



Personal Storytelling, Oral Traditions, and Narrative Art — Grades K-3

Summary

Students will learn about pictographic art and oral traditions by watching and responding to a PowerPoint, “The Art of Storytelling: Plains Indian Perspectives”; by considering important stories from their own lives, families, and communities; by examining the symbols Plains artists used in their pictographic art and the symbols we use today; by learning how to discuss and critique art; by creating a personal artistic piece using stylistic elements from ledger art; and by telling a personal story using visual language.

This lesson is aligned with the OPI Indian Education For All (IEFA) “Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians” (EUs), particularly

- EU 1–Tribal Diversity
- EU 2–Individual Diversity
- EU 3–Beliefs, Spirituality, Traditions, Oral History Persist
- EU 4–Reservations–land reserved
- EU 6–History from Indian Perspectives

This lesson is also aligned with the following Montana Art Content Standards

- Anchor Standard #2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #8. Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

- Anchor Standard #9. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding, including artistic ideas and works by American Indians.

Teaching Note

Educators can adapt this lesson, using parts or the whole. There are six distinct activities, and the lesson is designed so that one activity is done per day. However, this can be transformed into a unit study if educators focus on one image per day/week. Materials needed for each activity are specified under that activity.

About this Lesson

Marina Weatherly, an artist and art educator from Stevensville, Montana, developed this activity in 2012. It was reviewed by the Indian Education Division of the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI). Funding for this project was provided through a partnership between the Montana Historical Society and OPI.

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Activity 1: Learning about Narrative Art and Oral Traditions of the Plains Indians

Materials:

- “The Art of Storytelling” PowerPoint:
Download from <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/IEFA/GradesK-6TheArtofStorytelling.pptx>
- Lesson plan: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/IEFA/GradesK-6PPTLessonStorytelling.pdf>
- Blank ledger art paper for journals (optional) in “Prinable Ledger Templates” PDF: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/PictographicArt>

Preparation:

Instructors should familiarize themselves with the “Art of Storytelling” material. Print out the PowerPoint script and preview the PowerPoint.

Have students make journals, in which they can write notes and make sketches. If you wish, make copies of “Fort Keogh blank ledger page,” in the Ledger Templates PDF file to use for journal pages. Have students title their journals “My Ledger.”

Procedure:

Introduce the activity by presenting the learning objectives to the students.

Art is like a window into cultures and history. Culture refers to the customs, practices, and behaviors of a certain group or people. Looking at art can tell us something about the people who made the art and help us to appreciate and respect other people.

This art lesson will help teach us the story of several Montana Indian tribes during three time periods: thousands of years ago, in the late 1800s during a time of great change (a little more than a hundred years ago), and the present.

We will learn this story by looking at and talking about the art created by artists from those time periods. We will look at art from the Plains tribes of Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Hidatsa, and Blackfeet, and from the Plateau tribe of Salish.

We will make our own art to tell our own stories using some of the styles of the Indian artists. Styles are a certain way of doing something.

Discuss: Appreciation, respect, and how we show it.

Present Background Information:

Stories hold histories, ideas, and events.

The storytellers in this lesson often told their stories with pictures called *pictographs*.

Long ago, the Indian tribes of Montana did not have a written language; they did not write things down using an alphabet. Instead, they communicated orally (by talking and telling stories.) This is called oral tradition.

The people held knowledge, history, and stories *inside* of themselves and communicated in many different ways: the spoken word, sign language, picture writing or pictographs, music, dance, drama, and how they dressed.

They often used symbols to communicate. Symbols are pictures that mean something. Not all tribes and artists use the same symbols.

Today, people may use books and computers to store knowledge, history, and stories. They still communicate with the spoken word and different art forms, but now we also use computers, the Internet, phones, radio, TV, and movies to communicate and tell stories.

Sometimes stories in books use pictures with words to tell a story. This is called an illustration.

Today, symbols are still used. What are some symbols used today? Everyone has a special story to tell.

