

Circular Abstractions: Bulls-Eye Quilts

Fuller Craft Museum

TEACHER GUIDE

Overview

This guide provides a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offers suggestions for reflection and discussion, highlighting age-appropriate questions you might pose to students, along with basic background information for you to share.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students!

Circular Abstractions: Bulls-Eye Quilts

Exhibit Description: In this exhibit, guest curator Nancy Crow challenged the participating artists to create a unique design based upon the Bull's Eye pattern: four circles comprised of concentric rings (the iconic target symbol) set in a grid of four blocks, or quadrants. Artists from the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa responded to the invitation, deconstructing and re-assembling the bull's eye into new compositions. The result is a strikingly complex body of images, with each of the 25 quilts displayed conveying its own distinct voice. Many of the artists maintain the quadrants, with circles that vary from the rigidly geometric to wildly organic. For others, the circles break their boundaries, shift in scale, or even come to dominate the entire plane. The variety is a celebration of creativity, visual experimentation, design and the skill of the artist.

Speaking through the fundamental tools of artmaking – pattern, color, design, composition, rhythm, value, and movement – these pieces communicate a host of interpretations and narratives. For the viewer, it is a remarkable display not only of improvisation and expression, but of artists continuing the tradition of pushing the boundaries of their medium and demonstrating a mastery of their craft.

Pre-visit Activities

Before visiting Fuller Craft Museum, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and themes in the exhibition. We have included some selected images from the exhibition, along with relevant information that you may want to use before or after your museum visit.

Thirty-Second Look

Activity Overview: Discovering the elements in works of art takes time. Use the following activity to prompt students to look carefully and to develop observational skills viewing a work of art.

Activity Objectives:

- To encourage close looking and improve critical visual skills.
- To highlight that spending more time with a piece of art is necessary to understanding it fully.

Activity Steps:

1. Ask students to speculate on how much time they think a person might spend, on average, looking at a work of art. Record their responses and discuss the factors they believe affect the amount of time they spend looking. After students have answered, reveal that the average amount of time people spend looking at one object in a museum is less than half a minute. Ask them if 30 seconds is enough time to spend with a work of art. Why or why not? Try the following experiment in small groups to test their answers.
2. Direct students to look at a work of art (in the classroom, use a poster or transparency) for thirty seconds. For this exhibit, you could have them look at an intricate quilt or other textile piece of art. At the thirty-second mark, ask everyone to turn around and face away from the work of art (in the classroom, turn off projector or remove the poster).
3. Without looking back at the work of art, ask students to use their memories to answer questions based on their observations. Chart the words that students come up with to create a word bank. You might ask the following questions:
 - What colors are in the work of art? How many colors?
 - What shapes are in the artwork?
 - What does the artwork look like it is made of (what is the material)?
 - Is there an object, person, or specific setting depicted in the artwork?
4. With students' interests piqued, have them look again at the work of art. Guide the students through a careful re-examination. Ask them how they would refine their "looking." Ask if there is anything on the list that isn't actually in the work of art. Explain that sometimes we believe we saw something when we didn't; or we might recall different colors than those actually used in the work of art. Ask them to explain how the detailed observation allowed them to determine what the work of art depicts.
5. Ask students to consider how much longer they spent looking at the work of art the second time, and to explain their reactions to the work. Was their initial glance enough? Ask students if discussing and comparing observations with other people was helpful in determining the meaning in a work of art. Have the students explain their answers.

Discussion: What is Quilting?

Leading Questions:

- *What is a quilt?*
- *What do quilts look like?*
- *Are there quilts in your house?*
- *Do they serve a functional purpose or are they decorative?*

All quilts are made using a specific process called **quilting**. Quilting is done by sewing three layers of fabric together. These three layers are usually a quilt top, a batting or insulating material, and a backing. This process creates a thicker padded material, which we call a **quilt**.

Although they are all made using some variation on this basic process, quilts can take many different forms. Most likely, many of your students have quilts in their homes that they use as blankets or throws. However, the quilts you will see at the Fuller Craft do not serve this purpose. The bulls-eye quilts on display are **art quilts**, pieces of craft that are used for decorative purposes, not functional ones.

