Title: Khadi and Gardening for Sustainable Swaraj

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: High School Visual Arts (9-12)

Duration of Lesson:
Initial content delivery, design and implementation will take about 3 weeks, or 8-9 90 minute class sessions. Time is also dependent on collaboration with Environmental Studies classes. Periodic support of garden maintenance and responsive art will occur throughout semester. Final project will take about 3 class weeks.

Content Standards (from draft of Visual Arts Common Core Standards):
Content Standard 1
Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.
   Advanced: Students communicate ideas regularly at a high level of effectiveness in at least one visual arts medium

Content Standard 6
Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines
   Advanced: Students synthesize the creative and analytical principles and techniques of the visual arts and selected other arts disciplines, the humanities, or the sciences

Lesson Abstract:
Students will first learn about why Gandhi chose khadi not only as a symbol to galvanize support for India’s political swaraj, but as a means to economic, environmental, civic, moral, and spiritual sustainability. They will then investigate how gardening may address similar societal aims today. Students will apply knowledge gained through artful garden or native habitat design, implementation, and finally distribution of the garden’s “fruits” through drawings, photography, an art advocacy piece, and food gifting.

Guiding Questions:
1. Why did Gandhi choose khadi as both a symbol of and a movement for swaraj?
2. Why is gardening a potentially powerful symbol of protest and an important piece of the solution for some of today’s sustainability challenges?
Gandhi’s Khadi and 21st Century Gardening

1. Introduction
   Symbols wield power. A well-chosen symbol has the ability to represent multi-tiered concepts, bundled into a package far more compelling than the sum of its parts. Gandhi, leader of India’s struggle for independence, recognized the movement’s need for such a mega symbol. Khadi, cloth made from homespun, locally grown cotton yarn, was chosen as the symbolic embodiment of struggle toward personal, economic and political freedom for India (swaraj). The interconnection between khadi the symbol, and khadi the movement illustrates Gandhi’s political brilliance. Gandhi saw how the production, distribution and use of khadi addressed the multiple levels of challenge India faced in obtaining a just, free, civilization (Gonsalves). This paper considers how Gandhi’s use of khadi can inspire the implementation of a symbol and a movement that is similarly relevant to 21st Century challenges.

2. Historical Context
   To understand why Gandhi selected khadi as a symbol for swaraj, historical context is necessary. India had become a colony under the British Empire in 1850. Britain’s focus on “modernizing” colonial India’s rural-based economy resulted in the creation of mass poverty for all but a small, urban minority of Indians. The country’s vast resources were exploited solely for the benefit of the British Crown. As the Industrial Revolution, bolstered by colonialism, brought immense wealth to Europe and the US, feelings of discontent percolated through India’s upper classes. Many found the material prosperity of the West alluring, and wanted to share in the profits. The poverty stricken masses of India wished for an end to their oppression. All desired independence from British rule. However, the question of how to obtain freedom and what Indian self-rule might look like was unclear. Such was the situation in 1915 when Gandhi, after 21 years of activism in South Africa, returned to his homeland (Sethia 73-76).

3. Philosophical Framework
   Gandhi’s years in South Africa served as fertile soil for his socio-political experiments with nonviolent methods of civil disobedience (satyagraha). Gandhi use of satyagraha was aimed at obtaining social justice for the Indian population in South Africa. These experiments were deeply rooted in his developing philosophical beliefs. In 1915, Gandhi was ready to apply his knowledge gained in South Africa to the Indian struggle for independence. Gandhi’s vision of freedom (swaraj) did not simply constitute an India absent of British rule, but rather an India that aimed at becoming a just civilization (Sethia 24 - 72). Gandhi believed such a civilization ought to be based on a balance of the four “Canonical Aims of Life”, as defined by his “political guru”, Gokhale. These aims are as follows: ethical integrity (dharma), wealth and political power (artha), bodily welfare and aesthetics (kama), and spiritual transcendence (moksha). It was in the balance of these aims that Gandhi found a philosophical framework for his vision of swaraj (Parel xxi-xxii). He described swaraj, as when we learn to rule ourselves, a transformation from the inside out. One must begin with self-control, gained through ongoing practice, including constructive work. (Gandhi 70-72).
4. Need for a Symbol
Gandhi recognized the need for an effective vehicle in communicating the complex, powerful ideas of swaraj to the Indian population. Not only was the subcontinent geographically vast with minimal means for communication, its population consisted of over 300 million people, representing almost 100 different languages, as well as multiple ethnicities, cultures, and religious affiliations. Only five percent of Indians were literate. Most were living in abject poverty. The symbol Gandhi needed had to be visual, multi-faceted, and capable of representing a common Indian identity. It also needed to express empathy for the poorest in the nation. Gandhi saw khadi as the perfect tool to address this myriad of communication challenges (Gonsalves 1-7)

5. Khadi’s Success
Khadi’s success as a symbol and movement in India’s struggle for swaraj can in part be attributed to its ability to transcend the deeply entrenched Indian caste system. In it, Indians found a common thread, one rich in contextual background. Khadi as both a symbol and a movement embodied values associated with each of the four canonical aims of a just civilization. (Gonsalves 1-7)

