

LESSON PLANS

THEN AND NOW: IDENTITY IN FIRST NATIONS ART

Recommended grades: 6 - 12

Time required: 4 to 5– 45 minute class sessions

Materials: Large piece of paper, notebooks or paper, pencils

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

See the article “Connections & Complexities” by Gerald T. Conaty at the end of this package for an overview of First Nations art.

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand the concept of identity by exploring personal and collective identities in the classroom or group.
- Explore how traditional First Nations identity can be understood by critically looking at the designs and patterns in their objects.
- Begin to understand some of the issues facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada regarding rights, culture, and identity.
- Create an artwork or piece of work that represents their own identity

IMAGES

Please print in colour if possible



Sootsiman

Kainai

early 20th century

rawhide, paint

Collection of Glenbow Museum, AF 3752 A-B



Girl's Coming of Age Outfit

Deh Gah Got'ine, Fort Simpson

ca. 1890s

moosehide, glass beads, wool, porcupine quills, velvet, cotton, aluminium, bone, sinew

Collection of Glenbow Museum, AC 494, AC 495, AC 496, AC 497 A-B



Scraper

Néhiyawak

late 19th century

elk antler, metal, hide, cotton laces

Collection of Glenbow Museum, AP 293



Basket

Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin)

early 20th century

cedar root, spruce root, cherry bark, willow, bulrush, hide

Collection of Glenbow Museum AD 42



Belt

Siksika

early 20th century

hide, canvas, glass beads

Collection of Glenbow Museum, AF 1540

ACTIVITY PROCEDURES

CANADIAN IDENTITY

Recommended Grades: 7 – 12

Time Required: 4 – 5 45 minute class sessions

Materials: Large piece of paper, notebooks or paper, pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Begin a discussion about identity using the following suggested questions:

What is identity? What are some ways people identify themselves? What does it mean to have a personal identity? A collective identity? Record responses on a large piece of paper.

Some factors to consider may include traditions, cultural background, language, religion and spirituality, the arts (music, dance, etc.), attire (clothing, body markings), relationship to the land, ideological beliefs (political views, personal mottos).

2. Ask students to think about traits, activities, words, etc. that identify who they are. On a piece of paper, allow time for students to individually create a list, a mind map, draw or simply jot down anything that comes to mind of some of the ways they identify themselves.
3. Allow time for students to get together with a partner or a small group and share some of the traits that describe their identity. On the other side of their paper or a new piece, have them record the things that they have in common with each other. Students may continue to add things to their “identity” page as they hear other ideas.
4. After sharing, bring the class back together and discuss the things that the pairs or groups had in common. It may be helpful to record on a large piece of paper.

5. Though there may be some shared commonalities, there will also be some things that are unique to each person.
6. One thing that every student should have in common is that they live in Canada. From their list of commonalities, have students see if they can circle anything that is common to many Canadian.
7. Ask students then what makes someone a Canadian. Record thoughts on another large piece of paper or board. Suggestions questions for discussion:

Is a Canadian someone who lives within the “physical” boundaries of Canada? Or is a Canadian simply someone who identifies themselves as Canadian? Can you identify yourself as Canadian and something else?

What rights and freedoms do all Canadians have? What responsibilities come with these freedoms?

Think about some common Canadian stereotypes or symbols (ex. Hockey, Mounties, the maple leaf, the word “eh,” the national anthem). Does everyone who is “Canadian” identify with these things? Why do these stereotypes exist?

8. What are some other challenges to a collective Canadian identity? In other words, what are some issues that are dividing Canada? (For example, regionalism, separatism, Aboriginal rights, globalization and multiculturalism).

Thinking Further

- Interview people around them or in the community what their idea of a “Canadian” is or what comes to mind when they think of Canada. Create a master list of ideas and thoughts or a collective mind map with students recording responses.

FIRST NATIONS IDENTITY TRADITIONALLY

Materials: Copies of excerpt from “Connections & Complexities”,
Images and image descriptions

Background: An issue that affects some Canadians is Aboriginal rights. These rights stem from the Royal Proclamation of 1763 in which King George III of England recognized that the First Peoples had special inalienable rights regarding the land and all the resources. As Europeans interacted with Aboriginals, some of their material goods began to change, but many traditional beliefs and values remained the same. New materials such as glass beads or firearms did improve their lives, but they did not change their fundamental beliefs but rather adapted the new items to their cultural ways.