Discuss: Ways to communicate and tell stories, past and present, and use symbols (give examples).

Show PowerPoint Presentation, “The Art of Storytelling: Plains Indian Perspectives.”

Teaching Note: These images tell a sequential story, historical through contemporary. For kindergarten, the first visual image, of a petroglyph, may be used to begin the discussion below for content and art elements. Depending on amount of time and grade level, additional slides may be added to instructional time.

General Questions for the Visual Presentation: *While the students are viewing and discussing the images, engage the students by asking them the following guided questions, when applicable. Explain to the students they will be art and history detectives and will be looking for clues in the storytelling pictures to help them understand the stories better. Have students record answers to selected questions in their journals.*

Content	Art Elements & Principles of Design	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is happening? • Who is in the picture? • When did it happen? • Who made the picture? How many artists made the picture? • What tribe is the artist from? • Why was it made? • What are the figures wearing? Why? Hair style and headdress? Are they different or similar? How? • Which direction are the figures and animals moving? How are they moving? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of lines can you find? Did the artist draw the outside (outline) of their design first? • Shapes: What shapes do you see? • Do you see geometric shapes? What are they? • Are the people facing you or are they seen from the side? • Is there empty space? Big, little, or no space? • How are the shapes placed on the painting? • Who can find where pattern was used? • Is there movement? How did the artist show movement? • What colors can you find? • What materials did the artist use? • Can you find a symbol? What do you think the symbol means? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What action words can you use to describe what is happening? • Who can make a pose like that (specify) figure?

Understandings for Students K-3 Grades:

Stories may be told in many ways. A long time ago, Montana Indian tribes told stories by speaking and making pictures. Because they did not have a written language, they used an oral tradition to tell their stories (EU 3).

The picture stories may be about the past, or about what is happening now. By looking at the artistic style, you can see what life was like a long time ago, and you might see how it has changed (Crow, Hidatsa, Salish). Many Indian artists today continue to tell stories with their art (Blackfeet and Salish artists).

Sometimes the picture stories tell stories about good or brave deeds. The tribes show respect to those who have done good or brave deeds.

All Montana tribes are different, and each person is different (EUs 1, 2). Their artistic styles show both differences and similarities (Crow, Hidatsa, Northern Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Salish art).

Indian artists often used symbols to tell a story. Symbols are like writing with pictures. Not all Indian artists used the same symbols. Each tribe may have their own symbols still in use today.

Indian artists often traded ideas, gifts, and goods.

A long time ago (and still sometimes today), Montana Plains Indians and Salish Indians used natural materials from animals, plants, and minerals. The artists would respect their materials. Often, the stories, styles, and materials changed with time.

Artists often cooperated to create art together.

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Activity 2: Discussion and Inquiry (Single and/or Group Activity)

Materials:

- Images from packets or PowerPoint
- Student journals

Procedure:

Lead the class in a discussion of some of the following essential questions and/or choose a few of the questions for students to write about in their journals and share.

- What is an oral tradition?
- What are all the different ways a story can be told?
- Has my life been changed by something that has happened to me? How?
- What is an important event or memory I would like to show and tell others? Is it a family or community event?

- What good or brave deed have I done in my life that I am proud of?
- What important role do I have in my life? How do we show respect for each other?
- How have I cooperated or shared with someone else?
- How are we different from each other? How are we the same?

Journal Writing Activities:

What symbols do I use today in my life (numbers, letters, signs, etc.)?

What symbols, shapes, lines, patterns, colors, and materials did the Crow, Hidatsa, Northern Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Salish artists use to tell their picture story (name the tribe associated with the slide chosen per activity)?

What would I use to tell my story the best?

Activity 3: Remembering and Retelling Important Stories

Teaching Note: This is a multi-day lesson.

Materials:

- Family Story Assignment worksheet (on website: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/PictographicArt>) or other worksheet with sample questions
- Family History Question Ideas (on website: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/PictographicArt>)
- Student journals

Procedure:

Explain to students that ledger art allowed artists to preserve and share important memories. All of us have important memories that can be shared and preserved.

