

## Teaching Heritage Crafts to Young Children

*Sujata C*

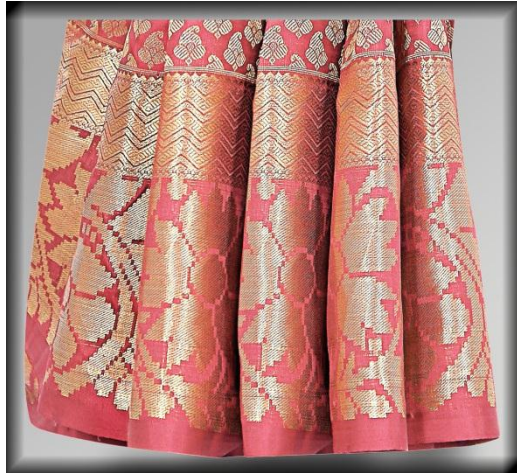


Man's propensity for the visual art form is primeval, and ancient cave paintings bear testimony to this. All Indian art and craft have a history that dates beyond the Indus Valley civilization. In that sense our crafts are our inheritance, our legacy, our very birthright, indeed. That crafts make for a relaxing and pleasurable activity is universally acknowledged and is encouraged in childhood to ensure multi-dimensional growth of one's personality.

So, should we introduce heritage crafts to children in primary classes? The answer would be a resounding 'yes', as the child is likely to be preoccupied with adolescence issues in later years.

How can we sensitize children to the varied arts and crafts of our country? The question itself is redundant because our heritage of crafts is such that we are surrounded by them from childhood. In our mother's lap, we have played in the silky folds of the *Kanjeevaram* saree, or the soft cotton of *Mangalgiri*, as the case maybe. The terracotta walls of our village homes are decorated with mud and mirror art in Kutch and Warli paintings in Maharashtra. Toddlers in villages have grown up seeing these on their walls and taken the exquisite art work for granted.

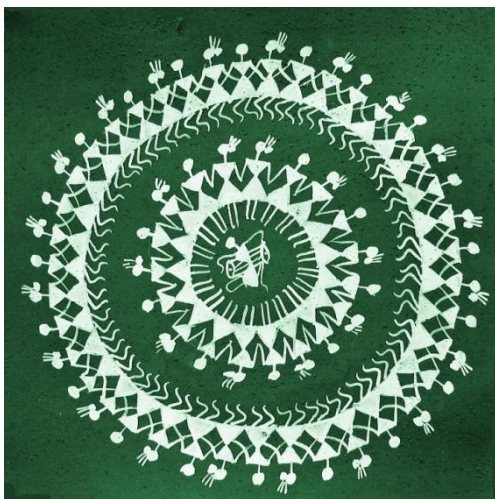
**Kanjeevaram and Mangalgiri sarees:**



**Gujarat mud and mirror art:**



**Warli art:**





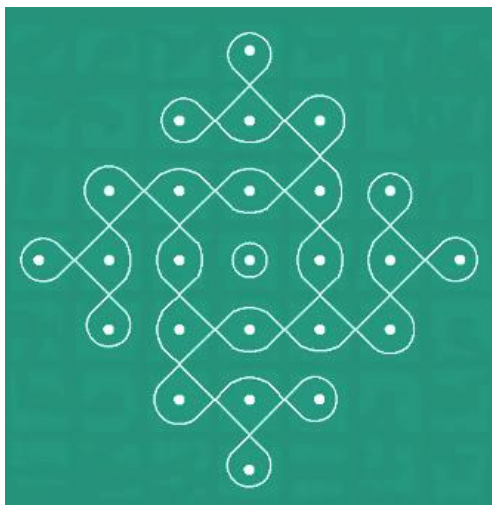
**Hodka home:**



**Rangoli:**



**Doorstep decorations in the form of *kolam*, *muggu* and *torans*:**



Our children have seen mothers or aunts draw the *kolam* or make *rangoli* during festivals. They have seen grandmothers weave an exotic shawl on the home loom in Nagaland or fathers making *pattachitra* on dried palm leaves in Odisha. Almost all ancient Indian craft forms are home-based practices, with sometimes the entire family involved in the various aspects of the craft, be it boat-making in Kerala or toy-making in Chennapatna. Little children in Sanganer have probably helped their mothers tie those knots on the beautiful *bandhani chunaris* that we so cherish!