1. Read the following quote from Frederick McDonald, a Fort McKay First Nations artist, out loud to the class.

“As hunting was very important to me as a young man, I gravitate to the art that had to do with hunting, trapping and fishing. Art on everyday clothing reminds me of the loving hands of our ancestors and the strong coexisting relationship between Native Peoples and the plants, animals and Other Beings. Art reminds us that everything is interconnected. Art is not separate from our daily lives and work is not separate from art.” –Frederick McDonald, Fort McKay First Nations Artist

2. After reading the quote, discuss the following: How do First Nations people perceive art? Is this concept the same as yours? Think about what you consider “art.” Where do you usually see it? Is art a separate part of your culture or is it imbedded into everything you do?
3. Distribute copies of the following excerpt from the article “Connections & Complexities.” Ask students to read the excerpt to further understand the concept of art and identity for First Nations people.

EXCERPT: CONNECTIONS & COMPLEXITIES

“Art has always been an integral part of Native People’s lives. It was interwoven with the production of tools, the construction of dwellings and the manufacture of clothing. While European cultures separate art as a practice that is distinct from most aspects of daily life, First Nations people have a more holistic understanding of the world. Visual art has always been integrated with song, dance, ceremony and oral traditions. In these cultures it is not possible to speak of *art*; art is a part of everything. And yet, many non-Natives have an implicit belief that the development of an artistic tradition is the foundation for cultural progress and “civilization.” For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the merit of visual art produced by First Nations people, even though we do so in a context outside of their own cultures.

Traditionally, this art was concerned with identity and connections. Stylistic variations of clothing, shelter and design motifs enabled individuals, families, clans and nations to identify themselves. The meanings behind these media and images embodied the connections between human beings and non-human beings within their universe, and embodied the principles of harmony and balance that bring about a successful life. This art was found on clothing, shelters, tools and on the landscape within which people lived.”

From “Connections & Complexities” by Gerald T. Conaty.

4. Briefly discuss the article, summarizing how the First Nations perspective on art is different from Europeans.

5. Show students **AF 3752 A-B, Sootsiman, Kainai, early 20th century**
Faciliate a discussion using the following suggested questions:

What do you see? What might this be? (A sootsiman (or parfleche) was used as a container for various purposes.) How would it be used? How does this object reflect the identity of the person who made it? Used it? How does this object reflect the First Nations’ view on art?

Read the following excerpts about this object:

“Sootsiman convey so much that is at the core of Blackfoot culture. They are simply made, yet functional as containers. The designs are symmetrical and the colours subtle and complimentary, embodying the principle of harmonious balance. The use of negative and positive space in an intricate play of images reflects the complex network of relationships in the Blackfoot world. These layered meanings make them fascinating works of art.” –Gerald Conaty

“... The designs all had names. A person would have been able to read these sootsimans and been able to tell where they came from or where they were used...like the Sundance (circle and cross design). Most of this symbolism has been lost. There were family designs and colours. This one is really typical of the Sundance because of its big size. But we don't know what those designs mean, and I don't want to guess.” –Allan Pard, First Nations Piikani

The knowledge of the symbolism on some items such as this parfleche is restricted to those who have the rights to this knowledge. Why is it important that this knowledge is passed on? How is knowledge of their culture important to Aboriginal identity?

6. Divide students into four groups. Explain that each group will look critically at a photograph of a historical First Nations artifact. Ask students to study the image carefully, read the accompanying information and answer the following questions:

Who would have used this object?

What designs or symbols do you see?

How is this object important to personal and First Nations identity?

Please print and distribute the following artifact descriptions

Girl's Coming of Age Outfit, Deh Gah Got'ine, ca. 1890s, AC 494 – 497 A-B

In some cultures, “coming of age” is a very important tradition. This means that in their culture, that person is now considered an adult. Some cultures, like the Deh Gah Got'ine had a tradition where a girl would be by herself in a dwelling where older women would visit and teach her the traditions of their culture and important skills like sewing, embroidery, quillwork, and beadwork. At the end of her seclusion, her mother would make her a special outfit and her father would lead her in her first drum dance, which could last all night. When someone wears an outfit like this, it shows that they are an important part of their community and they are now considered an adult.

