

American Indian Painters Series

Teaching Guide For Grades 6 - 8



Harvest Festival, Alphonso Roybal - San Ildefonso, 1950

This project was made possible in part by the
Institute of Museum and Library Services MA-249648-OMS-21.

Illinois
State
Museum
Society

ILLINOIS
STATE • MUSEUM
explore. discover. learn. share.



INSTITUTE of
Museum and Library
SERVICES

Key Themes

- Identity
- Tradition
- Assimilation
- Creative expression

Illinois Learning Standards for Visual Arts:

6th VA:Re7.1.6 a. Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

6th VA:Re7.2.6 a. Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

6th VA:Re8.1.6 a. Collaboratively interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information.

6th VA:Cn11.1.6 a. Analyze how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.

7th VA:Re7.1.7 a. Explain how the method of display, the location, and the experience of an artwork influence how it is perceived and valued

7th VA:Re8.1.7 a. Interpret art and generate meanings through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, and contextual information and identify key concepts.

7th VA:Cn11.1.7 a. Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

8th VA:Re8.1.8 a. Collaboratively develop meaningful interpretations, supported by evidence, of artworks through describing and analyzing feelings, subject matter, formal characteristics, artmaking approaches, contextual information, and key concepts.

8th VA:Cn11.1.8 a. Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

Introduction

The American Indian Painters series was collected and produced in 1950 by American painter and curator O.B. Jacobson and author Jeanne D'Ucel. Jacobson and D'Ucel put together a collection of Indigenous art depicting a wide range of Tribal heritage including traditional dress, religious ceremony, and everyday life.

This teaching guide challenges students to consider the significance of Indigenous Peoples saving their traditions and experiences through creative expression while simultaneously facing assimilation and the erasure of those same traditions.

Working in groups, students will analyze the paintings by answering questions. As a group, they will curate a collection of paintings and work together to write a museum label.

Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Describe and interpret imagery featured in artwork
- Support answers using context within artwork
- Summarize emotional response to artwork
- Identify symbols and interpret their meaning
- Construct a narrative for an artwork

Suggested Vocabulary

Indian Boarding School: Also known as American Indian Residential Schools, these were institutions in the United States and Canada, often run by churches and funded by the government, that took Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children from their families. Their goal was to erase the children's Indigenous identity and force them to adopt the culture of the white majority.

Assimilation: In U.S. history, assimilation means that people or groups become part of a dominant culture, usually by taking on its language, customs, and ways of life. For immigrants, this process can be complicated. It sometimes leads to a mix of cultures, but it can also cause people to lose their original identity or create conflicts between generations. For Native Americans, government policies tried to force assimilation and erase tribal cultures, which often had serious and harmful effects.

Ancestor: A person, typically one more remote than a grandparent, from whom one is descended

Curate: Select, organize, and look after the items in an exhibition

Label: A small sign next to an exhibit item that gives basic details about the object and the object's history

Introduction Activity

Visual Thinking Strategies: American Indian Painters Series



Pine Tree Ceremonial Dance, Jose R. Toledo - Jemez, 1950

Select 4 artworks from the American Indian Painters Series.

Using [Visual Thinking Strategies](#), ask the students to describe what they see.

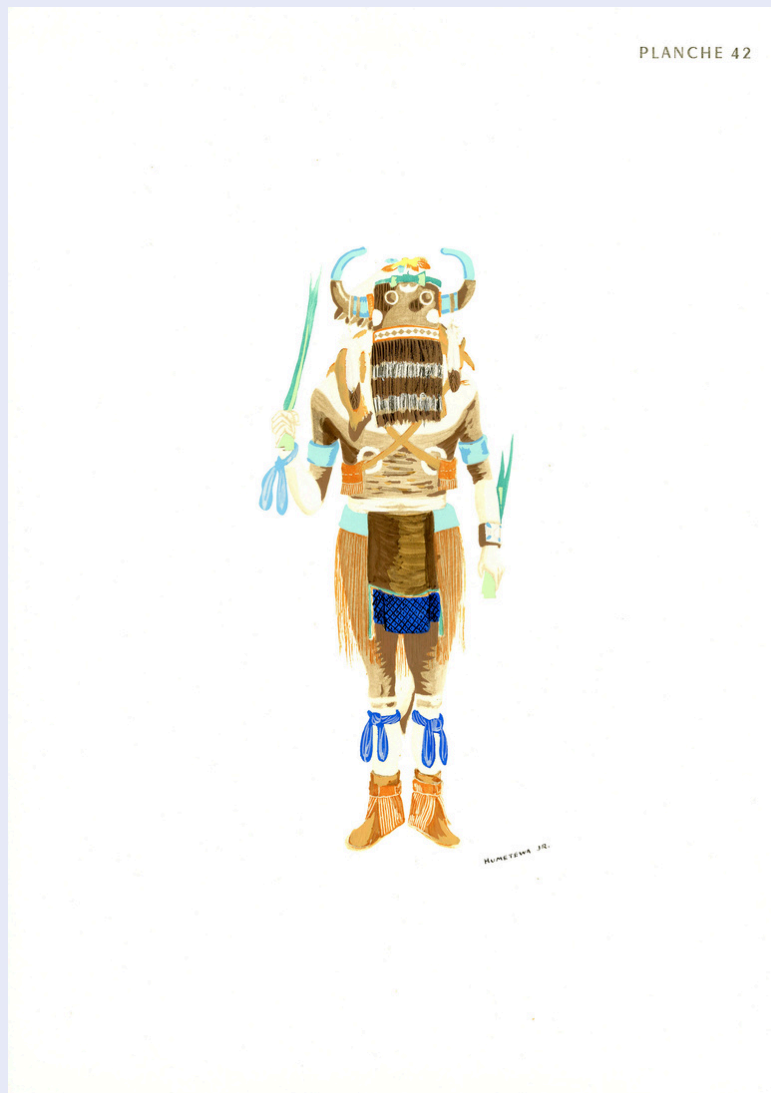
Then ask students:

- What are some commonalities between the artworks?
- What seems to be the theme of the artwork?
- What do you notice about the style of artwork?

