



Blanket Stories:
Ancestor, Baron
Woolen Mill, and
Hill People

Marie Watt, *Blanket Stories: Ancestor, Baron Woolen Mill, and Hill People*, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Blanket Stories: Ancestor, Baron Woolen Mill, and Hill People is an artwork by Marie Watt that explores themes of memory, community, and cultural significance through the use of blankets. In her sculptures, such as the towering blanket installations, Watt invites viewers to reflect on the personal and collective histories tied to these everyday objects. Blankets, in Native American traditions and beyond, are symbols of comfort, protection, and rites of passage. Through the layering of blankets, Watt creates a visual narrative that speaks to the power of storytelling, connection, and shared experience.

ARTIST BIO

Marie Watt (b. 1967) is an American artist who describes herself as “half Indian, half cowboy,” due to her diverse cultural heritage. Her ancestry includes Seneca, German, and Scottish roots, but it is her Native American Seneca heritage, as passed down from her mother, that most deeply informs Watt’s art. In their native tongue, the Seneca proudly refer to themselves as “The Great Hill People.” Historically, they inhabited areas within what is now Pennsylvania and New York, but today they live on several small reservations in western New York. Watt holds degrees from Willamette University, the Institute of American Indian Arts, and earned her Master’s of Fine Art in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University. In her work, she embraces art as a medium to bridge barriers of language, culture, and time.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Marie Watt’s artistic practice focuses on storytelling, memory, and the symbolism of everyday objects. She is particularly interested in the dual nature of textiles: as functional objects that offer physical comfort and warmth, and as symbolic carriers of memory, identity, and meaning. Her art often incorporates blankets, which hold significant cultural meaning in Indigenous communities. In addition to Native American traditions, many other cultures give blankets to mark important moments, even remaining with someone over the course of their life. Over time, these objects absorb layers of meaning, becoming inseparable from specific memories and emotions. In her *Blanket Stories* series, Watt explores this concept by inviting local communities to contribute the blankets used in her installations. In doing so, she gathers the stories linked to each donated blanket, reflecting the collective memory and experiences of the people in that area. Through this process, Watt encourages viewers to consider their own stories and the everyday objects associated with them.

ARTWORK

The use of textiles in *Blanket Stories: Ancestor, Baron Woolen Mill, and Hill People* is representative of Marie Watt’s overall work. This particular sculpture consists of a stack of wool blankets, carefully folded into squares and threaded onto a steel pole holding them upright. They rest on a cedar base, a tree native to the northwestern United States, where Watt grew up. The blankets vary in color and size, and each is accompanied by a tag featuring a personal story from its donor. Just as blankets are gifted in many Native cultures to mark important life milestones, these donated blankets symbolize significant moments or memories in the lives of those who contributed them. The title of the work also adds layers of meaning: “Baron Woolen Mill” refers to a historic wool mill in Brigham City, Utah, while “Hill People” likely references the Ute tribe, native to the Provo, Utah, area where the piece was installed. The inclusion of community-sourced blanket’s emphasizes the shared narratives and the collective histories that bind people together. Scan the nearby QR code to read a sampling of blanket stories.



GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Recognize how artists incorporate community and personal narratives into their work
- 2 Connect an artwork to its cultural, historical, and geographical context
- 3 Understand the significance of totem poles to specific Native American tribes
- 4 Creatively respond to another artwork

LOOK AND DISCUSS

- Describe the colors and textures in these blankets. How do they compare to your favorite blanket at home?
- What associations do you make with blankets? What are some different purposes of a blanket?
- If your favorite blanket could tell a story, what story would it tell?

CONTINUE THE STORY

Marie Watt’s work draws not only on her Seneca traditions in particular, but also other Native cultures across North America. In her *Blanket Stories* series, she references totem poles, which are not used by the Seneca people, but are common among northwestern tribes where Watt was raised. Some of these native tribes include the Jamestown S’Klallam, Tlingit, and Haida Tribes, and the Lummi Nation.