Ask students to talk to a family member to learn a story from their own family history or a

memorable family event.

- Provide students with sample questions (see Family History Question Ideas). Prepare your own questionnaire or use and/or modify the Family Story Assignment worksheet. In either case, provide support for students who may not have access to someone who can help them with this.

Have students brainstorm (individually or collectively) about a memorable event that happened to themselves, a family member, their family, classroom, school, or community. Encourage them to choose only one to three moments in that event. Which was the most important moment? What symbol or images would you use to portray those moments? (Students can draw these symbols or images in their journal.) Ask the students to tell the class their story.

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Discuss: generosity, kindness, and respect. How do you show it? What is an act you have done that you are proud of? How did other people show you respect for that action? What is an activity you did with others that showed cooperation? What symbols or images can show this activity? Have students reflect and/or draw symbols in their journals.

Related Extension Activities:

Invite a parent, grandparent, or native elder to tell stories. Whenever possible, invite a native tribal member to tell their tribal stories and

share the use of some symbols they use on traditional tipis, moccasins, powwow clothing (regalia), etc. This should be discussed ahead of time in a culturally respectful manner prior to the classroom or special site visit.

Read to or have students read Indian Reading Series about Montana tribes (e.g., *Tepee, Sun and Time*). Are any symbols used in the story? List them in the student journal.

Have students act out a story, in the oral tradition.

Activity 4: Art Evaluation

Materials:

- Images from PowerPoint or packet

Procedure:

Teach your students how to properly critique an art project by training them in ways of looking and talking about art. (This skill will be practiced later when students offer peer critiques of each other's art projects.)

Choose a slide from the PowerPoint to model and practice critiquing a work of art. Stress that art should be judged in relationship to its intentions (for student art, that intention is often to fulfill a specific assignment).

Provide model sentences that avoid judgment. For example, "The first thing I see is ..." or "___ stands out to me because of the (size, color, brightness, placement) contrast." (Marvin

Bartels, 2002.) In his essay, "Successful Art Class Critique," Bartel writes: "If it is peer evaluation, I ask students to avoid all judgmental comments. I stress description, analysis, and interpretation. These are comments that say what we see, why it makes an impression, and what it might mean or how it makes the viewer feel. No one may say, 'I like . . .' or, 'I don't like . . .' I ask them to simply say, 'The first thing I see is . . .' 'This ___ stands out for me because of the . . . (size, color, brightness, placement, subject, etc.) contrast.'" www.goshen.edu/art/ed/critique1.html

Let students know that they will be critiquing each other's work using these tools. Discuss that during peer review it is important to use a proper voice and to pay equal attention to all classroom students (not more for friends, etc.).

Activity 5: The Creative Process: Introduction to Style (Traditional, Tribal, Individual)

Materials:

- Untitled ledger drawing by Curley, (Crow) 1886 (show image from packet or PowerPoint)
- White or tan paper
- Pencil or sharpie, color pencils

Procedure:

Show image created by Curley.

Have students draw the main shapes from the image.

Instruct students to identify the middle of their paper with their hand. Then, using a pencil,

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have them draw only the main shapes of the figure in the style of the example. Tell them to leave out the clothing, hair, details, and accessories.

Remind students not to place their figure on the bottom of the page, but in the middle, where their hand was.

You may model each step for them on the white board, as they follow you. Emphasize side profile face, front-facing torso, profile legs, and other distinct features in the example.

Have students personalize their figures:

Tell them: “This figure is you. You are on your way to a very special event. How would you make this person look like you? What is the event? How would you dress for the occasion?”

Instruct the students to make their figure look like themselves by drawing their hair.

Then have them add clothing and accessories of their choice on the figure.

Emphasize that they are not copying what the Crow man is wearing.

They may decorate and color the figure using geometric patterns and symbols of their choosing from their journal and activities above.

Emphasize that the time period is now, and they should dress like they would today for a very special occasion.