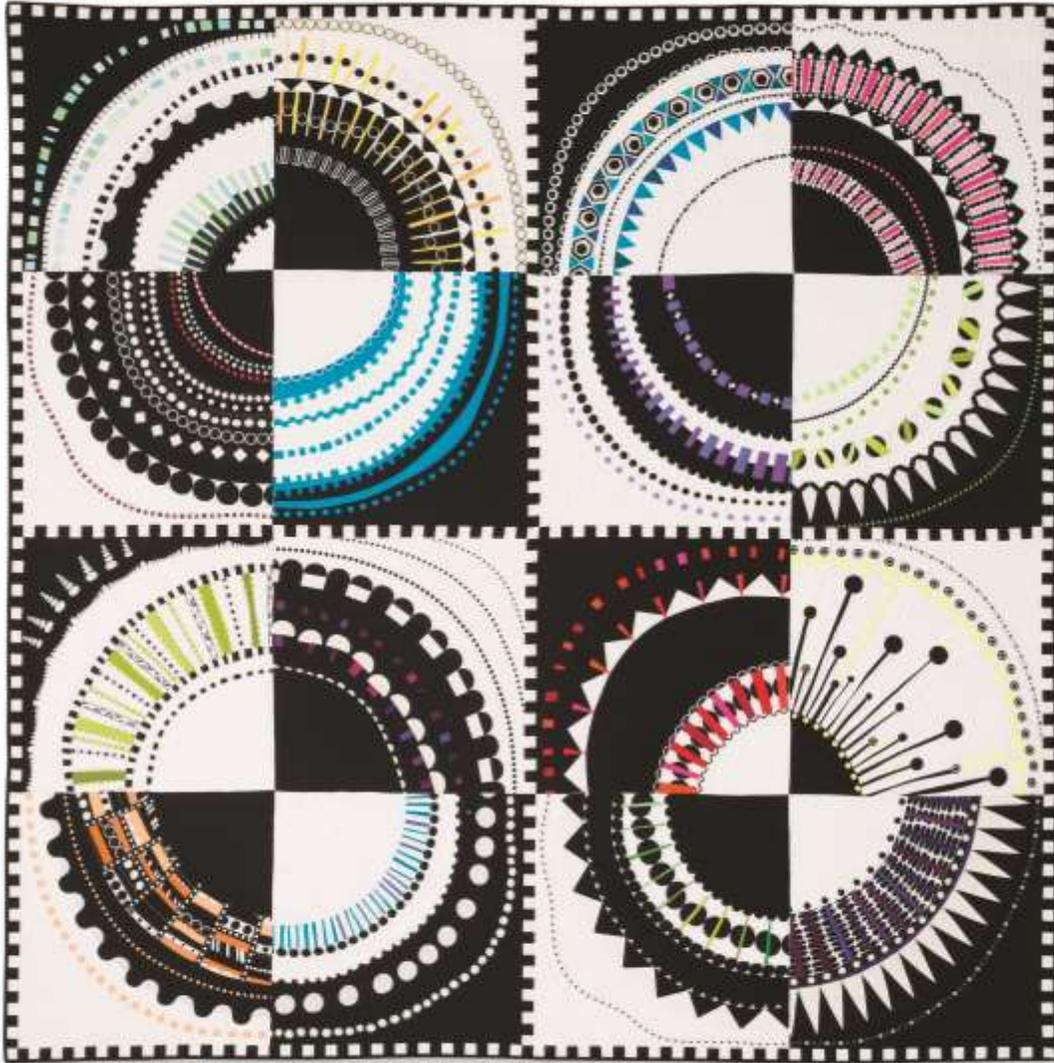
To achieve the multitude of different colors and shapes, the quilters in the exhibition used a technique called **piecing**. Piecing is done by sewing small pieces of cloth into patterns, called blocks, which are then sewn together to make the finished quilt top.

