



Colcha by Josephine Lobato

Look for these icons for resources accessible on this website



**Audio**



**Video**



**Lesson Plan**

## Colcha Embroidery

- Description:** Students learn what colcha embroidery is and its history, view photos of colcha embroidery based on the legend of La Llarona, tell and illustrate their own stories, create designs and make a colcha, engage in classroom discussions, create one-act plays.
- Grades:** K – 12
- Author:** Angelique Acevedo
- Materials Included:** Photo of colcha  
Recordings (available on this site or on audio cassette and vhs from the Colorado Council on the Arts)  
*"Do Not Pass Me By"* (audio)  
*"Just Plain Art"* (video)
- Materials Needed:** Burlap, yarn/embroidery needles, wool yarn, scissors, white paper, crayons or markers, permanent black marker, measuring tape or yard stick. Internet access to websites, pictures of paintings by Grandma Moses, additional reading if desired, Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990. (See Resources Sec.)
- Standards:** This activity can be used to address these Colorado Model Content Standards:  
**Foreign Language: 2**  
**Geography: 2, 4**  
**History: 1, 3, 5**  
**Math: 1, 5**  
**Music: 4, 5**  
**Reading and Writing: 2, 4**  
**Visual Arts: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5**

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### What is Colcha?

Colchas are embroidered woolen textiles depicting religious images or scenes from everyday life. A single type of stitch creates the uniquely dense textiles. The Spanish brought the tradition to this area during colonial times, when sheep and wool were an important part of the economy and everyday life. Colchas were used as altar cloths and altar carpets in Catholic churches and in the home as coverlets. The word colcha refers to the embroidery that evolved in colonial New Mexico. It also means 'coverlet' in Spanish.

Colcha embroidery is a traditional Spanish colonial style of textile, bed covering, or wall hanging dating from the early nineteenth century. This folk art tradition is both old and constantly renewing itself, presenting a sensitive portrayal of artists and the contexts in which they live and work. Colcha creation is bound up in a perpetual round of cultural commentary and self-reflection. Colcha embroidery is used to record how a stitcher's memories of his or her life are intertwined with the history of the community.



Josephine Lobato's colcha embroidery of La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, as described in the legend. Photo by Bea Roeder.

### Literacy Component

This colcha embroidery by Josie Lobato tells the legend of La Llorona, the weeping woman who was so furious when her lover abandoned her to marry an upper class woman that she killed her children (most agree she drowned them). When she died, St. Peter asked her where her children were, and told her she must find them before she could enter heaven. She still wanders along waterways, crying and calling for her children; numerous people say they have heard her. Some adults use the legend to keep children away from dangerous waterways; when the wind howls, they say, "Listen! La Llorona is looking for her children! Don't let her get you!" Or "Stay away from the water, or La Llorona will get you!"



Listen to Angel Vigil tell his version of the story of "La Llorona" on the recording "**Do Not Pass Me By**" (Volume II Side A #3).

Ask your students who knows the story and encourage them to tell it. One telling may provoke other versions; if so, use this opportunity to remind your students that one characteristic of folklore is that it is transmitted orally, so many variations arise. (VA4)

Then encourage each student to pick a story that is meaningful to them and illustrate it. Ask your students to tell the story behind their stitchery as they work on it, and to think about why it is significant to them.

## Classroom Activities

## Getting Started

A colcha embroidery is made from stitching many pieces of colored thread on a solid surface. The designs on colchas are usually autobiographical and tell a personal story. (H3, VA4, VA5)

- Design a pattern of your choice after looking at images of colchas. These patterns may be one of a kind or of a repeated design. It all depends on the story your colcha will tell. (RW4, Ma1)
- Colcha-like embroidery pieces from other cultures can be introduced as well as storytelling aspects of some of these works of art. What will your colcha be about? What story or memory will it speak of? Check the websites listed in the resource section for some examples of colcha design and embroidery produced by other cultures. (H3, VA4, VA5)



For an example of a Hmong embroidery folk art tradition alive in Colorado, see "*Just Plain Art*" segment 2.

- Look at colchas by Shirley Ortega and Luella Le Blanc in the [Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990](#). Catalog (see Resources Section for ordering information). Also look at Colchas by Sally Chávez and her apprentices. Discuss the artists' designs and the stories their images speak about. (H3, RW4, VA4)
- After looking at contemporary colchas made by the artists mentioned above, read what they say about why their work is important to them. Read more about the history of this art in "Hispanic Colcha Emroidery: Stiches in Time." [Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990](#) p 21. Consider the following: How does

colcha embroidery connect people with their ancestors? How important is the story element in them? How do the colcha artists represent the San Luis Valley? What do these colchas speak about? (H3, RW4, VA4 G2&4, VA5)