The evolution of khadi’s role in the attainment of swaraj was gradual. Firstly, Gandhi chose to wear only a loincloth of khadi to communicate solidarity with India’s poverty stricken masses. The change in attire worked. Gandhi had the attention of millions. He then began to see the spinning of khadi as a means of nonviolent civil disobedience against the British economy. He encouraged people to spin their own khadi, make their own cloth, and use it exclusively for clothing rather than purchase imported fabric and garments from the British mills. The boycott extended to other British goods while creating an aesthetic for Indian homespun garments. Made with Indian-grown cotton, khadi dress became not only a symbol of the struggle for swaraj, but also a physical manifestation of the tenants of swaraj. Aligning itself with the concept of self-control and individual civic responsibility, the very creation of khadi happened through constructive work. It is in part through the regular practice of constructive work that one finds personal transformation. Hand and foot work can be a form of meditation, a spiritual practice. For the remainder of his life, Gandhi awoke each day and spun khadi. He encouraged all Indians to do the same, and many indeed followed his example, creating an incredible sense of communal spirit. They spun in solidarity with the poor of India, and they spun in nonviolent protest of foreign imports, of foreign rule. They spun in the spirit of creating a sustainable, handmade product. (information was synthesized from Salt march Documentary shown in class, from Tara’s talks, and bits from books…not certain how to cite?)

Khadi addressed the economic and political tenants of swaraj. Not only was it a direct action of protest against British imports that accompanied British rule, but Gandhi also saw the production of khadi as the answer to the abject poverty most rural farmers experienced. Most farmers had four months of forced non-productive time each year. Gandhi believed farmers could change their economic situation by utilizing the down time with the production and sale of khadi (as well as other locally-made products). “The restoration, therefore, of the spinning-wheel solves the economic problem of India at a stroke.” (Gandhi 163) Here again, he reinforces the concepts of self-reliance and sustainability as essential to swaraj.

Gandhi’s use of khadi as both a symbol and a movement for swaraj was absolutely brilliant in its ability to bridge incredible communication challenges and galvanize the masses of India. Both the incredibly complex in its conceptual layers, yet very simple in design, khadi was
a masterful symbolic solution used in the pursuit of swaraj. The question presenting itself now: how might Gandhi’s use of khadi inform solutions to contemporary challenges to sustainability, justice, self-reliance, connectedness and truth?

6. Contemporary Context for Food Challenges

At present there exists an incredible disparity between distributions of quality food on the planet. Obesity is an epidemic in the U.S. while hunger continues to rise. Thousands of impoverished American citizens live in a “food desert”, where the only edible options available possess little-to-no nutritional value (Finley). “Our nation’s food supply is now controlled by a handful of corporations that often put profit ahead of ahead of consumer health, the livelihood of the American farmer, the safety of workers and our own environment.” The industrial approach to farming with its use of GMO’s, pesticides and imported fertilizers only offer a short-term gains with high-yield mono-crops. Invariably the land, air and water can only sustain this kind of use for a finite period of time before becoming barren (Global Research News).

Looking forward, the challenges feeding the people of this planet only deepen. The world population is rapidly rising while the space to grow food continues to disappear. In order feed everyone, we will have to grow more food in the next 50 years than in the last 10,000. And…it will need to be done with less. There will be less oil (most industrial-manufactured food takes 10 calories of oil to produce 1 calorie of food), less water, less land, climate instability, less genetic diversity, and less available time (Doiron).

7. Gardening as a Response

Access to foods that are sustainably healthy for both people and the planet is one of the greatest challenges we face as a species. As the balance of the world’s population moves into cities, urban gardens need to be part of the solution in addressing world food shortages. Havana, Cuba now grows the majority of its inhabitants’ foods within the city limits. Gardens abound on rooftops, in schoolyards, backyards, parks, and window boxes (Quirk). At present, only 2% of US food is produced in gardens. However, at the height of the Victory Garden Movement during WWII, 40% of American’s produce was grown in their gardens. “This can happen again” (Doiron).

“Food is the problem, and food is the solution” (Finley). Gardening is becoming a movement that addresses issues with food distributions. Like the khadi movement, gardening allows people to become more self-reliant. Gardening allows people to take back control over their own diet and health. It offers them more choices over their spending. It takes power away from the industrial farming complex and puts it back in the palms of the people. It offers an environmentally sustainable alternative to genetically modified mono-crops (Finley). Also like khadi, gardening offers the opportunity to participate in constructive work. People often report feeling a “sense of peace” or “connection” while gardening. The process of working in the garden connects people back to the earth, and to the inherent duty they have as its stewards.

The correlations between Gandhi’s use of khadi as a movement and the possibilities of a gardening movement are compelling. Therefore, gardening may also serve as a powerful symbol for igniting the collective fire needed if we as a species are to survive.
Teaching Activities

Film, stories, visiting artists/activists-gardeners, discussion, journaling, practice application of design elements and principles to the art of garden and nature-scaping design, collaboration with Sustainable Systems classes for design implementation and sustainable care, exemplars for art as communication and activism, and finally, art-making to either communicate student learning, serve as a call to action, or to “advertise” garden products that may be purchased to sustain future gardening efforts.

Materials Needed

Resource materials for information delivery and student research
Art journal-making materials
Visual presentation materials for education of art elements and principles
Garden design information
Art materials for designing
Visiting professionals in field of nature-scaping and landscape architecture
Gardening tools, plants, soil and nutrients
Exemplars of art journaling, and field journaling
Variety of art materials for journal entries
Exemplars for art as communication tool to advertise, advocate, teach, and protest
Variety of materials for execution of final project