

# PACK YOUR PARFLECHE!

## LESSON PLAN

If you lived a nomadic lifestyle like many of the American Indians of the Great Plains, what items would you be sure to pack? Invite students to imagine themselves out following herds of buffalo as they “pack” their virtual parfleche boxes!

### Intended Age Group

Elementary (grades K-5)

### Length of Lesson

One 50 minute lesson

### Standards Area

Language Arts

### Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

- describe the uses of a parfleche;
- identify items commonly transported in a parfleche;
- explain why certain American Indians were nomadic; and
- create a packing list for their own imaginary parfleche.

### Lesson

1. *Warm-up:* Display the image of *Box (Parfleche: “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? What do you notice about the decorations on the box?*
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, her parfleches are her own unique artistic creations. Historically, plains and western Indians made parfleches out of treated animal hides to store or carry items like moccasins, clothing and dried food.
3. Display a showing [map the original range of the American buffalo](#). Explain how buffalo herds were an important source of food for many American Indians and thus they followed the buffalo as they migrated to graze on prairie grasses. Invite students to imagine that they’re joining the hunt and bringing all their possessions with them. Ask: *Have you ever gone camping and needed to bring all your supplies with you? What did you bring? If you haven’t been camping, think about all the things you use everyday in your life from the moment you wake up in the morning until the time you go to sleep. What do you need each day in terms of clothes, shelter, tools and food?* To help younger students write their lists, create a word bank on the board using words from the class brainstorming session.
4. Give each student a sheet of paper and a pencil. Ask them to create a list of all the supplies they would pack in their parfleche boxes in order to live life on the Plains and follow the buffalo herds. Encourage students to be as thorough as possible.
5. Once students have completed their lists, have them divide into small groups and compare lists. Were there items on a friend’s list that they had missed?
6. Gather the class together to wrap up the lesson. Ask: *How many things did you have on your list? Lots of items or just a few? What are some examples of items you would pack in your parfleche? What do you think it would be like to carry all these things with you as you moved from place to place? Are there things on your list that maybe you could leave behind in order to lighten your load? Were there any items on a friend’s list that surprised you? Do you think you would like to live in a lot of different places? Why or why not? Why do you think parfleche boxes were important to many*

## Materials

- pencils
- one sheet of lined paper for each student
- *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
    - 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
  - Relate and Connect to Transfer
- **Language Arts**
  - Oral Expression and Listening
  - Writing and Composition

## 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.”



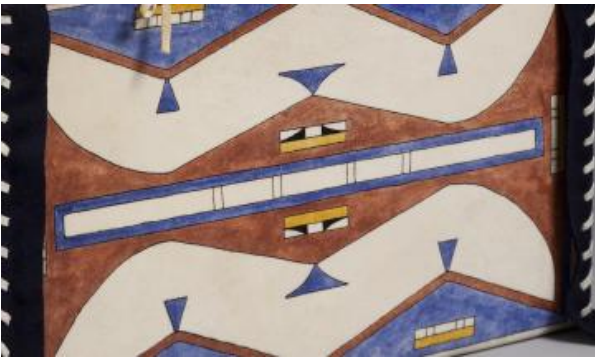
### Dark Blue Trade Cloth

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.



Funding for lesson plans provided by a grant from the Morgridge Family Foundation. Additional funding provided by the William Randolph Hearst Endowment for Education Programs, and Xcel Energy Foundation. We thank our colleagues at the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education.