



ART BRIDGES: Lesson Plans for Enrichment, Growth and Healing

Button Tree

**A Lesson Developed and Contributed by
Anna Alcalde
Urban Legends Art Studio and Artisans**

Objectives:

The participants will

1. Experiment with blending colors using acrylic paint
2. Use the elements of color and lines to create background and trees
3. Sort through buttons to bring back memories and/or imagine how the buttons were originally used

Audiences:

Anyone can use this lesson. This lesson was recently used by Anna as she was working with Alzheimer's Patients at Arbor in Lincoln, NE.

Note to Facilitator:

The end product for this lesson is not what's important—it's the interacting, communicating and bringing back memories that are the most important elements of this activity. The lesson was conducted in two sessions by Anna but could be completed in one session if a blow dryer is used to dry the paint. A large assortment of buttons made available for the project adds another element in

drawing out memories. Allow the participants to sort through the buttons, guessing at how they were used and what garments they adorned. Also, using flat canvases for the project will reduce slippage and are better than using wrapped canvases.

Learning Opportunities (Optional): The earliest buttons date back to 2000 BC and were made of bone, horn, and wood or even sea shells. These earliest buttons were not used as fasteners but were ornaments on garments. In 1200 AD, the word “bouton” first appeared in the French Language. Buttons were reserved for the wealthy and there were even laws that forbade “commoners” from owning them. Buttons continued to adorn the garments of nobility—gold, cloth-covered, silk, ceramic, and silver buttons and even diamond buttons for royalty were all the rage. Buttons were so popular that there were servants whose sole job was that of professional dressers. Legend has it that Napoleon insisted that the sleeves of his army’s uniforms be trimmed in buttons to keep the soldiers from using those sleeves to wipe their runny noses. Black glass buttons became popular during the reign of Queen Victoria and before long, buttons of all kinds were being mass produced to be used for practical and ornamental purposes.

Supplies/Materials:

- 9x14” flat canvas for each participant
- A variety of brush sizes for each participants (small, medium round and large flat)
- All purpose acrylic paint in a variety of colors
- A large selection of buttons in various sizes and colors
- Art sponges
- Paper towels for blotting
- Water cups
- Small paper plates to hold paint
- Glue gun with glue sticks
- A small tree branch to be used as a model for the participants
- Aprons for the participants

Prior to Class:

- Cover the art surface with sheets or a tarp for protection

- Set up stations for each participant with an apron (or large shirt), water dish, a paper plate, a variety of brushes, art sponge, and paper towels
- Consider having some music (from the participant's era) available to play in the background after you've given the initial instructions. This can have a calming effect and add to the creativity of the participants

Class Instruction:

1. Begin the class with greetings and friendship. If necessary, introduce (or reintroduce) yourself to your group, putting everyone at ease.
2. Show an example of the art to be created during the session—a Button Tree.



3. Ask participants to put on their aprons or shirts for protection from the paint.
4. Show the students the variety of colors they can use for their Button Tree and let them select the colors they'd like to use. Encourage them to “think outside the box” and dab multiple colors (at least 5-6) of the acrylic paint on each of their paper plates.



5. Standing in front of the group with your own blank canvas and plate of paint, demonstrate to the class how to make the background for their Button Tree.

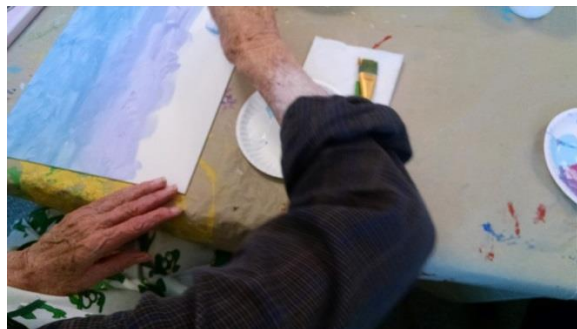
6. Dip your art sponge into two or three colors of the paint and apply to the canvas to create a background. You can show the students how to apply the paint in straight lines or in circles or swirls or a combination of all.



7. Emphasize the feeling of the paint on the canvas—it glides and feels smooth—it can give the feeling of the seasons depending upon the colors used.



8. Have the participants get started on their own creations, encouraging them to cover all the surface of the canvas. The students can go back over the background adding different textures such as lines and circles if they wish—anything goes!



9. The background paint will dry quickly if it is not applied too thickly but a blow dryer can be used to speed up the process.