### Catch them young!

Mahatma Gandhi had encouraged everyone to do a spot of spinning the *charkha* every day because the act was conducive to thinking and disciplining the mind. Likewise all art and craft, while being highly stimulating, can also be an amazing exercise in calming down brain functions. The sooner our children pick up these skills, the better prepared they will be to face the real world.

Those of us who started schooling in the sixties have all learnt to sew from a very young age because it was considered an essential skill. We were asked to bring small pieces of cloth leftover from the items that our mothers probably made for themselves. We were taught running stitch, hemming, machine stitch and so on with regular needle and threads, graduating to embroidery the next school term. Those days one couldn't afford to be a little girl and not have a handkerchief with dainty daisy flowers embroidered in one corner, pinned to one's school pinafores because embroidery was haute couture in the late sixties! We learnt it all with amazing ease with no helicopter mothers fretting over us, saying things like *7-8 year olds will hurt themselves with sharp needles*. The next year it was knitting and we learnt that also effortlessly and made small caps for our dolls.



All this was taught to girls only, because the boys were sent off to carpentry classes, where they built small tools and furniture. No doubt this was highly loaded with gender issues, but one has to understand that this was pre-*women's lib* days. This history and practice show that it was only in the eighties that knitting lost its popularity after the women's lib surge of the seventies. Any kind of needlework was seen as a sign of domestication and subjugation. One was considered a fossil if they said they liked it. By the nineties, the art of needlework had lost all its sheen and fell by the wayside, gathering dust heaped on by technological advances and liberated women, who made their way to outer space subsequently.



### Age of creative activity

Child development experts say that children, if left to themselves, away from criticism and ridicule, will turn to creative activity in late childhood. This stage of life is also known as *creative age*. This is probably why the current children's TV show **Mr Maker** of CBeebies is such a global hit. Mr Maker, the art master, goes all around the world meeting little artists and inspiring them to give it a go at making things themselves.

Children in primary schools are generally in the late childhood stage when they are 8-12 years. According to *Elizabeth Hurlock*, children of this age indulge in constructive play. They enjoy making things with their hands, just for the fun of creating something by themselves and not for any particular use. Boys show preferences to play with tools and blocks and girls for clay modeling, jewellery making, sewing and drawing. They are less self conscious while working on something and look for appreciation from peers and elders. As far as skill development is concerned, girls as a rule surpass boys in painting, sewing, weaving and other activities involving fine motor skills while boys are better at activities involving muscle application, e.g., kicking a football, throwing a ball, jumping, etc.





But in India, we know that our best *zardosi* workers are men. In fact, from the times of the Mughal Empire, embroidery has been practised by men in Muslim communities due to the patronage received from Emperor Akbar himself, and they used to learn their craft as young boys through simple observation. So one more myth, imposed on the rest of the world by western research has been proved wrong.

### **New lease of life through technology**

Surprisingly without any of us realizing, after almost three decades of ignominy and anonymity, our glorious needlework past has crept up on us slowly, all the latest gadgetry and technology notwithstanding. Google has reported a 70% rise in search for words like '*knitting*' and '*crochet*'. **Pinterest** has given a new lease of life for the lovers of needlework, crochet and embroidery. We are bringing out our handcrafted treasures, sharing and showcasing them like never before, thanks to technology. There is a surge in popularity of crafts of all kinds, due to several craft-revival initiatives of governments. We are once again celebrating our craftsmen and honouring the legacy we have inherited.

Parents, caregivers and teachers must be sensitive to the fact that when our young children come to school, they carry with them the sum total of home experiences and they are already initiated into the world of art, having imbued the rich cultural heritage from their everyday surroundings. We merely need to take it forward in our schools and hone their inherent love for art and craft.