It is the style of the figures in the art that will be emphasized.

Activity 6: Tell a Story with Visual Language

Materials:

- Use materials that are readily available in the classroom. You may also experiment with traditional natural materials as noted on the slide.
- Choose one surface: the blank hide example in the kit (make copies), large construction paper (white, or tan, with torn edges or plain), or recycled material.
- Choose media: one to outline and another for color (pencils, Sharpies, color pencils, paint (tempera), or crayons).

Procedure:

Based on previous discussions, have students illustrate a true important personal story or event in their life. Have students pre-draw ideas first in their journals before starting their ultimate project. Emphasize that students are to use only images and symbols, not written words, to tell the story. The story could

illustrate a good action or deed. There could be several moments and events in the same story, if they are related.

Ask students to make sure that only what is necessary to tell the story is included. Students can decorate their stories with shapes, patterns, and geometric designs.

Tell students that the style may be their own, but that they will use space similar to what they saw in the earlier examples. For example, events and figures are not placed along the bottom of the page, but over the entire page. You may model for them an example of a story/event from your life.

When finished, the students may show their story to the class. Have classmates try to “read” or interpret the story back to the artist in the oral tradition of recounting events. Then have the artist tell the story verbally while showing the picture.

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Extensions for Alternative/Additional Lesson: Group Collaboration and Cooperation

Materials:

- Large roll paper, white, yellow, or light tan. Preferred: Pencil or Sharpies, tempera paint, large brushes. Pencils and crayon could be used instead.
- This lesson would be a class or group collaboration. The students will first draw a rough copy of their story idea before applying it to the large paper. You may help them decide whose story goes where, and the size of each. Older students could cooperate together to make those decisions.
- The students will then draw and color their stories on one large roll paper, which could be displayed in the classroom or hallway.

Cooperation: Artistic Roles and Geometric Designs

Same lesson and materials as above, but the students will divide into two groups. The students in one group will each draw and color their story; the other group will create their own geometric designs and patterns in bands between each or several stories, or around the edge of the paper.

Evaluation or Assessment

Students will be evaluated or assessed on their demonstration of knowledge, understandings, skills, and abilities of both the Essential Understandings and Arts content as outlined in the learning objectives. Assessment will be based on how well the students answered the questions during the visual presentation, the level of inquiry, and the outcome of the art activities. If individual student journals were kept through the lessons, they could be utilized as a formative assessment by how well the following concepts of the essential student understandings are demonstrated, visually and through journal writing.

Objectives to Evaluate and/or Assess:

IEFA Concepts

Students will know:

- By looking at art, you can learn about other people and their life.
- Montana Indian tribes had and still have an oral tradition for storytelling as a means of remembering and communicating.
- The concept of symbols and picture storytelling.
- Long ago, Indian men and women had different roles.
- A long time ago, art supplies used by Montana Indian tribes were made from natural materials (hide, plants, fiber, rocks, earth, etc.) and were, and still are, respected.
- Indian artists often traded ideas, gifts, and goods with each other, other tribes, and new people moving into their homelands.

Art Concepts

Students identified:

- Some lines, shapes, and patterns, including geometric designs, used by Montana Indian artists
- The use of space in the art
- How the storytelling artists showed movement and action
- Individual and tribal clothing and some art styles of a few Montana tribes

Students will be able to:

- Use lines and shapes to draw a figurative self-portrait in Plains Indian Crow pictorial style
- Create original artwork inspired by Plains Indian pictorial style that illustrates a personal story from an event that has meaning. Use available materials and basic elements of art and principles of design to create their story; present and discuss their artwork with their peers.

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Resources

Books from the Indian Reading Series, published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, including *Teepee, Sun, and Time: A Crow Story*, by Henry Real Bird, Level II, Book 14 (Portland, OR, 1978). Check your library or download the story from the internet by searching “Indian Reading Series Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.”

Learn more about the Essential Understandings regarding Montana Indian and the Montana Art Content Standards on the Montana Office of Public Instruction’s website.