

# LESSON PLANS

## THE CREE:

## CONNECTING ART AND SPIRITUALITY

**Recommended grades:** 1 – 6

**Time required:** 30 minute class lessons

**Materials:** Map of Traditional Cree territory, Tracing or Rice Paper, Ballpoint Pens

**Images Required:** AP 1825, AP 2501, AP 585 A-B, AP 2523, AP 2174 A-B, AP 1643 A-B

### INTRODUCTION

How did the Cree people traditionally live? How was art used to illustrate spirituality? What methods were used to evoke spirituality within their art? Through the use of images, vocabulary and lesson plans, students will gain knowledge of the Cree people's lives and beliefs and discover how their art is informed by these values and philosophies.

### OBJECTIVES

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

- Understand the Cree's connection to their environment, natural resources and how these connections are reflected in their traditions.
- Recognize how cycles of life and balance are exhibited within the art of the Cree.

## IMAGES

*Please print in colour if possible*



### **Cape**

Nehiwyan, Onion Lake First Nation  
mid 20<sup>th</sup> century  
velveteen, glass beads  
AP 1825

**Cape**

Nehiwyan, Onion Lake First Nation

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

velveteen, glass beads

AP 1825

I find that the beadwork on this cape is very striking.

Gerry Conaty

*It is very creative how these cut beads were used. What is fascinating is that the cut beads are right across this way. It's not just the small beads. The small beads are used for the outside of the leaf pattern. But there is also the middle. Then there is that darker green. I would say this is very artful.... Someone who is not an expert in beads might say they wanted to get this done real fast so they just used small beads. These are small beads. Whoever came up with this was a genius in their own time.*

Joe Deschamps



**Pipe Bag**  
Nehiwyan  
mid 20<sup>th</sup> century  
buckskin, glass beads, sinew thread  
AP 2501

### **Pipe Bag**

Nehiwyan

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

buckskin, glass beads, sinew thread

AP 2501

One of these pipe bags, [the blue bag], was for a short pipe stem.

Gerry Conaty

*If you measured from half-way on the neck of the bag to the bottom, you have the length of the pipe stem. They tie the stem about half way along the neck of the bag.*

*See how the lighter and darker pink beaded trim goes all the way around the bag? It is a circle or hoop around the pipe.*

Joe Deschamps

These pipe bags are all different sizes and slightly different shapes. Why would pipe bags vary so much?

Gerry Conaty

*Most of the old men had up to four pipes. According to my research, for example, Big Bear had maybe three or four pipes. Each one of them was used for a different ceremony. A lot of people don't know that. What does a red pipe mean? What does a green pipe mean? What does a black pipe mean? What do all these other exotic pipe colours mean? There are some that are brown or grey. But all those colours mean something in a ceremonial sense. A lot of people are so commercial, they think commercially. They don't really have the ins and outs to know the approach, the protocol of pipes. So this one probably indicates that the owner had a nicer pipe. The nicer pipe bag you have, the nicer the pipe is. So that's why I think these pipe bags should go together. These had a very short stem – medium-long.*

Joe Deschamps





**Birch Bark Basket**

Nehiwyan

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

birch bark, dye, roots, porcupine

AP 585 A-B

**Birch Bark Basket**

Nehiwyan

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

birch bark, dye, roots, porcupine

AP 585 A-B

If you look closely at the quill work and the inside of the basket, you can see how intricately the porcupine quill work is. How would an artist decorate birch bark with porcupine quills?

During the process of fastening the porcupine quills to the birch bark, small perforations are made in the bark with an awl that is just a bit smaller than the quills. These perforations follow a pattern that has been drawn on the bark with a blunt-pointed object, usually made of bone or antler. The perforation is made immediately before the quill is inserted.

This work is done while the bark is still wet. When the bark dries and contracts, the quills are held tight. A thin piece of bark is fastened on the inside of the basket, protecting the cut ends of the quills and adding a neat finish to the inside.

Gerry Conaty



**Child's Jacket**

Nehiwyan

late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century

hide, brass buttons, plastic buttons, glass beads, wool stroud



### **Child's Jacket**

Nehiwyan

late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century

hide, brass buttons, plastic buttons, glass beads, wool stroud

AP 2523

This jacket is very nicely decorated. It looks like an adult jacket, but made in miniature. This seems to be a very unusual jacket for a child.

Gerry Conaty

*This one is so adult – it doesn't look like a child's jacket. It looks like an adult jacket. I like the design on the sleeve – you rarely see it full length on a child's sleeve. I don't know how he bent his arm with the beadwork on. The buttons make me think. I like this. His grandfather or dad must have been in the high ranks the way this little coat is made. What I mean by that is, back then you wouldn't see many families that could afford beads. I'm thinking along that line. What I'm thinking for a date is mid 1800s or late 1800s.*

Joe Deschamps

The designs on the sleeves and along the front are very unique.

Gerry Conaty

*That's another thing that's important. These designs – you can tell immediately where that person came from.*

Joe Deschamps

Does the rosette circle design on the back have a special meaning?

Gerry Conaty

*It has to. This one is quite different the way that the beadwork goes. There are four sets of three trapezoids. The centre in each set goes higher. There are only four that are different here. It's almost a fancy way of acknowledging the four directions. And what has been put in the middle has to be acknowledged as well. That is the red stroud. When we made offerings a long time ago, we used hide and this cloth. This was sought after. The old men still say today...if you want to put a hierarchy, this would be the top. You get answers. But it definitely has meaning – it is protection for the child and the whole family.*

Joe Deschamps



**Gauntlets**

Nehiwyaw

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

buckskin, fur, glass beads, denim

AP 2174 A-B

## **Gauntlets**

Nehiwyan

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

buckskin, fur, glass beads, denim

AP 2174 A-B

The beaded design on these gauntlets is very interesting.