**Sujata C** is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been a brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad, etc.

## Lesson Plan on Teaching Heritage Crafts

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It has been proved by research that art and craft activities have a calming influence on the mind. The process of creating something beautiful takes the minds off other stressful things in human beings. So such a skill should be acquired as early as possible, considering the stress levels we all face in this highly mechanized and technology-driven world.

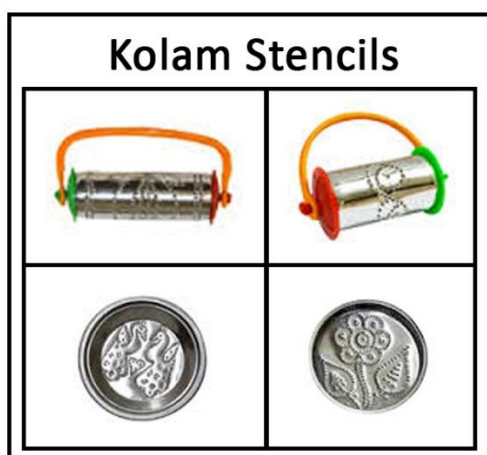
Unbelievable as it may sound, stress in children starts young. While preschoolers might feel separation anxiety, children of primary and middle classes are under academic and societal pressures which can make them tense. Family discord is another common disturbing reason for stress. Watching news about war, terror acts, violence or natural disasters can lead to children worrying about their own safety. Children need to be taught constructive coping strategies, and arts and crafts constitute one of them. As *Erik Ericson* says, young children are in the process of developing thinking, feeling, imagining, relating and coordinating skills, and arts and crafts help children improve in all these areas.

Most craft activities are structured and easy to implement as the learning outcome is predetermined. For children of primary classes, it would make sense to begin with simple activities that are in sync with the cultural nuances of their hometown. The whole idea is to teach them to be nimble-fingered and learn a few hands-on skills. Since we are focusing on heritage arts, we can pick up activities that have a timeless quality, and are simple enough for young children.

**Stringing or beading:** A beginner's activity could be stringing flowers to make a garland. It is a wonderful activity for developing hand-eye coordination and children from any background will enjoy doing this. The needle does not have to be sharp as it can be one of those tapestry needles, large and blunt with a big eye. Let the students learn to thread the needle with wool or thick yarn. The same activity can be done with big plastic or glass beads also. You can ask the children to select the flowers or beads of their liking as this way they will get to know themselves and about their likes and dislikes. This will lead them to self-reflect and gradually hone their unique personalities.



**Kolam:** You can get these wonderful *kolam* stencils which can be filled with rice powder or flour and just tapping them on a wet floor would create beautiful dotted patterns. These are also available as rollers, so a child can easily be given one to roll and they can feel the excitement of creating something beautiful and original.



If you can't get these stencils easily, you can make simple *rangoli* designs on a *styrofoam* plate for children to use. Making a flower carpet should be another enjoyable and simple activity to try out.

**Weaving and looping:** Every home in the North-Eastern states of India has a loom on which the women weave shawls after household chores are done. Children who have seen weaving being done will definitely appreciate the craft. Newcomers can also be taught this with a cardboard loom, a plastic looping hoop and different coloured yarns.







**Stitching:** Another simple activity is to learn to stitch. All one needs is a sharp eye and a steady hand to thread a needle and under proper supervision, even a seven year old can be taught to do this. Give them a paper plate to understand how the needle goes up and down and secure the thread to the paper. Draw a line and let them sew over it. The child's mind will be very curious to see how the thread stays in place while stitching and they will be proud of every single stitch they make. Running stitch is the first and easiest skill to learn and will be forever useful.



Let children get hold of some cloth scraps – draw a heart or star shape on it and put two pieces of cloth together and let them do running stitch on the outline. Now, cut out the heart shape and let the child stuff it with some cotton. Stitch up the open end, make a ring with a satin ribbon and there you have a cute little pink heart or star for the child to show off, and they will be so proud of it!

