

Lesson Plan

Australian Aboriginal Art and Storytelling



Australian Aboriginal art is one of the oldest continuing art traditions in the world. Much of the most important knowledge of aboriginal society was conveyed through different kinds of storytelling—including narratives that were spoken, performed as dances or songs, and those that were painted. In this lesson students will learn about the Aboriginal storytelling tradition through the spoken word and through visual culture. They will have the opportunity to hear stories of the Dreamtime told by the Aboriginal people, as well as to investigate Aboriginal storytelling in contemporary dot paintings.

Guiding Questions

Who are Australian Aborigines and what styles of storytelling do they practice?

Learning Objectives

Analyze Australian Aboriginal culture through a study of storytelling and dot painting.

Define the aboriginal term Dreamtime.

Explain the lessons in or purposes for telling the stories they will hear in this lesson.

Identify some Australian animals and explain how they relate to Aboriginal art.



Subjects & Topic:

History & Social Studies

World History

Art & Culture

Painting

History

Grade: K-5

Lesson Plan Details

Content Standards

NCSS.D2.His.1.3-5. Create and use a chronological sequence of related events to compare developments that happened at the same time.

NCSS.D2.His.2.3-5. Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.

NCSS.D2.His.3.3-5. Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.

NCSS.D2.His.4.3-5. Explain why individuals and groups during the same historical period differed in their perspectives.

NCSS.D2.His.12.3-5. Generate questions about multiple historical sources

Preparation

- Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and other useful websites. Download and print out documents you will use and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing. In particular, you should print out a copy of [Information and pictures of Australian animals](#) available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website Internet Public Library for yourself, as well as making copies of the [quiz PDF](#).

- Read the background information on the [history of Australia and early Australian aboriginal history and art](#) available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website [NativeWeb](#). You may find it helpful also to review the [Australia for Kids information](#) available through Internet Public Library, [also an EDSITEment-reviewed website](#). Also available through [NativeWeb](#).

Lesson Activities



Activity 1. Storytelling in Aboriginal Art

Telling stories out loud is only one way that Aboriginal people convey narratives. In addition to spoken stories there are also songs and dances that tell similar narratives. Another well-known method—particularly in recent years—is in the form of painting. In this activity students will learn about contemporary, Aboriginal dot painting as a storytelling medium.

Show the class Rover Thomas's painting, [Cyclone Tracy](#), at the National Gallery of Australia, available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website [The Center for the Liberal Arts](#). Begin by asking students to describe what they see in his painting. They should describe the elements of art that appear in this painting, including elements such as lines, shapes, and colors. For instance, does the artist paint in long brushstrokes? Are the lines curved, straight, thick, or thin? Does the artist use a variety of shapes? What types of shapes do you see? What are the colors that the artist uses? Ask students to

describe what objects they see in Thomas's painting. What do they think the black cone is? What do they think the red and yellow shapes around the cone are?

When students view the large image of this painting this will likely notice that many of the lines aren't lines at all, but are strings of dots. Explain to students that this type of painting is very common in Aboriginal art. Then, share with students the information that accompanies this painting on the museum website. Thomas's painting contains within the image the story of Cyclone Tracy, which destroyed the city of Darwin in 1974. Ask students to think about one of the stories they heard in the previous activity. Are there similarities in the story behind this painting and the ones they heard before?

In many of those stories there was a character—often an animal—whose actions or behavior taught a lesson to the people hearing the story. Thomas's painting also contains within it an animal whose actions teach a lesson. In this case it is the mythical rainbow serpent that is believed to have taken the form of the cyclone as a warning to the Aboriginal people that they must keep their culture strong. Have students work together to create a list of similarities between one of the stories they heard in the previous activity and the story behind Thomas's painting.

You can find a rich collection of Aboriginal dot paintings in the collection of the [Art Gallery of New South Wales](#) available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website The Center for the Liberal Arts. Click on the top left image to enter the Aboriginal Art collection. Next click on the Browse icon (the eye)

next to Painting, and then click "image list" beneath the heading "Central and Western Desert." Scroll down the list until you come to Eubena Nampitjin's 1991 painting "Pinyu."

Ask students to describe what they see in the painting, discussing elements such as line, color, and shapes, as they did for the previous painting. Then ask them to describe what forms or objects they see in Nampitjin's painting. What does it look like? Are there any people or animals? Are there any trees or hills?

Students should again note that the painting is composed primarily of dots. In the accompanying material on Nampitjin and her work on the museum website this painting is described as mapping Nampitjin's homeland. The image contains sacred rock formations and the dingoes that live in the countryside. How do students think that she has pictured the land? Is it seen from her house? From the sky? Does it resemble a map?

Ask students to recall the stories they heard in the last activity that taught listeners something about the geography of the storyteller's home, such as "Gulaga," Told by Warren Foster. Do students see similarities in the kinds of stories that are being told by both Foster and Nampitjin? Have them work in small groups to create a list of the points that they think are similar. Have each group share and compare their lists with the rest of the class.