Many of the artists in the exhibit also dye their own fabrics and use specialty sewing machines called long-arm machines to create small, beautiful designs on the large quilt tops. This attention to detail can also often be seen on the back of the quilts. Some artists take pride in making their backings as beautiful as their quilt tops, so keep an eye out in the exhibition.

Batting, pictured to the right, is what makes the difference between sewing and quilting. Quilters add batting between the two pieces of fabric, the backing and the quilt top, and sew all three layers together.



Looking at and Talking About Bulls-Eye Quilts



Example: Maria Elkins, *Freedom*

There are many things to notice in the bulls-eye quilts. They are often highly complex, using multiple shapes, colors, and techniques. Questions that encourage students to make observations and closely look at an artifact, such as “**What do you notice?**”, work especially well throughout the Museum. More ways to talk about art:

- **What’s going on in this piece of artwork?**
- **What do you see that makes you say that?**
- **What else do you see?**
- **How do you feel when you look at this piece?**
- **What markings and words do you notice?**
- **Do you like looking at this piece? If so, what do you like about it?**
- **Do you not like looking at this piece? If so, what don’t you like about it?**

Thinking Mathematically Through Bulls-Eye Quilts

Due to their incorporation of different patterns and shapes as well as their inclusion of symmetry (or lack there-of), looking at bulls-eye quilts can be a good time to highlight how art can display mathematical concepts. The following questions can be suitable for students learning about counting, cardinality, and fractions, and they will also encourage close looking. Feel free to use *Freedom*, pictured above, as an example.

- **How many big black and white squares can you see?**
- **Is this piece symmetrical? What about each quarter? What about the individual squares in each quarter (of which there are 16 in total)?**
- **Can you notice any patterns in the shapes? The colors? The quilt as a whole?**
- **What different lines can you notice?**
- **What different shapes can you notice?**

If your students are younger, you can also practice counting by identifying the number of different shapes in the quilts.

After your Visit

Have the students discuss their experiences. Ask them how they felt about what they saw or if they have any questions. Make sure to keep communicating with students even after the visit is over.

Sample Questions: “What did you think about the museum? Is there anything that really stood out to you? What did you like?” “Do you have any questions or thoughts about the visit?”

- **What did you think about the museum?**
- **Is there anything that really stood out to you?**
- **What did you like?**
- **What did you dislike?**
- **Do you have any more questions or thoughts?**

Additional Resources

About the Curator

Nancy Crow has been making quilts for over 30 years and maintains a large studio and teaching facility on her 100-acre farm east of Columbus, Ohio. Nancy was named a Fellow of the American Craft Council in 1999 and in 1996 received two major awards: the Individual Artist's Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council and The National Living Treasure Award from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. In addition to participating in group shows around the world, she has had major solo exhibitions at the Renwick Gallery; the Museum of Arts & Design in New York City; the Cultural Arts Museum, Konstanz, Germany; the Auckland Art Museum and the Hawke's Bay Exhibition Centre in New Zealand; The International Quilt Study Center & Museum at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Carnegie Mellon University's Regina Miller Gouger Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA; the Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, MA; and the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center, Auburn, NY. A major figure and pioneer in fine art quilting, she has taught quilts as an art form in Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Ireland, Austria, England, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada, South Africa, and the United States. She is featured in two recent books: *Nancy Crow* (Breckling Press 2006), and a Synderman Gallery exhibition catalogue titled *Crossroads: Constructions, Markings, and Structures* (Breckling Press 2007). She is also the author of *Nancy Crow: Improvisational Quilts* (C & T Publishing, 1995), *Nancy Crow: Work in Transition* (American Quilters' Society), *Nancy Crow: Quilts and Influences* (American Quilters' Society, 1992) and *Gradations: From the Studio of Nancy Crow* (Quilt House Publishing, 1955).

Suggested Reading

[Nancy Crow](#) by Nancy Crow, Breckling Press, 2006.

[Nancy Crow: Quilts and Influences](#) by Nancy Crow and Jean Robertson, American Quilters' Society, 1992.

The exhibition catalog is also available in the gallery.