Totem poles are tall, carved wooden pillars featuring stacked figures, and are often placed throughout tribal lands as important cultural markers. While totem pole styles vary across different tribes, they share a common purpose of preserving and passing down stories, histories, and ancestral memories across generations. Carved symbols often depict animals, each representing a specific family line, clan, or the social standing connected to the pole’s owner and their ancestors. Some totem poles tell traditional legends where each figure represents a character in the story.

Scan the QR code to explore a list of totem pole symbols and their meanings, provided by the Smithsonian Institute (see page 4):

Why do you think it is important to pass down stories through generations? What story would you want to tell about yourself or your family? How could different art forms be used to communicate those narratives?



Examples of important totem poles:



Thunderbird House Post in Stanley Park, Vancouver, BC, Canada

- Original made in early 1900s
- Replica (pictured) created in 1987
- Original artist Charlie James (Kwakwaka’wakw)



Chief Johnson Totem Pole in Ketchikan, Alaska

- Carved in 1902, recarved in 1989
- Recarved by Israel Shotridge (Tlingit)
- Commissioned by the Chief



Why the Sun Always Shines in Sequim Totem Pole in Sequim, WA

- Created in 2015
- Designed by master carver Dale Faulstich (Jamestown S’Klallam)

ACTIVITY #1: PERSONALIZED BLANKET STORIES

Materials: Paper, colored pencils, sticky notes

Subject Areas: Visual Arts, Math, English Language Arts

Duration: 30-40 minutes

Think of your favorite blanket. What do you like about it? Draw a picture of that blanket, and on a sticky note, write a short reflection about why it matters to you. Then, with the rest of your class, arrange your drawings together on the floor or wall in a creative class art project. As a class, discuss what your collection reveals about shared experiences and community.

Next, gather and analyze mathematical data from the drawings and reflections. What fraction of the blankets are fuzzy? How many more (or fewer) blankets are patterned than solid colors? What percentage of them are more than five years old?

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.R)

Students will understand, evaluate and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

Strand: Connect (V.CO)

Students will relate artistic skills, ideas, and work with personal meaning and external context.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lesson may include student participation in group discussions and thoughtful completion of the learning activity. The activity “Personalized Blanket Stories” can be used to assess students’ ability to connect personal experience to visual arts, engage with personal storytelling, and analyze class data using math concepts. The activity “Memory-Keeping Zines” can be used to evaluate students’ ability to connect past experiences to artmaking, preserve memory through narrative, articulate personal meaning, and express identity.

ACTIVITY #2: MEMORY-KEEPING ZINES

Materials: Paper, pens, markers or colored pencils, scissors, glue sticks and stapler (optional)

Subject Areas: Visual Arts, English Language Arts

Duration: 30-40 minutes

Just as totem poles serve as memory keepers, diaries, journals, and other books can preserve our own personal histories. Create a zine—a small handmade booklet—to tell your own stories. Fill it with drawings and writings that reflect a family memory, an important tradition, a favorite object, or an important moment that shaped who you are.

Optional lesson modifications: Make a hand-sewn binding for your zine. Or, instead of making a zine, make a stapled booklet.

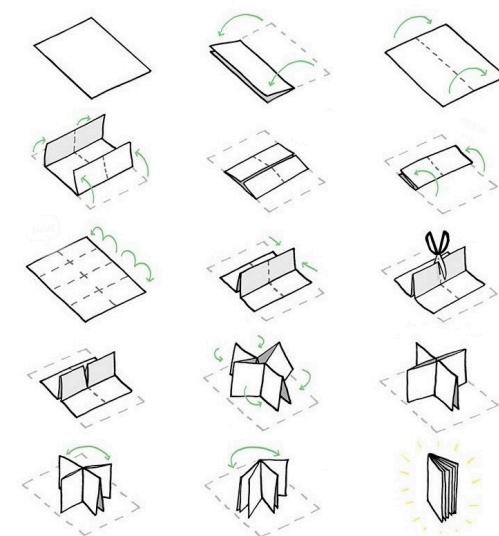
UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.CR)

Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation.

Strand: Respond (V.R)

Students will understand, evaluate and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.



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