AP 293, Scraper, Néhiyawak, late 19th century

“This scraper is from Loon Lake, Saskatchewan. It is made from an elk antler and the donor’s grandmother used it. You can see the wear. Here are beautifully incised decorations – lines with dots and some x-shaped scratch marks in between the lines. There is an indentation in the base where a wrist strap would have been attached. We know that Native women spent much of their time tanning and preparing hides for clothing, utensils and tipis. I think the very simple curve of the antler and the elegant incised markings were a way to beautify a utilitarian item, and to show respect for the animals she was working with. The designs also identified her unique personal utensil. It makes sense that she would want something beautiful to hold in her daily tasks. That would have been really important. – Beth Carter, Curator of Ethnology at Glenbow Museum

AD 42, Basket, Tsilhqot'in, early 20th century

“The Tsilhqot'in, a Dene-speaking people who live in the centre of British Columbia, created this distinct style of coiled root basket. These are burden baskets that women would have carried on a daily basis. Even though they are utilitarian, women took the time to create these elaborate designs, to make the baskets both practical and beautiful...I think the design on this basket shows a real connection to the land and the environment in the region where these people live. There are three bands of design. Along the bottom, elk or caribou are shown using dark red cherry bark. A checker board band occupies the middle. A plant-like design is at the top.” –Beth Carter, Curator of Ethnology at Glenbow Museum

Belt, Siksika, early 20th century, AF 1540

“The swastika is an ancient symbol that is found among many First Nations in North America and in other cultures around the world. It represents harmony, balance and the importance of living a proper life. The appropriation of the symbol by the Nazis turned the meaning to one of hate and racism. Because of this popular understanding, many museums are reluctant to display the symbol – even when it is on Native materials. This deprives people of the right to their own symbols and unwittingly, supports the Nazi supremacist beliefs.” – Gerald Conaty, Director of Indigenous Studies

“What I like about this one...it has a stylized symbol of life. This design reflects the four directions. It is a similar design to the swastika that Hitler used. Native people used this as a symbol of life, a symbol of the four directions and a symbol of the four seasons. It is a very important symbol that one evil person took away from the Native people. If you wore it today you would be accused of loving the Nazis. But if I wore it today it would be with the intent of taking back a First Nations design.

Symbols have dualities...different meanings in different cultures. As an artist you have to recognize why you are putting a design on a piece of art, what it means and who is going to be looking at the art. Back then, when they made the belts, they were incorporating a design that was a family design, a community design or a design of their own people or nation, so it had specific meanings for those people.” --Frederick McDonald, Fort McKay First Nations artist

7. After groups have had time to examine and discuss, have each group share their discussions with the class.

Thinking Further

Ask students to write an essay on their connection to art discussing the following: How is art used in your culture? Why is art created? What message is art today sending to its viewers? How are these ideas different or the same for the First Nations people? Refer to the excerpt "Connections & Complexities" as well as your discussions about the artifacts.

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY TODAY

Materials: Images and image descriptions

1. Begin a discussion about the traditional lifestyle of First Nations people, keeping in mind that there are two aspects: the material culture, and the values and beliefs. As they began interacting with Europeans, how did these change? How did they stay the same? (see background information from Part 2)
2. Show Image 'Blood Camps' by Gerald Tailfeathers, 56.22.3 What evidence do you see of their traditional lifestyle? What is more modern? Read the following quotes.