American Indian Painters Series

White Bear, Kutcah Onauu

In the early 1900s, Dr. J Walter Fewkes from the Bureau of American Ethnology asked Kutcah Onauu, also known as White Bear from the Hopi Tribe, to draw various Indigenous symbols and religious figures to help explain their meanings. Onauu produced more than 150 drawings of spiritual beings known as Kachinas. These drawings were published in 1903 as the “Codex of Hopiensis.”



Tunwup Hopi Kachina, James R. Humetawa - Hopi, 1950

American Indian Painters Series

Indian Boarding School Students

In 1917, a teacher at an Indian Boarding School noticed that their students had started using art supplies to draw different pictures from their Indigenous heritage. The drawings depicted traditions that the students were no longer permitted to celebrate.



Cochiti Eagle Dance, Tonita Pena - Cochiti, 1950

American Indian Painters Series

Ta e (Home of the Elk), Crescencio Martinez

Similarly, Crescencio Martinez—Indigenously named Ta e, meaning Home of the Elk—was a custodian at an Indigenous boarding school who used broken crayons to draw images of religious symbols and ceremonies. His drawings were inspired by ancient artifacts he had seen while working at an excavation site, objects that reminded him of and reconnected him to his Pueblo heritage.



Pueblo Pottery Makers, Velino Shije Herrera - Zia, 1950

American Indian Painters Series

Ask: What do these three stories have in common?

In these three examples, Indigenous peoples made pictures showing traditions that were no longer passed down through generations. Over time, these traditions disappeared because of assimilation.

Ask: What is assimilation?

Assimilation happens when a powerful group makes another group adopt its culture. The less powerful group has to give up its beliefs, clothing, language, and celebrations to fit in. Since the founding of the United States, Indigenous people have been pressured to become part of white, European culture. This has taken away their unique identities and traditions. Indian boarding schools were set up to make Indigenous peoples assimilate.

Indian Boarding Schools were places where Indigenous children, taken from their families, were taught white culture by white teachers. As a result, they lost their own languages, traditions, and life lessons. Over time, this led many students to lose touch with their cultural identity.

American Indian Painters Series

In the examples discussed earlier, White Bear, Boarding School students, and Crecensio Martinez had all been pressured to leave behind the knowledge of their ancestors, but were somehow able to still keep those memories alive through their art.

This collection of art celebrates the unique voices and styles of Indigenous Peoples. Each piece tells a story—of sacred dances and ceremonies, wisdom passed down through generations, the deep bond with nature, and everyday moments of family and community life.

The artists used bold colors, flowing lines, and smooth textures to bring their stories to life. The colors and shapes create a sense of movement and rhythm, drawing you into each scene.

You will see depictions of traditions, family, clothing, animals, nature, and more—each one holding cultural meaning. These artworks offer a powerful glimpse into the people, places, and beliefs that are cherished in Indigenous cultures, and show the strong ties they have to their ancestors and heritage.

Discussion

- How do we preserve our memories?
- How do we express ourselves and our identity?
- How can art help tell stories, honor culture, and save memories?

Group Activity: Exploring and Curating Indigenous Art

Divide into Groups

Split the class into groups of 4–5 students. Each group gets a set of prints (no more than 10 images, and each group should have the same number).

Look Closely at the Art (5 min per image)

Choose one image at a time and discuss:

What's happening in this picture?

What do you see that makes you say that?

Notice the Details (2 min)

Talk about what stands out to you in the art. What colors, patterns, or symbols do you notice?

Ask Questions (5 min)

As a group, write down 5 questions you have about the artwork. These can be about the meaning, style, history, or anything you're curious about.

Group Activity: Exploring and Curating Indigenous Art

Create Your Own Exhibit (3 min)

Choose up to 5 artworks from your group's set to include in your own exhibit. Think about:

What themes or ideas connect them?

Is there a story these images can tell together?

What do they have in common?

Write About Your Exhibit (10 min)

As a group, write 3–4 sentences that explain:

Why you chose these pieces

What you want people to feel or think when they see your exhibit

How you would display them (e.g., in what order or layout)

Share and Explore (20 min)

Set up your exhibit and display your written explanation. Then, visit the other groups' exhibits. Ask questions, make comments, and take time to explore what your classmates created.

Resources

- Teacher Guide - Echoes on Easels: Indian Boarding Schools



[Click here to watch Tales from the Vault: Life of an Extraordinary Apache Basket](#)



[Personal Connections - Legacy of the Past: Exploring How Objects Tell a Story](#)

Explore Contemporary Indigenous Art (Post-Exhibit Activity)

Objective: Deepen students' understanding of Indigenous art by comparing historical and contemporary works.

Instructions:

After exploring the main exhibit, guide your students in viewing contemporary Indigenous artworks from the Illinois State Museum (ISM) collection. Select 3–5 compelling pieces that represent a range of themes, styles, and media.

Engage the class using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS):

As you display each artwork, facilitate a whole-class discussion using these open-ended prompts:

- What's going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

Encourage students to observe closely, support their ideas with evidence, and build on each other's thinking.

Reflection & Comparison:

Once all artworks have been viewed and discussed, prompt students to reflect on the similarities and differences between contemporary Indigenous art and the early 20th century pieces they saw in the exhibit.

Guiding questions might include:

- How have the themes or stories in Indigenous art changed over time?
- What traditional elements are still present in modern works?
- In what ways are contemporary artists innovating or challenging expectations?