

Water in Aboriginal Art

About the lesson

Explore the inclusion of water as a theme in Australian art, in particular Aboriginal art, and consider how layers of cultural meanings can be embedded in artworks.

Year level

Year 9

Learning objectives

Students will:

- Capture ideas and concepts in a visual mindmap.
- Consider the importance of water in Australian culture.
- Examine and analyse a range of Australian artworks, focusing on those produced by Aboriginal people.
- Consider the significance of art as a tool to communicate and share cultural knowledge.
- Reflect on their own cultural identity and incorporate layers of cultural meaning into their own artwork relating to water.

Curriculum links

The Arts

Visual Arts

- [ACAVAM128](#): Ideas for art-making appropriate for chosen discipline (e.g. brainstorm, mind map, annotations/sketches, photography, media testing)
- [ACAVAM125](#): Visual art language (visual art elements and principles of design) used in the development of artwork (e.g. applying colour to a black and white print)
- [ACAVAM125](#); [ACAVAM128](#): Recognition and use of visual art conventions (e.g. examining the representation of the human form in cultural contexts)
- [ACAVAM125](#): Personal responses in written and visual form to illustrate understanding of themes, concepts or subject
- [ACAVAM125](#): Introduction of ideas inspired by an artistic style in their own artwork
- [ACAVAR131](#): Critical analysis frameworks (STICI, Feldman or Taylor) used to analyse artwork from contemporary and past times
- [ACAVAR131](#): Use of visual art language (visual art elements and principles of design), visual conventions and art terminology to respond to artwork (e.g. dot point, short answer essay, verbal format)
- [ACAVAR130](#): Identification of representations in artwork within a given context
- [ACAVAR131](#): Viewpoints in artwork from particular artists and styles
- [ACAVAR130](#): Practices, techniques and viewpoints of artists from different cultural groups
- [ACAVAR130](#): Evaluation of their own artwork and the artwork of others', using examples and evidence to support judgements

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

- [OI.2](#): Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities maintain a special connection to and responsibility for Country/Place.
- [OI.3](#): Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have holistic belief systems and are spiritually and intellectually connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways.
- [OI.5](#): Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of life are uniquely expressed through ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.

> Lesson Plan

Engage and set the scene

Ask students:

What do you think of when you think of water?

Get students to create a brainstorm mindmap – either working individually, in groups or as a whole class – which shows the things, places, activities and events they associate with water. Encourage students to use words, symbols and illustrations as part of their mind map.

Discuss:

Can you think of any artworks you've seen that have a water theme?

Explore

Show students a selection of Australian paintings linked to water. You can use images suggested in this resource, or ones of your own choosing. Make sure there is at least one artwork created by an Aboriginal artist.

Discuss:

- What might compel an artist to paint water scenes?
- How do the representations of water differ? (eg. technique, composition, mood created)
- How important is 'water' in the context of Australian culture, both now and in the past?
- Which of these artworks do you think might have been created by an Aboriginal artist? What makes you say this?

Use the last question as an opportunity for students to comment on their existing understanding of Aboriginal art.

Working individually or as a class, analyse an Aboriginal artwork of your choosing using the Feldman critical framework.

Equipment and Links

[Waterholes](#), Sarrita King (Aboriginal artist)

[Hunting party](#), Christopher Pease (Aboriginal artist)

[Swan River picnic](#), Elizabeth Blair Barber

[Circular Quay](#), Frederick Garling,

[The heron](#), Brett Whitely

[Landscape at Murrubeena](#), Arthur Boyd

[Figure in landscape \(Nude washing in a creek III\)](#), Arthur Boyd

[Beach scene](#), Arthur Streeton

[Policeman floating in the river](#), Sidney Nolan

[A day on the water](#), Ken Rasmussen

[Walking the dog](#), Ken Done

[Swaggie by a billabong](#), Anne Gardiner

[Feldman framework for art analysis](#)

Explain

Discuss:

Aboriginal art is the oldest known continuous art form, although there is a diversity of styles across the continent, for expel:

- X-ray art is commonly found in the Northern Territory.
- Bark paintings are one of the oldest forms of Aboriginal art, many coming from northern Australia.
- Naturalistic art is found in rock art of the Kimberley.
- Aerial views are often characteristic of desert Aboriginal art.

In many people's minds dot paintings are the only kind of Aboriginal art. However, these weren't used at all by traditional Aboriginal people, but emerged in the 1970s in central Australia. Aboriginal artists were influenced by a white art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon. There's a few theories as to why they chose to adopt this style, mainly to do with concealing sacred signs which they'd previously used.

Show students a brief video about [Aboriginal rock art](#).

Explain that as traditional Aboriginal people had no written languages, communication was commonly represented through art, and as such Aboriginal art is not just a form of artistic expression but is embedded with layers of cultural meaning.

One of the most enduring themes in Aboriginal culture – and therefore in art – is water, with many artworks focusing on the creation, location, and nature of water on traditional lands.

Refer to, or read together, through the [Water in Aboriginal art](#) information sheet.

> Lesson Plan

Explain that cultural meaning is communicated through the use of symbols. Some of these are used in the public domain – refer to the [Aboriginal water symbols](#) fact sheet. However, other, sacred symbols, may only be viewed by particular Aboriginal groups to whom they belong. A painting may have many levels of story and symbols may be used differently, in different contexts, and by different people.

Watch the [Ancestors in gallery](#) video, in which the artist Sarrita King explains some of the cultural layers included in her art. For contrast, you can also have a look at the [Boornyarri and the Yaarkal](#) painting by Christopher Pease, and read the associated traditional story behind it.

If possible, invite an Aboriginal artist to talk to students about the significance of water in her culture, and how he or she have imbedded this cultural knowledge in their work.

Equipment and Links

[Aboriginal rock art](#) video, 2:37min

[Water in Aboriginal art](#) information sheet

[Aboriginal water symbols](#) fact sheet

[Ancestors in gallery](#) video, 2:47min

[Boornyarri and the Waarkal, Christopher Pease](#)



Extend and elaborate

Ask students to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds to see if they can think of any traditional stories or legends which involve the theme of water.

Get students to pick one of those stories, or otherwise to pick a memorable event from their life which involves water, and use this as inspiration to create an original artwork. They can refer to their original brainstorm of water associations for ideas.

Encourage students to use symbols and colours as tools to create added layers of meaning, rather than just presenting a realistic depiction of events.



Evaluate and reflect

Get students to display their artworks and critique their own and others' work, and write a reflection of their art process and product in their visual diary.

Useful resources

- Water Corporation. (n.d.). Western Australian Aboriginal language centres contact list.
<https://www.watercorporation.com.au/-/media/files/education/lessons-and-teaching-resources/lesson-plans/activity-sheets-and-fact-sheets/western-australian-aboriginal-language-centres-contact-list.pdf>
- Noongar Art. (n.d.) Kaartdijin Noongar – Noongar Knowledge.
<https://www.noongarculture.org.au/art/>
- Japingka Aboriginal art on line.
<https://japingkaaboriginalart.com/>