



Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art

Start with Art

Medieval Europe

Arts Integration Educator's Guide for Teachers and Parents

DISCOVERING THE DARK AGES:

About Medieval Europe:

The Medieval Period in Europe spanned from the 5th-15th centuries. During the Renaissance, scholars labeled this period the Middle Ages, or the Dark Ages, because it was the time between the golden age of classicism (ancient Greece and Rome) and the rebirth of classical ideas during the Renaissance. To the people of the Renaissance, the Middle Ages seemed a time of mystery and turmoil, when the golden ideas of classicism were seemingly lost. However, the Medieval Period was actually a notable time of achievement and sharing of ideas. Many European cities, states, governments were born during this time. This is also when universities were established. Furthermore, several inventions were created during the Middle Ages, including the windmill, wheel barrow, horizontal loom, heavy plow, spectacles, and cakes of soap. Finally, many monuments, particularly great castles and cathedrals, remain standing today as a testament to “Dark Ages” innovation.

Feudalism in the Middle Ages:

Most of Medieval Europe was governed by monarchs, kings and queens who inherited their rule. The kingdoms of the monarchs were organized by a feudal system where land was given to vassals (servants) in return for services. The monarch would give land grants (fiefs) to his vassals—his most important nobles (barons and bishops)—in return for the nobles supplying soldiers and/or supplies during times of war. The nobles, in turn, had their own vassals—lower lords called knights—who fought for the nobles (and thereby the monarch) and provided soldiers and supplies in exchange for fiefs.

During the Middle Ages, over 90% of the population were peasants (serfs) that worked the land owned by lords and nobles. According to medieval law, serfs did not belong to themselves, but to their lord. In exchange for working the lords' lands, serfs were given a small piece of land to work for themselves. Many struggled to produce enough to feed their families.

HERALDRY 101:

About Coats of Arms:

In the Middle Ages, knights met one another on the field of battle wearing elaborate suits of metal armor with helmets covering their faces. In order to distinguish which knight was which, the knights would emblazon their shields and surcoats (tunics that covered their armor) with different colors and symbols. This practice, commonly used throughout Europe by the 12th century, is known as heraldry. The combination of colors (tinctures) and symbols (charges) is popularly known as a coat of arms.

The tinctures and charges of the coat of arms were personal to the knight and his family. Generally, knights inherited the arms of their fathers, changing them slightly to create a distinction for themselves. Women also inherited the arms of their fathers, but combined them with those of their husbands. Occasionally, men and women would be granted (rather than inheriting) coats of arms.

The proper name for a “coat of arms” is a “heraldic achievement.” As coats of arms became more and more popular across Europe, men known as “heralds” were given the task of recording which arms belonged to which person. The heralds also kept track of the rules that were established to govern heraldry as the heraldic achievements became more and more elaborate.

POINT-OF-ENTRY:

Design Your Own Coat of Arms:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): VA 3.1-2, 3.5, 4.1-3

Supplies (per person): 1 sheet of white paper or graph paper, 1 sheet of watercolor paper or heavy stock, 1 graphite pencil, 1 eraser, 1 colored pencil or pen, 1 ruler, tempera paints, small soft-bristled paintbrush, paint palette or plate, container of water, tape (optional), water-proof black pen (optional).

1. At the museum, observe the 8 coats of arms on the lid of the medieval *Ivory Jewelry Chest* and the shield on the medieval suit of armor.
2. Visit www.mgmoa.org/lesson-plans to download a handout with step-by-step photos of this project and a handout detailing the components of the coat of arms. Review the “Coats of Arms Components” handout before beginning this process as you will need to make several decisions regarding your design.
3. To begin your design, choose a shield shape for your field. If you are using white paper, you can use the ruler and pencil to draw a grid in which to orient your shape. If using graph paper, employ the grid printed on the paper. With a pencil, draw your shape, making sure that it is symmetrical. You are designing your coat of arms on the white/graph paper and then you will transfer your design to the watercolor/stock. Therefore, don't be worried about mistakes or using guidelines because these won't show up on your final artwork.
4. If you are going to “part the field” (divide your shape into sections) use the ruler and pencil to draw ordinaries or sub-ordinaries. If the lines you are using are organic (not straight), you can still draw straight lines with the ruler to act as guide lines for the placement of the organic lines.
5. Choose the charges (symbols) that will be emblazoned on your field. These can be traditional or they can be personal symbols for you or your family. Use the pencil to draw the charges on the field.
6. If you are going to create the more elaborate, full armorial achievement, draw in the helm, mantle, wreath, crest, supporters, compartment, and motto.
7. Choose the tinctures (colors, metals, furs) that you will use for your coat of arms. Note them on your design to help you when you are painting later. Remember to create a good visual contrast.
8. To transfer your design to the watercolor/stock paper, turn your design over and color the back of the white paper with the graphite pencil. Make sure the graphite layer is consistent and heavy.

