pair of students or the ability to project the map onto a wall or screen
- *About the Art* section on *Box*
- One color copy of the artwork for every four students, or the ability to project the image onto a wall or screen

## CO Standards

- **Social Studies**
  - History
    - Ask questions, share information and discuss ideas about the past and present
    - Analyze historical sources using tools of a historian
    - Become familiar with United States historical eras, groups, individuals, and themes
  - Geography
    - Become familiar with United States geography
    - Understand people and their relationship with geography and their environment
- Visual Arts
  - Observe and Learn to Comprehend

## 21st Century Skills

- Collaboration
- Critical Thinking & Reasoning
- Information Literacy



ABOUT THE ART



**Box**  
2010  
Debra Box

## WHO MADE IT?

For more than twenty-five years, Debra Box has been reviving the almost-lost art of making *parfleches* (rawhide containers). She has received many awards for her artwork and represented the Southern Ute Nation at the grand opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in 2004. In addition to making parfleches, she also does bead and quill work. Her creations have found their way into such movies as *Dances with Wolves* and are offered for sale in galleries and at the Santa Fe Indian Market every August.

## WHAT INSPIRED IT?

Plains and western Indians made containers out of treated animal hides to store or carry items like moccasins, clothing, or dried food. French traders called these boxes *parfleches*, from the French words *parer*, meaning “parry” or “defend,” and *flèche*, meaning “arrow,” because the hide was tough enough to deflect an arrow.

Debra Box became interested in making parfleches when she began to travel with her late husband to mountain man rendezvous, where they would stay in a tipi they tried to keep authentic to the pre-1840s fur-trading period. After much research and conversations with her grandmother, Box learned the month-long process of tanning, shaping, and decorating animal hides to make a parfleche.

Although Box uses traditional techniques and bases her designs on objects in museum collections, photographs, and books, her parfleches are her own unique artistic creations. “My rawhide painting reflects my Ute heritage but in an abstract and contemporary form,” she says.

## DETAILS



### Material

Debra Box makes her parfleches out of cowhide that she buys from a slaughter house and cleans by soaking in water and detergent. She ties the hide to a wooden frame and leaves it in the sun to dry. Once the hide is dry, Box uses a metal scraper to scrape off the hair and fatty tissue—a process that takes three full days. She sets the hide out in the sun again until it is white, turning it every few days so it bleaches evenly. After a few weeks, the hide is stiffened and ready for her to cut and shape with a wooden mallet.



### Leather Ties

Box fastens the edges of her parfleches with leather ties made from deer hide she tans herself. She describes the tanning process as “very labor intensive...I’ve never done this work but if you’ve done it right your hide will be as soft as velvet. This is [also] the kind of hide that I buy for my beadwork. The beading needles won’t break.”

### Dark Blue Trade Cloth

The material on the four side edges is modern-day trade cloth. Box doesn't normally add fabric, but she did on this piece—made especially for the Denver Art Museum—to add color and texture, and because the museum's curator requested it. "When the fur traders came to the West they brought glass beads, trade beads, metal pots, guns and trade cloth. A trade cloth dress was a sign of wealth," Box says.



### Colors

Box uses three colors in this particular work: ochre, red, and blue, plus small amounts of black for accents and outlines. In traditional Southern Ute art, blue symbolizes mountain slopes and big predatory animals like the grizzly bear, wolf, and coyote; red signifies spring, bodies of water, and the weasel's domain; and yellow represents summer or the mountain lion's domain. The black outline stands for winter and the rattlesnake's domain, while the white background represents the sky and the eagle's domain.



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