- Are the stories in these colchas clear? How do you feel about this form of communication? (RW4, VA4, VA5)
- Now move into a discussion of the colchas and the stories they have told in history. Do you think that it is important to open up and not repress your feelings? Could such an action take on a political direction? Why do we have an amendment that protects our freedom of speech and expression? (Ma1, H3, RW4, VA4, VA5)
- Divide the class into small groups. Have them create one-act plays where the idea of self expression is threatened. Plot out the stage area, props and dialogue relevant to the students' topics. Discuss historical settings where personal freedom and expression was removed. Discuss pros and cons. (Ma1, H3, RW4, VA4, VA5)
- Discuss the political and social implications of a colcha that had a story with this kind of story or statement on it. What would be the implications if produced in our society today? (H3, RW4, VA4, VA5)
- Examine the paintings of Grandma Moses and compare her story telling quality with the colchas. Discuss the emotional impact each style has and how that emotional quality affects the viewer. What memories are stirred up? Do you think that this was accidental or part of a skilled story teller's technique? (H3, RW4, VA4, VA5)

## Making a Colcha

Note: It would be great to find a local colcha maker or embroiderer of any type who could help students with the stitching on their colchas. Invite them to come to your classroom and teach a few simple stitches.

### Materials Needed

- For each student, 14 in. x 14 in. piece of white or cream burlap (for lower grades) or muslin (for upper grades)
- Thick, blunt yarn needles for lower grades; sharp crewel embroidery needles for upper grades
- Wool yarn in many colors
- Fabric scissors
- Sheet of white paper cut to be the same size as the piece of cloth
- Optional: crayons, colored pencils, or markers for color design
- Permanent black marker to draw design on cloth
- Measuring tape or yard stick (for measuring cloth and rooms)

“The word colcha means bedspread. In all probability white or unbleached muslin was used to cover the beds. With time the ladies began to decorate this cloth; thus colcha embroidery.”  
 Evangeline Salazar, [Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990.](#)

### Procedures

1. Planning, for each student: Think about an important event in your life. It can be a move to a new town or school, a fun game you've played, going to live with someone new, losing a favorite person or pet, or one of many other true stories in your life. Create a picture in your mind of that story. (VA1, RW4)
2. Sketch that story onto the piece of paper cut to be the same size as your cloth will be. The design should have about one inch as a border. Try to draw your story picture so that you can communicate your feelings and memories through it. Show something about your environment. (VA4, VA5, G2)
3. Transfer your design onto your piece of cloth with the permanent black marker. Remember to leave the border. You'll be turning that under at the end. (VA3)
4. Carefully decide on the strands of color that you will embroider onto your piece of cloth. Do you want warm colors or cool colors? Will they be dark or light? Do you want to add texture with special stitches? Will you have contrast? Plan it well. (H3, RW4, VA4 VA2&5)
5. When you are ready to sew, thread your needles and use the simple under/over stitch. Choose your yarn colors carefully and make each stitch even. Take this slowly; you want to do a good job. Quality is very important here. After all, your story is worth telling and it is worth telling well. (RW4, VA3&4 VA5)
6. Watch as you add stitches to the different parts of your design and the sections come together as a whole. They are parts that are fractions of the whole and it is starting to come together. Can you see your story element coming through yet? (Ma1, H3, RW4, VA4, VA5)

# TIES THAT BIND

## Folk Arts Lesson Plan - Colcha Embroidery

7. Ask for help in making your stitches. Remember, it takes lots of practice to become a master colcha maker like Shirley Ortega and Sally Chávez. (VA3&4)

It might be a good idea to do a color drawing of your design before you start. (NOTE: As an alternative activity, the design can be developed more fully and serve as a project in itself.)

Discuss the following during your stitching times:

Looking at the colcha you are making, what is starting to happen to the design? Do you see repeated patterns? Are you putting dark colors next to light ones to create contrast? What if you put some extra cross stitches over another colored thread? What would happen then? Is your colcha starting to look a little like one of the cultures we have been studying? Is this influence an accident or do you want it to resemble that culture? (H3, RW4 VA4 VA5)

After you've worked about 30 minutes, count your stitches. How many stitches have you made so far? How many stitches do you think you'll need to complete your colcha? About how many stitches will it take for all students in your classroom combined to complete their colchas? (Ma1&5)

Some students will use longer stitches than others. What difference does that make in how many stitches they'll need for their colcha? (Ma1)

How many student colchas would it take to blanket the entire floor surface of the classroom? The dining hall or gym? (Ma1&5)

Discuss the way colcha makers like Shirley Ortega and Sally Chávez, shown in the Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990, depict

the San Luis Valley. Think about what happens when folk artists like them move from their home to another state or country. Do their new neighbors necessarily appreciate their art? Have your students met artists whose work they don't understand?

