

LESSON PLAN

AMERICAN FOLK ART FISH DECOYS



Suggested Levels: Grades 6 - Advanced

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Students will explore the folk-art tradition of creating fish decoys, first developed by Indigenous peoples and later adapted by settlers for ice fishing. Though utilitarian, these objects often became decorative, reflecting culture and craftsmanship. Students will design and sculpt a decorative ceramic fish decoy, incorporating texture, pattern, and glaze to connect historical function with personal expression.

OBJECTIVES

I CAN... understand the cultural significance of fish decoys in American folk art.

I CAN... design and sculpt a decorative ceramic fish form using traditional ceramic techniques.

I CAN... reflect on the connection between function, art, and cultural heritage.

NATIONAL VISUAL ART STANDARDS

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

- Creativity and innovative thinking are essential life skills.
- Students explore folk art traditions and invent their own utilitarian-inspired decoy designs.

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

- Artists shape investigations through experimentation and tradition.
- Students reinterpret fish decoys through ceramic techniques, surface design, and symbolism.

Analyze, interpret, and select artistic work for presentation.

- Art reflects history, culture, and daily life.
- Students analyze fish decoys as artifacts of American folk tradition and create pieces that honor or reimagine those roots.



SUPPLY LIST

CLAY

- Clay body of choice

BRUSHES & TOOLS

- Needle tools
- Ribs
- Carving/modeling tools
- Slip and scoring tools
- Brushes
- Sponges

MISCELLANEOUS

- Rolling pin
- Tools for texture (stamps, combs, mesh, natural items)
- Folk art image references
- Dull pencil



COLORS BY MAYCO

Fundamentals Underglaze and a clear glaze finish are used in this lesson plan.

Fundamentals Underglaze provides bold, opaque color similar to folk palettes. A clear glaze overlay adds shine and depth, enhancing carved textures and details.



Accommodations

- Visuals: Provide historical fish decoy photos.
- Physical Support: Pre-cut slabs or simplified fish shapes.
- Timing: Offer flexible pacing through building and glazing.
- Choice: Allow realistic or abstract interpretations.
- Verbal Support: Pair spoken demos with step-by-step visuals.



Teacher Tips

- When comparing utilitarian and decorative folk art, highlight how each serves a different purpose; function versus aesthetic expression.
- Encourage storytelling through design choices.
- Pre-roll slabs for time efficiency.
- Two thin coats beat one thick coat. Underglazes like to be built up with thin even layers to reduce cracking flaking and brushstrokes.

MEET THE MASTER



Karen Karnes

1925-2016

American ceramist who blended function and artistry. While not known for fish decoys, her salt-glazed utilitarian ware reflects the balance of purpose and beauty in folk traditions.

"Folk art isn't naive; it's deeply informed by daily life." — Karen Karnes



DIRECTIONS - CLAY BUILDING PROCESS

Method 1

1. Start with a ball of clay. Gently shape it into the body of your fish. Use a paddle to help form the shape you want.



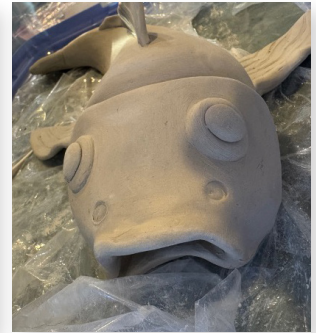
2. Use a rib or tool to carve gills or separate the head from the body.



3. Let the clay firm up a little, then carefully turn it upside down (tip, use foam to cushion so you don't flatten the top of the fish). Hollow out the inside and create the opening in the mouth using loop tools.



4. Roll out extra clay for fins and eyes. Use a rib or tool to press textures for scales or details.
5. Score the areas on both the fish and attachments and slip generously before attaching fins and eyes, so they stay secure.
6. Cover your fish with plastic wrap as you work. Remember—thin areas (like fins and the mouth opening) dry faster than the body, so keep them covered to prevent cracks.



7. Smooth surfaces with a damp sponge and keep adding details until your fish is complete.
8. Some students may have thicker walls that may require more drying time. Thinner areas or parts that stick out may dry quicker, so a wet box or wrapping with plastic wrap can help slow the drying process and prevent cracking. Prop the box or gradually remove plastic wrap to allow the clay to dry evenly.
9. Make certain the creations are completely dry before firing. Moisture in clay can cause items to break or pop in firing. If the items feel cool to the touch, they probably need more drying time. Bisque fire slowly to cone 04, decorate with fired colors, and glaze fire to the recommended temperature for the clay body selected and colors used.



DIRECTIONS - CLAY BUILDING PROCESS

Method 2

1. Roll out a slab from the low fire clay and compress both sides of the clay with a rib or plastic card.
2. Using the dull pencil, sketch out the fish shapes directly on the clay slab. "Erase" any mistakes during drawing by smoothing the clay back out with the rib or card.
3. Cut out the fish shapes with a toothpick or needle tool.
4. Use the dull pencil and toothpick to create segments and drawn textures on the front side of each fish. In our example we chose to do lines and swirls to mimic the look of wood grain.
5. Allow to dry and bisque fire to cone 04.



DIRECTIONS - DECORATING PROCESS



Using Mayco's Fundamental glaze, apply bright folk-art colors with patterns or symbols.



EXTEND THE LEARNING *using Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory*

LINGUISTIC (Word Smart)

Write a folk tale about your fish.

SPATIAL (Picture Smart)

Draft templates and 3D sketches before building.

INTERPERSONAL (People Smart)

Stage a "folk market" display with labels.

BODY KINESTHETIC (Body Smart)

Host a gallery walk, leaving peer feedback notes.

NATURALIST (Nature Smart)

Base design on a local fish species.

LOGICAL/ MATHEMATICAL (Number Smart)

Explore symmetry and proportion in design.

INTRAPERSONAL (Self Smart)

Journal about your fish's symbolism.

MUSIC (Music Smart)

Work with folk/Indigenous music playing during studio time.

RUBRIC

	EXCELLENT (5 PTS)	GOOD (4 PTS)	SATISFACTORY (3 PTS)	NEEDS WORK (1-2 PTS)
CRAFTSMANSHIP	Excellent construction, sturdy, clean	Strong craftsmanship, minor flaws	Adequate, some rough edges	Incomplete/poorly built
CREATIVITY	Unique, personal design	Original, thoughtful details	Some creative effort	Little to no originality
HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING	Strong reflection of folk art	Clear reference with symbolism	Some folk art influence	Minimal context or no connection
SURFACE DESIGN AND GLAZING	Enhances texture & symbolism	Good application, thoughtful color	Adequate but limited	Uneven, rushed, or unfinished
EFFORT AND ENGAGEMENT	Consistently engaged, revisions made	Participated well	Needed reminders	Little to no engagement

Total Score: ____/25

PERFORMANCE LEVELS
<p>25-20 POINTS (A): OUTSTANDING</p> <p>19-15 POINTS (B): GOOD</p> <p>14-11 POINTS (C): FAIR</p> <p>10-7 POINTS (D): WEAK</p> <p>6-0 POINTS (F): INCOMPLETE</p>