"This scene may just as well have been painted today. Each summer, Kainai gather at Akokaatsin where families and friends meet and where important ceremonies reaffirm Kainai connections with their world. Tipis are erected next to canvas tents. Horses are tethered next to cars and trucks. Ancient ceremonies continue in the context of modern life. Tailfeathers' use of colour reflects the earth paint used by his ancestors. This painting is full of hope and pride." --Gerald Conaty

"In some ways, this image represents the encroachment of western influences on traditional Aboriginal life. This image, set in the Alberta foothills, brings together the nineteenth century (horse) and the twentieth century (automobile) as it juxtaposes a Native tipi and the non-Native tent. In his own life, Tailfeathers often felt the need to assimilate in order to be taken seriously as an artist. He was advised to de-Indianize his name by signing his paintings "Gerald T. Feathers." Conversely, much of his work reflects this strong desire to connect to his cultural traditions, to continue to paint the stories that he had learned about his tribe's history. He eventually moved back to his reserve, signed his paintings with just his Native name, Tailfeathers, and immersed himself in traditional ceremonies." --Quyen Hoang

How are these two perspectives different? While one feels the painting is celebratory, the other notices discrimination and prejudices of the time. What were some ways in which Aboriginals were pressured or forced to assimilate? (social pressures, residential schools, banning of some ceremonies, etc.)

1. Divide the class into four groups. Explain that each group will be given two images of contemporary art done by First Nations artists. Each group should study each image silently for a few minutes, giving time to examine and formulate individual thoughts before group discussion. It may also be helpful to look at one image at a time, then compare the two at the end. Before reading the label copy, consider the following questions:

What do you see? What do you think the artist is trying to say? How does the artist identify himself/herself? What is the artist saying about Aboriginal identity?

After examining the second image, compare the two pieces. How are the two artists' messages the same? How are they different?

2. After discussing the images, have each group share some of their discussion with the class. Together as a class, try to summarize each image with a word, phrase or issue that it is representing. Though each artwork deals with First Nations identity in some way, there may be many different perspectives that are represented, illustrating some of the many varied perspectives on Aboriginal and Canadian identity.

Thinking Further

Research an artist such as Paul Kane, Karl Bodmer, or George Catlin, 19th century artists well-known for their portraits of Aboriginal people. Investigate how they viewed and portrayed these people as a dying race, and the idea of the "noble savage."

IMAGES

Please print in colour if possible



Gerald Tailfeathers

Kainai (1925-1975)

Blood Camps, 1956

watercolour on paper

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased, 1956

56.22.3



George Littlechild

Néhiyawak (b. 1958)

Cross Cultural Examination #2, 2007

inkjet on paper

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with funds from the Historic Resource Fund, 2008

2008.111.001

George Littlechild

Néhiyawak (b. 1958)

Cross Cultural Examination #2, 2007

inkjet on paper

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with funds from the Historic Resource Fund, 2008
2008.111.001

“In this work, George Littlechild explores his mixed ancestry with historical photographs, one depicting his grandfather’s cousin, Grace Marston, and the other, Eva Pipestem, a Plains Cree woman from Hobbema. While the images recall the painful history of colonization, religious oppression and cultural loss, it is ultimately an examination of change and transition. Together, they represent a shared history that has affected the descendants of both cultures.”

– Quyen Hoang

“Both of these portraits were taken in the 1920’s, but in separate studios and separate locales. I was struck by the beauty of both of these women captured and frozen in time; each wearing their respective styles of the era – the glamorous 20s vs. the hybrid western and Native garb. It is interesting to explore these images for traces of their lives – who they were and how similar or differently they lived. If they had an opportunity to sit over tea ... how would they have interacted? What would they have spoken about?”

From left to right: Grace Marston of Los Angeles, my grandfather John MacKenzie Price’s first cousin; Eva Pipestem, a descendant of Chief Big Bear and is related to me through marriage on my mother, Rachel Littlechild’s, side.” – George Littlechild



Jane Ash Poitras

Denesuline (b. 1951)

Living in the Storm Too Long, 1992

xerox, photographs, newsprint and acrylic on canvas

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with support from the Canada Council for the Arts

996.025.001

Jane Ash Poitras

Denesuline (b. 1951)

Living in the Storm Too Long, 1992

xerox, photographs, newsprint and acrylic on canvas

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with support from the Canada Council for the Arts

996.025.001

“Living in the Storm Too Long is a complex painting that layers contemporary, historical and popular culture perceptions and stereotypes of First Nations peoples. These images are then juxtaposed with images of those who symbolize the cultural and political oppression of these peoples, such as the Pope and Christopher Columbus.