Discuss with students any changing demographics in their own neighborhoods. Study immigration patterns in the United States over the past 20 years. How does this compare to historical migrations? (H3, RW4, VA4, G2&4)



Listen to the following two selections of "*Do Not Pass Me By.*" (Music 4, 5; History 1, 3; Foreign Language 2)

La Familia Manzanaras are a Spanish colonial family band from the San Luis Valley, home of many active colcha embroiderers. Learn about the effects of isolation on religious and social life, the Penitentes, and dances. Also hear about musical differences between southern Colorado Spanish colonial culture and Mexican culture. (Volume II Side A #1)

We hear Jacklyn Sanchez singing and playing a blend of Mexican and Spanish colonial music, beginning with a short section of "La Llarona" and including "Ah, ¡Cómo No!" and "Ojitos verdes" (songs in Spanish). (Volume II Side A #2)

8. Completing your colcha: When you are satisfied that you have told your story well with your stitches of yarn on your cloth, finish the edges by turning them to the wrong side and stitching them down. You may use a piece of white thread to do this. (VA3&4)

### Evaluation and Discussion Questions

Which colchas in this classroom tell personal stories or personal narratives? Hold a class discussion in which the students defend personal points of view, comparing the worth of personal identity and self-expression to controlled discipline. (H3, RW4, VA4, VA5)

Given the history of colchas and the people who made them, were there controversies in the cultures that their colchas could have told? What were they? Are there any colchas in this classroom that seem political? Why? (H3&5, RW4, VA4)

Have students write down the themes that they see expressed in the colchas. Encourage a discussion and emphasize universal themes like searching for freedom, peace, harmony and trust. (H3, RW4, VA4&5, RW2)

Have students present their own colchas to the class. They should explain the stories they depicted and explain their choices of design, color, symmetry, etc. (RW2)

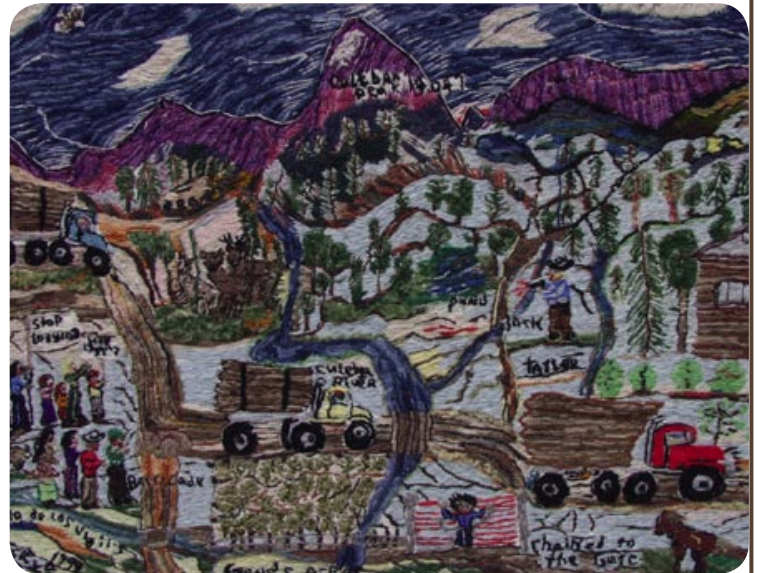
Hold class critiques of the colchas. Of all the colchas in the class, which are more practical and which more decorative? Are there any that display cultural influences? How? Which show the best use of design elements like contrast, color, different types of symmetry, and shape. Students may also evaluate each others' presentations of their colchas. (RW4; VA1,2,4)

#### *Optional to the teacher*

With safety pins, attach all the students' colchas to a large piece of cloth, like an appliquéd quilt, and hang it on your classroom wall for a while. Later, let each student take home his or her creation.

### Pre-Assessment of Existing Knowledge

- Identify grade appropriate vocabulary which focuses on the idea of what a story or personal narrative is.
- Discuss preconceived notions involving words and actions, cultures, immigration and freedom.
- Discuss preconceived notions of personal feelings and bias regarding what art is, what good art is and what bad art is.
- Discuss attitudes about being different, being an immigrant and feeling isolated.



Josephine Lobato created her wool colcha embroidery piece called "La Sierra" in 1999. It depicts the protest action of the people of San Luis in the Sangre de Cristo mountain range of the San Luis Valley. Photo by Jennifer Stewart from Suzanne Macaulay collection.

"I cannot paint with a brush, but I can paint with a needle. I can use my needle as a medium to create a picture. I consider myself an artist, because I paint with a needle. It gives me a good feeling to see a finished product." Sally Chavez, [Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990](#).

### Instructional Strategies

Modeling, group discussion, collaboration, independent work and individual research, brainstorming and small group work. Key questions: What do you notice about the attitudes and commitment aspects of the task? What do you notice about the idea of “quality and craftsmanship?”

Note: For another colcha embroidery activity, see Angel Vigil's book [Una Linda Raza: Cultural and Artistic Traditions of the Hispanic Southwest](#) which may be available at your local library or bookstore.

How do you think a story can be told by a colcha?

“A tourist looking at a colcha-embroidered skirt commented, ‘I could buy this cheaper at K-Mart.’ Shirley notes that this comment reveals a common lack of understanding of the difference in time, skills and materials between a fine handmade object and a mass-produced cheap imitation. This lack of appreciation is a common problem for artists attempting to sell handmade items.” Shirley Ortega, [Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990.](#)