10. Once the background is dry, it is time to paint the tree onto the canvas.
Standing in front of the group to demonstrate, select the color for the tree (Brown, purple, blue?)
11. Show the participants the tree branch you brought as an example, paying particular attention to the rough bark, the tiny twigs and the buds. Point out the lines of the branch and the asymmetry.
12. Using whatever brush feels appropriate (thick flat brush for the trunk of the tree, medium brush for branches or thin brush for twigs), dip the brush into the desired paint color and add a dab of white (or gray or black) and begin painting the trunk of the tree.



13. Start close to the ground with a nice thick trunk—you can add some roots if you'd like.



14. Next incorporate in branches and twigs, adding some curls to the branches as a place to “accept” buttons. You can make smaller limbs with branches that narrow off and trail off into the sky. Don’t be afraid to use nontraditional colors.



15. Now encourage the participants to begin their own trees, encouraging the creative thought process as they work.



16. Ask them:

- What kind of tree are you making?
- Is this a tree you could climb? Did you like to climb trees or did you ever build a tree house?
- Do you suppose this tree grows fruit like apples or peaches?
- What trees have you planted or enjoyed?
- Did you ever play hide-and-go-seek in the woods?

17. Circulate around encouraging and helping when needed. Let each participant guide their own creations. The art will be finished whenever the participant says it is.

18. Once all the trees have been painted, you can either end the session for the day and complete the project in your next session or wait until the paint has dried to apply the buttons. You may need to use a blow dryer to dry the paint in order to finish up in one session.

19. Plug in the glue gun(s) to warm and then bring out the container of buttons the students will be using.

20. Have the students sort through the buttons and select those they'd like to incorporate into their button tree.

21. At this point, you can share a little bit about the history of buttons and then talk with the participants about the buttons you've brought to class:

- Did you enjoy sewing?
- How do you suppose this particular button was used?
- Can you pick out any buttons that are similar to those you may have worn on a garment?
- Did you have a button collection at home?
- What story could you make up about a particular button?

- Can you see the button in another way, for instance, as a flower?
- Many families had button boxes at home that were full of gathered buttons from discarded clothes. Did your family ever have a button box full of history?

22. Have the participants select multiple buttons to adorn their trees and place them in the positions they desire. Once the buttons are in place, the facilitator will use the glue gun to permanently affix the buttons.



23. Have the participants sign their art (or put their names on the back of the canvas with a marker if they need assistance) and then have a sharing time where they show their art and talk about the process of creating it. Encourage the students to share any memories or thoughts they have about buttons or trees.

Plan in Action:

Marilyn Stadler and Cathy Harrington (*Art from the Heart*) implemented Anna's "Button Tree" project at Legacy Retirement Community in Lincoln, NE. Fifteen participants, along with three adult teachers, three volunteer High school art students and the social director of Legacy, gathered to design and create trees with paint, buttons and other embellishments.

Cathy made a sample for students to see as a model. Participants used sponges to apply a color wash/background on ready-stretched 9" x 12" canvases. Teachers demonstrated selection of coordinating colors to apply on a paper plate, dilute with water and apply as a backdrop for their creations. The canvases were then blown with a hair dryer to speed up the drying process. The trunk and branches were painted on to create the basis of the tree. "Artists" then selected colored, clear, gold and silver buttons to decorate the tree, and some applied additional paint or other embellishments to create leaves, branches, berries, etc. Art elements taught/reviewed were color, balance and design.

This art project was accomplished in about 1 ½ hours and was enjoyed by every one of the residents at Legacy that participated. This was a project that they all felt confident that they could successfully accomplish. They were excited about it and in the end, each artist was very proud of her creation! The final products were put on display at the Legacy for all residents to view.



Anna Alcalde, an artist and teacher, is co-owner of *Urban Legends*, an interactive art studio located in Lincoln, Nebraska. Anna's philosophy is that everyone has an artist inside. In addition to teaching small art classes at her studio, Anna is also committed to bringing the artistic experience to those facing the challenges of Alzheimer's and autism. You can learn more about Anna and her studio at <http://urbanlegendsart.com>.

*Thanks also to **Marilyn Stadler** and **Cathy Harrington** for their insights and feedback when implementing this project through their “Art From the Heart” initiative sponsored by Hildegard Center for the Arts.*

If you have used this lesson plan, we’d love to hear from you! Please send questions or comments through our website www.hildegardcenter.org .

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