**Rolling:** The kitchen too can be a great place for children to pick up some skills easily. ‘*Roti dough*’ is fun to play with and learning to roll out one with a rolling pin is very engaging for a child. Shaping the dough with their fingers, or cutting out different shapes with a cookie-cutter can help them learn about different shapes.



**Clay and Pottery:** Both clay and pottery offer a sensory experience that also help in building of self-image and self-expression. Clay or mud can be moulded according to our imagination and children enjoy the sight of something taking shape with their own hands. Mistakes can easily be corrected in both clay and pottery. Though children might feel disappointed at first if their artwork is damaged, they learn quickly enough and can make it all over again without much effort, which is an important lesson in future problem solving.



**Braiding:** Learning to braid can be fun and can increase concentration capacities. You can get hold of some thick yarn or jute rope and start the braiding process. If you want to try something offbeat, braiding a palm leaf can be done too. Children can make braided bracelets to wear or gift each other.



The main job of an arts and crafts teacher is to encourage creativity in the classroom. Since children are learning by ‘doing’ in a crafts class, we should help them make the most of it with our own positive energy and enthusiasm.

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## Words Section



### Hypermedia (noun)

#### Meaning

- The art of knotting string in patterns to make decorative articles. It is an elaborately patterned lacelike webbing made of hand-knotted cord, yarn, or the like, and used for wall decorations, hanging baskets, garments, accessories, etc. (*Oxforddictionaries.com*)

**Origin (and additional information)** ~ The term's first known use was in mid-19th century: it is a French word, derived from Turkish *makrama* meaning *tablecloth* or *towel*, which in turn was derived from Arabic *miqrama* meaning *bedspread*.

Macramé's primary knots are the square knot and forms of "hitching": *full hitch* and *double half hitches*. **Cavandoli macramé** is a variety of macramé used to form geometric patterns and free-form patterns like weaving. One of the earliest recorded uses of macramé style knots as decoration appeared in the carvings of the **Babylonians** and **Assyrians**. Fringe-like plaiting and braiding adorned the costumes of the time and were captured in their stone statuary. Macramé was a specialty of Genoa, where, in the 19th century, towels decorated with knotted cord were popular. Its roots were in a 16th-century technique of knotting lace known as *punto a groppo*. Macramé travelled from North Africa with the **Moors** during their conquests to Spain, and as a result of this conquest it spread, firstly to France, and then throughout Europe. It was introduced into England at the court of **Mary II** in the late 17th century. Queen Mary taught the art of macramé to her ladies-in-waiting.

Sailors made macramé objects in off hours while at sea, and sold or bartered them when they landed, thus spreading the art to places like China and the New World. Nineteenth-century British and American sailors made hammocks, bell fringes and belts from macramé.

Though the craze for macramé faded slowly, it regained popularity during the 1970s as a means to make wall hangings, articles of clothing, bedspreads, small jeans shorts, tablecloths, draperies, plant hangers and other furnishings. By the early 1980s macramé had again begun to fall out of fashion as a decoration trend.

## **Words Section**

Macramé jewellery has become popular among the American neo-hippie and grunge crowd, starting in the early 1970s. Using mainly square knots and granny knots, this jewellery often features handmade glass beads and natural elements such as bone and shell. Necklaces, anklets and bracelets have become popular forms of macramé jewellery, along with leather and fabric belts. Materials used in macramé include cords made of *cotton twine, linen, hemp, jute, leather* or *yarn*.

### **Usage ~**

- i. *The exhibition featured bobbin lace, patchwork and quilting, cross stitch, canvas work embroidery, macramé, and even miniature furniture.*
- ii. *Women in rural areas are well known for their macramé hammocks and bags.*
- iii. *The rustic chair and stools, the country-style ceramic pig cookie-jar on the counter, and the macramé shade over the table— all contribute to a feeling of casual comfort.*