

Why Do We Teach Handwork?

Out of natural insight, many ancient peoples connected weaving, braiding, and knot-tying with the development of the intellect and wisdom. Isis, the female deity of Egypt who exemplified wisdom, disguised her identity to wander on the earth until she was discovered as she taught a princess to braid her hair. Athene, who was born out of the head of Zeus and ruled over the world of thoughts, was also the patron of weaving. The preponderance of braid-like and woven strands in temple paintings and ritual sites in New Mexico, northern and southern Africa, Peru and central Asia suggest a link between the activities of weaving and braiding and humanity's aspirations to an independent life of thinking.

Recent neurological research tends to confirm that mobility and dexterity in the fine motor muscles, especially in the hand, may stimulate cellular development in the brain, and so strengthen the physical foundation of thinking.



What occurs when a child sets about to knit? Needles are held in both hands, with each hand assigned its respective activity. Laterality is immediately established, as well as the

eye's control over the hand. From the outset, the child is asserting a degree of control over his will. The right needle must enter a rather tightly-wound loop of yarn on the left needle, weave it through and pull it away, in the process tying a knot. Only a steady, controlled hand can accomplish such a feat, so the power of concentration is awakened.

To knit properly, the child must count the number of stitches and the number of rows. By using different colors and different row lengths the teacher encourages not only attentiveness to numbers, but also flexibility in thinking. As children learn more arithmetic, teachers can devise patterns that call for two rows of blue followed by four rows of yellow followed by six rows of blue, etc. In this way numerical skills are reinforced in a challenging, yet enjoyable manner. Nor should we underestimate the self-esteem and joy that arises in the child as the result of a skill that has been learned. (Excerpt from "The Role of Handwork in the Waldorf Curriculum" by Eugene Schwartz).



Handwork and crafting have been taught in all the grades since the founding of the first Waldorf school.

Rudolf Steiner insisted on this radical innovation, because, he said, they lead to the enhancement of judgment. Judgment comes out of the imaginative forces, working through the heart. It is not the head alone but the whole human being that forms a judgment.

Many of the senses are used in handwork—sight, touch, movement, balance, etc. The senses take in different impressions of the world and join them together to form a judgment. Our hands bring us into a deeper, closer relationship to the world, and therefore, to a greater understanding of humanity. (Excerpt from "The Importance of Handwork in the Waldorf School" by Patricia Livingston).



The Artful Integration of Handwork and the 4th Grade Curriculum—by Jennifer Borges, Handwork Teacher

"Take your needle, my child, and work at your pattern; it will come out a rose by and by. Life is like that - One stitch at a time taken patiently and the pattern will come out all right like the embroidery."

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

4th Grade is an ideal time to broaden the class's understanding of the many "needle-arts" that have spanned the history of time. With this knowledge, the students are introduced to a new approach in their handwork experience by creating a Main Project. This Project, a "Rune-Stone Pouch", constructed in focused, dedicated stages, is ideal in that, not only are all of its origins found in the 4th Grade curriculum (even down to the Gold Rush denim), but also incorporates each needle-art taught throughout the year.

Students begin the year learning KUMIHIMO BRAIDING and its many historical uses. The students make their own Kumihimo disk out of cardboard, draw out its measurements, and then begin their braid work. They make one long braid that will be used as the drawstring to their rune-stone pouch.



Around the first signs of autumn, the class is ready to learn the essentials of embroidery and the many designs that a stitch can create. After sewing ten commonly used embroidery stitches onto a square of fabric, they will then be able to use this EMBROIDERY SAMPLER as their reference guide later on when embellishing their pouch.

At the beginning of the new year, they learn the fundamentals of CROSS-STITCH. The class makes their own sample patterns on a piece of grid paper then, create their final cross-stitch pattern on a 5" square of Aida fabric. This square becomes the focal point to the front of their pouch.



After their cross-stitch is complete, they get to sew together their denim rune-stone pouch. Each student is required to incorporate 2 or 3 of the embroidery stitches they learned earlier in the year onto their denim pouch and sew their cross-stitch square to the front. So as to have a workable drawstring, they thread the Kumihimo braid through the top seam to complete their pouch.



By mid-Spring, the students learn the basics of DRY FELTING, as well as where this ancient art comes from, and how it was used. For the project, they felt several quarter-sized "stones" out of wool, and then embroider each stone with a different runic symbol of their choice. Once completed, they will be able to store the stones in the pouch, and take their completed project.

Should any of the children finish early enough with their main project, they are given the opportunity to transition back to knitting and make a fun KNITTED



FISH SAMPLER project. This sampler is practice of all the stitches they'll need to know to knit a pair of socks in 5th Grade. We believe it is important to transition back to knitting at the end of the year since socks may seem like a daunting journey at any age and this will leave them feeling better prepared for 5th Grade's Handwork.