Gerry Conaty

*This represents a Nehiwyan hoop or, as I like to call it, a dream catcher, although we don't have those webs. That is how we recognize the hoop. We say for the east, yellow. We say for the blue, south. We say red for the west. And for the north, white. And a lot of those have a lot of meaning. A lot of people respect what they are. Yellow represents spring. South – summer. Red – fall, white – north-winter. Those were our colours.*

Joe Deschamps

Did people copy designs very often?

Gerry Conaty

*The majority of the time these patterns and designs and colour belong to families. In other words, back then they had their trademark and copyright already. If one family member sews something that isn't theirs they would be stopped and told, 'You have to go ask that family. That's their design or that's their colours.' And sometimes back then, too, if someone liked a design they might eventually marry into that clan. That's also important to talk about. A lot of these designs and patterns belonged to clans. At least that's what I was told.*

Joe Deschamps



### **Breechcloth**

Nehiwyan

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

buckskin, cotton cloth, glass beads

AP 1643 A-B

I see that the designs on this breechcloth are different from some of the other Cree items we've seen.

Gerry Conaty

*This is a floral design. Wealthier people who could afford to hire skilled beadworkers [would have owned breechcloth such as this]*

Joe Deschamps

How do you tell the front from the back?

Gerry Conaty

*The front is shorter.*

Joe Deschamps

# ACTIVITY PROCEDURES

## THE CREE:

### CONNECTING ART AND SPIRITUALITY

**Recommended grades:** 1 – 6

**Time required:** 30 minute class lessons

**Materials:** Map of Traditional Cree territory, Tracing or Rice Paper, Ballpoint Pens

Images Required: AP 1825, AP 2501, AP 585, AP 2523, AP 2174, AP 1643

The Cree people lived in many areas throughout Canada. For thousands of years, the surrounding environment has been their source of food, shelter, and clothing. This area has an abundance of natural resources including; trees, bushes, bison, elk, deer, rabbits, birds, and water. The way the Cree thought about their environment was reflected in their artwork. Most things the Cree created were decorated and the decorative patterns were derived from their spiritual beliefs. Their connection to the environment, land, animals and their belief in the spiritual realm all became part of their art, decoration and craft.

The Cree believe that creating balance in one's life is reached through living harmoniously with the universe. When you are living a balanced life with all living things you in turn will have balance in your own life. This belief is reflected in their decoration through the symmetry you'll find in many of their patterns.

*Teachers: Try to have the students identify Tribal ID, special meaning, symmetry and balance within the decoration. Why do the Cree use this symbol? What do you think it means?*



# INSTRUCTIONS

Introduce the terms **tradition, symmetry and balance**.

- **Traditions:** beliefs, values and ways of acting that are a part of a community for a long time. What are examples of **traditions**? Family? School? Community? (celebrations, special events, holidays)
- **Symmetry:** balanced proportions; being symmetrical: correspondence in size, shape, and relative position of parts on opposite sides of a dividing line or median plane or about a center or axis.
- **Balance:** equal distribution of weight, amount, etc.; mental steadiness or emotional stability; habit of calm behavior, judgment, etc.

## 1. Introduce the concept of Birch Bark Biting

Cree women used *Birch Bark Biting* as a way to create pattern templates for their decorative beading. The birch bark was folded into an even square shape with four layers. The bark was thin enough, that when bitten, the tooth mark would be left in all layers creating a perfectly symmetrical pattern when the bark is unfolded. The bark was then laid over a piece of material (e.g. leather) and used as a template to sew beads into a decorative pattern, destroying the bark in the process. Today Birch Bark Biting has become an art form all its own. They are created in the same manner, but rather than destroyed they are displayed as artwork.

2. Divide the students into small groups and distribute the 'Required Images' evenly throughout the groups. Ask the groups to look carefully at the images to find evidence of the Cree's spiritual belief in symmetry and balance in life. Look critically for patterns, symmetry and balance in the decoration.

3. With the images as a resource, have the students begin to think of a pattern they would like to create. Using tracing, rice or any variation of fine paper; have the students create a SQUARE piece of paper. Fold the squared paper into 4 quadrants by folding in half and then in half again.
4. Beginning with a pencil, have the students lightly and gently mark out their pattern on the top layer of the paper. Now using a ballpoint pen (or teeth if preferred) go over the pattern pressing into the paper; be sure to have the students press or bite hard enough that the pattern will transfer onto all four layers.
5. Once the students are finished pressing the marks into the paper layers, slowly and gently unfold it.
6. What's left will be a beautifully symmetrical and balanced pattern much like the Cree would create! Display the finished pieces in a window or near a light source to really make the patterns visible!

#### *An Alternative*

##### *Grades 1 – 3*

*Using the templates create a 'beaded pattern' with acrylic paints of various colours. Paint coloured dots over top of the patterns formed with the pen. This will allow the students to use their colour skills and add another level of learning. The patience and tranquility needed to finish this task will also connect the students to the spiritual and meditative process that brings balance to one's life, much like the Cree.*

##### *Grades 4 - 6*

*Using the templates, create an actual beaded pattern with thread, needles and various coloured beads. This will provide an alternative level of learning by allowing the students to experience the time required to complete these decorative arts. The patience and tranquility needed to finish this task will also connect the students to the spiritual and meditative process that brings balance to one's life, much like the Cree.*