Elegant Amulets

Smithsonian National Museum of African Art
Amulets are decorated pouches or charms, worn throughout the world since prehistoric times, that hold something that may bring good fortune or protect its owner. An important aspect of the cycle of life in parts of Africa, amulets are worn at various stages of one’s life. Considered sacred, they deflect evil and bring good luck to their owners.

An amulet’s supernatural powers can be naturally imbued or given special powers by a spiritual leader. Made of numerous materials, including wood, stone, leather, clay, metal, plants, bones, and claws, they hang around a person’s neck or any part of the body or clothing, helping the wearers to overcome the adversities and calamities that may befall them in their journey through life.
GET READY!

Today, we will create a personal amulet in the shape of a pouch. Once completed, you will place a meaningful object, such as a keepsake, photograph, or special item, inside the pouch.

Visit the museum’s website at africa.si.edu, click on Browse the Collection under Collections and look at the following objects. Can you identify the materials used and the part of the amulet that carries the object(s) meant to protect the owner from harm?

Object name: object number

Somalian necklace with amulet: 76-16-2
Necklace with amulet case: 76-16-1
Armband with leather amulets: 2012-18-198
Fon hat with amulets: 73-1-2
Limba amulet: 2003-13-2
Let's Get Started

First, cover your workspace

- Ruler
- Scissors
- Pencil
- Eraser
- Elmer’s glue (extra strength)
- Hole punch

Then, gather your materials

- Empty paper towel roll
- 9 x 12 inch black or dark construction paper
- Scrap colored paper, lightweight cardboard, or tagboard
- Heavy duty aluminum foil
- Scrap gold/silver gift wrapping or metallic paper
- Beads, cowrie shells, yarn, string or ribbon
- Permanent metallic and colored markers
- Drawing paper
- Small plastic container for loose small items
**Instructions**

**STEP 1**

Create your pouch

1. Flatten and crease the paper towel roll by rubbing with the ruler or scissors handles.
2. Measure 4 inches from one end of the flattened roll and cut to create the framework for the pouch.
3. Measure and place a mark 1/2 inch up on both sides of each end of the 4-inch piece to make the pouch’s flaps. Draw a diagonal line from each mark to the bottom edges of the pouch framework, making triangular shapes. Cut the triangles off to make the flaps.
4. Bend the flap on each side upward and crease. On one side, push the flap inward into the roll and crease. Fold the flap on the other side over the outside like an envelope; crease and glue the flap in place creating a pouch or container that is approximately 3 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches.
5. Place aside to dry under a heavy object.
Cover your pouch

1. Place the black or dark 9 x 12 inch construction paper in a vertical position. Measure and place dots 4 inches from the bottom of the paper. Draw a straight line to join the dots. Cut along the line.

2. Place the strip lengthwise in a horizontal position. Align the bottom of your pouch (keeping the opening at the top) with the bottom of the strip. Fold the strip around the pouch and crease the side edges. Place glue on the strip’s sides and press around your pouch.

3. The paper will be longer than your pouch at the top opening. Clip the edges of the paper on a diagonal. Push the paper inside the opening and crease. Add a little glue to ensure the paper won’t move. Put aside to dry.
STEP 3

Decorate your pouch

1. Sketch some designs to decorate your pouch. Consider the materials you are working with; let the materials dictate your design.

2. Put a hole or holes in your pouch for a string attachment and begin decorating. Be creative and experiment!
With careful observation you have discovered...

- Many cultures utilize similar art forms.
- Scrap items can be given a new life through art.
- Creating personal objects encourages one to be reflective.
- Different materials can create different textures and feelings.
- The possibilities are limitless.
Share your creations!

Send your creations to NMAFA-Workshops@si.edu to post on the museum’s website

NOTE: We will make every effort, but cannot guarantee, to include your artwork.
Alfa Sort Sawaneh
Sierra Leone
Amulet
c. 1978-80
Colored inks on graph paper
21 x 27 cm (8 1/4 x 10 5/8 in.)
Gift of Simon Ottenberg, 2003-13-2

Somali artist
Somalia
Armlet with amulet case
Early to mid-20th century
Gold alloy
2.0 x 7.9 x 10.0 cm
(13/16 x 3 1/8 x 3 15/16 in.)
Gift of the Loughrans, 76-16-11