I find this work interesting because it asserts a different sense of time. This painting reads much like a film because the images are presented all at once, suggesting a narrative that has no beginning or end. For Native People, history is simply part of a continuum that has persisted for thousands of years, prior to any notions of “discovery.” Columbus’s arrival merely marked the beginning of a parallel history between Native and non-Native cultures.”
--Quyen Hoang

“My art is a social statement. It is issue-oriented art. This word colonization is an interesting word. I ask myself, what exactly does this word mean? As we near the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus (lost in search of India) we often hear we are living in post-colonial times. That suggests to me that the period of colonization is over and the Native voice is no longer heard. When the Europeans first came to the Americas, [the land was] already occupied by Indigenous people, buffalo and spirits. In the most fundamental way it was impossible for the Europeans to colonize the Americas...Although we did not think of it as colonization, Indian people had already transformed the natural decentralized chaos of the world and given it order according to our vision of what it should be, given it order or cosmos.” --Jane Ash Poitras, 1992



Terrance Houle and Jarusha Brown

Kainai/Nahkawiniwak (b. 1975) and Canadian (b. 1977)

Untitled # 7 (from the Urban Indian Series), 2006

c-print on paper

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with funds from the Historic Resources Fund,
2007

2007.037.007

Terrance Houle and Jarusha Brown

Kainai/Nahkawiniwak (b. 1975) and Canadian (b. 1977)

Untitled # 7 (from the Urban Indian Series), 2006

c-print on paper

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with funds from the Historic Resources Fund,
2007

2007.037.007

The *Urban Indian Series* consists of eight photographs that depict the artist performing everyday tasks such as shopping, working and, in this case, riding Calgary transit while dressed in his powwow (Grass Dance) regalia.

I find this work presents links to tradition in a contemporary and provocative way. Terrance grew up powwow dancing and participating in ceremonies. These traditions continue to be a part of his life and serve as sources of inspiration for his work. He questions our perceptions about Aboriginal culture and place within contemporary settings. Terrance makes it clear that identity is not static and that tradition is an ongoing part of contemporary Aboriginal life.” --Quyen Hoang

“The *Urban Indian Series* is a comment on personal identity and cultural commodity in today’s contemporary culture. As a Blackfoot person growing up across the prairies of Canada, I experience many different cultures and the social boundaries we place on identity. I wanted to use regalia as a way to create dialogue and question what it is to be a First Nations person today. What is my culture vs. the mainstream understanding of Native Peoples? The regalia acts as a catalyst in this image, breaking up the sea of mundane western garb. I wanted to use my regalia for a different function other than dancing, but as a representation that is part of my everyday, much like my culture and questioning the suggestion that I am out of place in a world that only identifies with conformity. The words speak on several levels that question ideas of tradition, identity and culture that is often negated or replaced by western cultural standards.” --Terrance Houle



Judy Chartrand, Néhiyawak (b. 1959)

Métis Soup Cans, 2007

low-fired clay, glaze, luster, wood

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with funds from the Historic Resource Fund, 2008.102.001 A-AW

Judy Chartrand, Néhiyawak (b. 1959)

Métis Soup Cans, 2007

low-fired clay, glaze, luster, wood

Collection of Glenbow Museum; Purchased with funds from the Historic Resource Fund, 2008.102.001 A-AW

In the 1960s, Andy Warhol produced a famous painting of Campbell soup cans as a commentary on our consumer-oriented society. Chartrand is using soup cans to comment on the place of Native people in Canadian society. Look closely at the labels on the cans. What languages are on the labels? Are these the contents you would expect to find in soup? The mixture of “country food,” such as moose meat, elk and rabbit, with mainstream food helps us think about the role of Native people in our society.

Some people maintain traditional lifestyles and some live in urban centres. Many Native people move between the two settings. The artist wants us to ask questions such as: Is it fair to stereotype Native people as being either “traditional” or “modern?” “What are the effects of modern lifestyles on traditional ways of living on the land?”

As a Metis, Chartrand has both a Native and a non-Native heritage. The soup can is an ideal medium to reflect this. The “country food” names on the commercial icon blends the old with the new. The colour of the can – red and white – might symbolize the blending of the Native (sometimes called “red”) heritage with the non-native (or White) backgrounds.