



Diversity of Cultures

Storytelling Symbols: Interpreting Aboriginal Culture through Art

Historical Context

For over 60,000 years, Aboriginal peoples of Australia have used art as a powerful way to share stories, preserve knowledge, and connect to land, ancestors, and spirituality. Long before colonization, Aboriginal art has always been more than just decoration; it is a visual language that passed down sacred stories, known as the Dreaming, through generations. These stories explained the creation of the world, taught moral lessons, and marked territorial boundaries. Art appeared in many forms such as rock paintings, bark drawings, carvings, sand art, and ceremonial body paint. Each region had its own style and symbols, rooted in local traditions and tied to specific places. Because many Aboriginal groups relied on oral tradition instead of written language, visual art became essential for preserving history, law, and cultural identity. When British colonizers arrived in 1788, they dismissed Aboriginal art as primitive and tried to erase Indigenous cultures through violent policies, land theft, and forced assimilation. For more than a century, Aboriginal people were excluded from the mainstream Australian narrative, their voices silenced in history books, museums, and national identity. But art remained a form of resistance. In the 20th century, especially during the land rights movement of the 1970s, Aboriginal communities began using traditional and contemporary art to reclaim their heritage and assert their rights. The famous Papunya Tula movement marked a turning point when artists in central Australia began painting Dreaming stories with acrylics on canvas, creating a new style that gained global attention. These paintings weren't just beautiful, they were maps of memory and cultural survival. The Indigenous concept of "Country" moves beyond a mere physical space to encompass a rich and complex web of spiritual, cultural, social, and emotional relationships. Aboriginal art serves as a crucial expression and keeper of this profound connection, differing significantly from mainstream interpretations of land as a commodity or territory. Today, Aboriginal art continues to be one of the most important ways Indigenous Australians protect and express their culture. It challenges historical erasure, educates younger generations, and demands recognition in a society that once tried to ignore them. Whether found on ancient cave walls or in modern galleries, Aboriginal art is not just about the past but instead it is an ongoing act of resilience and cultural pride.

Connection to Habit

For Aboriginal peoples, art is a way to share stories, pass down knowledge, and stay connected to land and ancestors. It has been a vital part of their culture for over 60,000 years. Even after colonization and efforts to erase their traditions, Aboriginal communities continued to use art to preserve their identity and resist being silenced. From ancient rock paintings to modern canvas work, their art shows how culture can survive, adapt, and speak across generations. Learning about Aboriginal art helps us see the richness of different cultures and reminds us that all people have stories worth telling. It also shows that even in struggle, people find ways to hold onto what matters.

Discussion Questions

- In what ways does Aboriginal art preserve and pass down cultural knowledge across generations?
- How does the concept of Country differ from mainstream ideas of land or territory? Why is this important to understand when studying Aboriginal art?
- How can Aboriginal art be seen as a form of resistance to colonization and assimilation?
- How does Aboriginal art challenge the traditional narratives often found in Australian (and Western) history books?
- Why do you think Aboriginal art has gained international recognition, and how might this recognition help Indigenous communities?
- Can you think of examples from other cultures where art is used to preserve identity or resist oppression?
- How does learning about Aboriginal art and history help you better appreciate the complexity of culture and the impact of colonization?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Computer
- Construction/Printer/Poster Paper

Depends on the art style selected:

- Pencils/Pens
- Markers/Colored Pencils/Paint
- Scissors
- Yarn/string
- Glue

Note: This activity may take 1-2 class periods depending on the time duration; optional home time can be used if needed.

Part 1: Research and Understanding

1. Choose an Aboriginal art style to focus on (dot painting, bark painting, rarrk/cross-hatching, weaving)
2. Research and take brief notes on some of the following information to better help you create your art piece and artist statement:
 - Origins and geographic location of the style
 - Materials traditionally used
 - Cultural meanings of colors, shapes, and symbols
 - How the style is used to tell stories or express spiritual connection to Country
 - Examples of well-known Aboriginal artists: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Gulumbu Yunupingu

Students may use other websites/sources, but here are a few options to get started with research:

- [The Australian Museum \(First Nations\)](#)
- [The National Museum of Australia](#)

Part 2: Art Creation

1. Using what you've learned, create your own original artwork inspired by the Aboriginal style you researched.
 - Your artwork should represent a personal story, cultural value, or theme connected to nature, place, or identity.
 - Use symbols, patterns, and color choices intentionally and respectfully.
 - You may use paint, pencil, digital tools, collage, or any approved medium.
2. Do not copy an existing Aboriginal work. Instead, honor the tradition by drawing inspiration from its methods and meanings while creating something original and respectful.

Part 3: Artist Statement (Half page written explanation)

Write a brief statement explaining:

- The story or message behind your artwork
- The Aboriginal style and symbols that inspired you
- What you learned about Aboriginal art and its connection to cultural survival, resistance, and identity

Aboriginal Art Assessment Criteria (Total: 50 points)

Category Points: Research Notes ___/5 Original artwork effort and creativity ___/10
Use of Aboriginal-inspired style and symbolism ___/15 Artist statement clarity and depth ___/20

Optional: You can have students present their piece to the class to explain how their creative choices reflect what they learned about Aboriginal culture and storytelling. You can include that in the point value for assessment as well if desired.

Primary Sources

Aboriginal Art Examples

Dot Painting



Source: Aboriginal painting in the Papunya Tula Style, c. 2014.

Weaving



Source: Studio Alvaro Catalán de Ocón, ABC News.

Primary Sources

Aboriginal Art Examples

Rarrk/cross-hatching



Source: Cross Hatching (2020), <https://www.wentworthgalleries.com.au/post/7936-cross-hatching>.

Bark Painting



Source: The Sea and the Sky (1948), by Mungurrawuy Yunupingu