Next, ask students to think about the ways in which the two media—oral storytelling and visual storytelling—are different. Are there things that a storyteller can get across in telling the story that he or she can't get across in painting? Are there things that can only be told in visual media? Working

with the same small groups, have students create a list of differences and answers to these questions, which they should then share with the rest of the class.

Activity 2. Telling stories: Listening to the Aboriginal Elders

Ask students to think about something that they might have learned from their parents or their teachers through a song or a story. Did they learn their ABCs from a song? Or did they learn to count from a rhyme (such as one, two, buckle my shoe, etc.)? Was it easier to learn their ABCs by learning a song to go with it?

Have students think about the path from their room at home to the kitchen (or from their home to school). How would they explain it to somebody else how to get from one room to the next? What landmarks would they tell the other person to look out for? Students might say things like "pass my brother's room then turn right." But how will someone who doesn't know their house already know when they have passed their brother's room? How will they explain it to someone who is unfamiliar in a way that they can recognize and remember that landmark? Might they tell a story about the landmark that might help them to remember? What story would they tell someone to help them remember the landmarks? For example, students might offer stories about the posters on their brother's door, such as explaining that he got them at a concert.

Many Aboriginal stories have just this kind of information embedded within them. In addition to conveying information about the landscape, many Aboriginal stories explain natural phenomena, such as the characteristics of the animals and plants of Australia. Finally, many Aboriginal stories are designed to teach lessons about morality, ethics, and right behavior. Ask students if they have ever heard a story that had a moral? They might identify a fable, such as one of Aesop's fables, or a fairy tale.

Perhaps the best place to start learning about Aboriginal storytelling is with the concept of *Dreamtime*. Aborigines believe in a time called Dreamtime, during which the land, the sky above, and all they contained were formed by the actions of unknown, supernatural beings. Dreamtime is the beginning of all things, and there are numerous Aboriginal stories that connect the creation of Australia's geography to the actions of animals, spirits, and people in the Dreamtime. You may wish to begin by sharing the [information on the Dreamtime](#) that is available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website Native Web. Work together with the class to create a definition for the idea of Dreamtime. A working definition might be: The period when, according to the Aboriginal people, the world was formed and all things came into being.

Now that students have learned something about the concept of Dreamtime, they are ready to learn about Aboriginal storytelling, and to listen to some stories about Dreamtime. Begin by listening to an introduction to Aboriginal storytelling by Aunty Beryl Carmichael, called [Why the Stories are Told](#). This is available as both an audio and a text file from this web page, which is accessible through Native Web. When you and your class have finished

listening to the explanation of why stories are told you can move on to hearing some stories told by Aboriginal storytellers. You can choose from the

Assessment



Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Have each group read one of the [Bunyips stories](#) from the National Library of Australia's website, accessible through the EDSITEment-reviewed website The Center for the Liberal Arts. When they have finished reading the story their group has been assigned have them work together to answer the following questions:

- What is this story about?
- Who are the characters? Are they animals? People? Spirits?
- Are some characters good? Are some characters bad?
- What is the lesson of this story?
- How can you tell that this story is an Aboriginal story?

Next, assign one painting from the the collection of the [Art Gallery of New South Wales](#) available through the EDSITEment-reviewed website The Center for the Liberal Arts to each group. Share with them the information available from the museum website about the paintings they will be viewing. Have students work together to answer the following questions about the painting they have been assigned:

- Describe the painting your group has been assigned. What kinds of colors, lines, shapes, and animals do you see in the painting?

- Does this painting tell a story? What kind of story?
- Is there a lesson in the story? What is the lesson?
- Is there anything in this painting that lets you know that it is an Aboriginal painting? Explain your answer.

OR

Ask students to create their own stories explaining the route from their home to school or the behavior or characteristic of a family pet. Their story should reflect and implement the things that they have learned in this lesson about Aboriginal storytelling. Their story should attempt to: _____

Lesson Extensions



Selected EDSITEment Websites

- [The Center for the Liberal Arts](#)
 - [National Gallery of Australia](#)
 - [Art Gallery of New South Wales](#)
- [National Geographic Society Xpeditions](#)
 - [Map of Australia](#)

- [Native Web](#)
 - [History of Australia](#)
 - [Early Australian aboriginal history and art](#)
 - [Explore the various regions of Australia and Aboriginal communities](#)
 - [Aboriginal rock art](#)
 - [Background information on Aboriginal life and history especially designed for teachers](#)
 - [Fact sheet of answers to common questions asked by kids](#)
 - [Information on Dreamtime](#)
 - [Why the Stories are Told](#)
 - [List of stories](#)
 - ["Creation Story," told by Aunty Beryl Carmichael](#)
 - ["Gulaga," told by Warren Foster](#)

Materials & Media

Australian Aboriginal Art and Storytelling: Worksheet 1

 File (PDF)