9. Flip the white paper over again and place the graphite-colored back on top of the watercolor/stock paper. (If you choose, you can tape both down to your desk to keep them from sliding).
10. Using the colored pencil or pen, trace your design, pressing firmly to transfer it to the watercolor/stock paper. When you're done tracing, remove the white paper.
11. If necessary, use an eraser to "clean up" your design (erase any errant marks or smudges). You may choose to trace over your design with a water proof black pen.
12. Using the notes on your original design, color your coat of arms with the tempera paint. If you would like to paint in the traditional medieval way—you can create your own tempera paint. Download the handout "Making Egg Tempera" at www.mgmoa.org/lesson-plans for directions. When painting, make sure you create consistent, flat fields of bold colors that can easily be seen from a distance.
13. Display your coat of arms proudly!

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS:

Language Arts:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **R/L 5.1; W/G/U&M: 1.1-5**

Prior to developing a coat of arms, students should develop a medieval persona. They should first choose a name, an age, a time period, a place of residence, and an occupation. Then, they should write a "life story" that should include additional information, based on factual information about the Middle Ages. Who is their lord? How was their occupation performed? What did they eat? What did they do for entertainment? Were they betrothed? What was their religion? Were they a member of the clergy? Students can consult atlases, encyclopedias, and other sources for information. Students should be encouraged to use at least one primary document as a reference (that could include writings or imagery).

After their "life story" is complete and they are completely immersed in the persona, then they should design the coat of arms to present along with the story.

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **W/G/U&M: 1.1-5**

After designing their coats of arms, students should write about the components of the arms, detailing why they chose these specific components and how the components relate to the students personally.

Science and Math:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **SP&I 3.1-5, MPS 5.1**

During the Middle Ages, coats of arms were illustrated in a variety of media to suit different purposes. They could be woven or stitched into fabric, cast or embossed in metal, or even executed in stained glass. However, if the coats of arms were painted, then they were likely painted with egg tempera.

Egg tempera was the primary painting medium of the Middle Ages. It was made by combining ground pigment, water, and the yolk of an egg. The popularity of egg tempera waned in the Renaissance when oil paints became popular, but the technique never disappeared and many artists today still use this medium.

Students can create their own egg tempera paint to use for coloring their shields. They will grind pigment, mixing it with water and egg yolk. Download the “Making Egg Tempera Paint” handout at www.mgmoa.org/lesson-plans for step-by-step directions.

Prior to beginning, as a class, have students hypothesize about the role of the egg in the egg tempera. What does it do for the paint? Is it a necessary component? What would happen if there was too much or too little egg in the mixture? Note the students’ answers.

After preparing the pigment and the egg (as described in the handout), students should experiment with the ratios of water to pigment to egg in order to determine the best mixture for painting and to observe how changing the ratios can affect the visible and physical qualities of the paint. Students should regulate the amount of water, pigment, and egg yolk added to the mixture. An easy way to do this is to use clear straws as pipettes (with the unit marked on the straw).

Students should create a chart to record their findings and include paint swatches of the different mixtures.

As a class, discuss the students’ findings. Revisit the pre-experiment discussion questions. Were the students hypotheses correct? Were any of the results unexpected? If the students ground different colored pigments, were the ratios for the best mixture for painting similar or different?

To follow up, have students look at egg tempera paintings and compare them with other paintings. Now that they have used egg medium, can they visually tell which of the paintings is egg tempera? How does it visually compare to other painting mediums?

Social Studies:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **WS 1.1,3; 4.1**

As a class, discuss monarchies and feudalism. How do these systems differ from the major political and economic systems that exist today? Discuss the similarities and differences between the feudalistic practice of serfdom and slavery and sharecropping.

Download the handout “Crafts in the Middle Ages” at www.mgmoa.org/lesson-plans. Review the primary document “Gebhard, Bishop of Constance: Allocation of Serfs to Crafts, [in the year] 990.” As a class, discuss what this document reveals about the difference between the rights of tradesmen (crafters) and serfs.

As a class, review the trades listed in the primary document “List of Florentine Crafts Subject to Tax, [in the year] 1316.” Each student should choose a trade for further research. Students should write a short research paper about the trade and then design a coat of arms to represent a craftsman of that trade to accompany their paper.

WEB RESOURCES:

The Internet Medieval Source Book (located at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>) is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history.

The web exhibit, *Pigments through the Ages* (available at <http://www.webexhibits.org/pigments/>) contains a wealth of information about egg tempera and the pigments used during the Middle Ages (and other time periods).