

Explorations in Haida Formline Design: Abstract Paintings

CREATED WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY: Veis Dokhani, Daylen Luchsinger, and Amelia Epp

TOPICS: Haida formline design; Cultural appropriation; Abstract art

SUBJECT(S): Visual Arts **GRADE(S):** 8-12

UNIT DURATION: 4 lessons

OVERVIEW & CULMINATING TASK: The following lesson sequence was developed in 2015 when the exhibition *Robert Davidson: Progression of Form* was presented at the Gordon Smith Art Gallery. This was a solo exhibition of the work of internationally-renowned Canadian artist, Robert Davidson, featuring his prints, paintings, carvings, and sculptures. Robert Davidson worked closely with the Gordon Smith Art Gallery and Artists for Kids, contributing to numerous educational opportunities presented in conjunction with this exhibition. In addition to visiting multiple schools in School District 44 and contributing to schoolwide projects as a mentor artist, he also provided feedback on the development of curriculum that was presented to K-12 students at the Gallery and compiled for teachers to incorporate into their classrooms. Artists for Kids would like to thank Robert Davidson for his contributions to these educational initiatives and for his ongoing commitment to art education.

This lesson sequence examines intergenerational learning through the study of traditional formline structures of Haida art. Students will experiment with and develop a 2D language of Indigenous Art.

A NOTE ABOUT DISPLAYING STUDENT ARTWORK AND CREDITING

SOURCES: Providing specific contextual information and acknowledgement of inspiration and source material is important when presenting and displaying student artwork. For example, when displaying students' finished artwork in a hallway or classroom at the conclusion of this lesson sequence, the following caption would provide contextual information for viewers: "Abstract paintings inspired by artist Robert Davidson and Haida formline design".



Robert Davidson: Progression of Form installation view, 2015, Gordon Smith Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.

BIG IDEAS (What students will understand):

- Traditions, perspectives, worldviews, and stories are shared through aesthetic experiences. (Art Studio 10)
- Visual arts reflect the interconnectedness of the individual, community, history, and society. (Art Studio 11)

CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES (What students will do):

- Explore relationships between identity, place, culture, society, and belonging through arts activities and experiences
- Intentionally select and apply materials, movements, technologies, environments, tools, and techniques by combining and arranging artistic elements, processes, and principles in art making

CONCEPTS & CONTENT (What students will know):

- Image development strategies
- Elements of visual art; principles of design
- Traditional and contemporary Aboriginal arts and arts-making processes

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) (What students will keep considering):

- How can shape and colour be used to create balance and unity in an abstract composition?
- What is the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation?
- How can we respectfully incorporate elements into our creative works from other artists and from cultures that are not our own?

FIRST PEOPLES' PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING:

Learning recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge.

MATERIALS & TECHNOLOGIES:

- digital images of ovoid, inner ovoid, U-shape, and trigon (see end of document)
- digital images of artwork by Robert Davidson (see end of document)
- digital projector/computer
- pencils
- scissors
- glue sticks
- palettes
- 11" x 17" white printer paper
- tracing paper
- carbon paper
- 24" x 30" newsprint paper
- 24" x 30" canvas or thick white paper (i.e. oqaque vellum)
- acrylic paint in black, red, green-blue, cobalt blue, yellow, green, and white
- paint brushes
- water containers

VOCABULARY:

abstract art, formline design, ovoid, inner ovoid, U-shape, trigon, stencil, balance, unity, juxtaposition, culture, appropriation, cultural appropriation

RESOURCES & REFERENCES:

- Robert Davidson bio and images: <https://www.robertdavidson.ca>
- Curriculum addressing Northwest Coast formline design: <https://www.sealaskaheritage.org/sites/default/files/Sealaska%20Heritage%20Formline%20Art%20Kit%20ONLINE%20low%20res.pdf>
- Information about Haida art from the Canadian Museum of History: <https://www.historymuseum.ca/app/DocRepository/1/Exhibitions/haida/haidaarte.pdf>
- Images from the Haida Gwaii Museum Collections: <http://haidagwaii.emuseum.com/collections;jsessionid=62148C359EB2F44E03D4498C5410D899>
- Art terms glossary: <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/>
- Lesson plan addressing cultural appropriation vs. cultural appreciation: https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global_learning/2016/12/addressing_cultural_appropriation_in_the_classroom_tools_and_resources.html
- Lesson plan addressing cultural appropriation in art and popular culture: <https://teachrock.org/lesson/indians-american-imagination-exploring-cultural-appropriation-structured-academic-controversy/>
- Lesson plan addressing cultural appropriation in art, design, and advertising: <https://theartofeducation.edu/2018/04/20/a-project-to-help-teach-your-students-about-appropriation/>

ADAPTATIONS & MODIFICATIONS:

Students with hand function difficulties may need assistance with cutting out formline shapes and may need to use thick-handled brushes.

DISCUSSION & ACTIVITIES (Teacher Action/Student Action):

LESSON #1 (intro to Northwest Coast Formline Design and the art of Robert Davidson, analyzing artwork):

- Introduce the concept of **formline design** to the students by displaying the images of the **ovoid**, **inner ovoid**, **U-shape**, and **trigon** (see large images at end of document).
- The following is a brief introduction to the concept of **formline design** (adapted from the following curriculum document by Sealaska Heritage Institute: <https://www.sealaskaheritage.org/sites/default/files/Sealaska%20Heritage%20Formline%20Art%20Kit%20ONLINE%20low%20res.pdf>):

Formline design is an artistic style used by Northwest Coast Indigenous groups including the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples. Formlines vary in width and change in thickness as they flow around corners. An interconnected web of formlines is used to compose a creature image or design. They may represent stories of Raven and other creatures, historic events, clan crests, or other concepts including clouds or glaciers. Two-dimensional formline designs are depicted on objects such as bentwood boxes, clan hats, and house screens, and can also be adapted to embellish three-dimensional objects such as masks and totem poles. The core building-block shapes of formline design are the ovoid and U-shape.

Formline design is a concept that dates back more than two thousand years. Prior to the late 18th century, the formline styles of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian were all close in appearance to one another. This was the end result of generations of evolution from an ancient core tradition of at least 1,000 years before. The three traditions began to diverge further apart as the 19th century turned and progressed, with Haida and Tsimshian artists in particular moving toward thinner positive formlines and more negative space than in the older styles of formline compositions.

While contemporary Haida artists work in a wide variety of media, the formline system was first and foremost a painted art. Some painting was done freehand, some with the aid of ovoid and U-form templates. The predominant colours of Haida art are black and red—black for

the outline, red for the interior—complemented at times with blue-green.

- Divide students into groups of 3 and provide each group with the 2 Formline Design Template sheets (see end of this document). Give each group a copy of one of the 6 images of artwork by Robert Davidson (see end of this document).
- Groups should refer to the 2 Formline Design Template sheets to find, match, and list the formline shapes used within the artwork.
- Display the following images of Robert Davidson's artwork (see large size images at the end of this document):
 1. *T'sillialis (Raven Fin)* (2014)
 2. *Butterfly* (2005)
 3. *Sea Anemone* (2008)
 4. *Bird in the Air* (2009) (painting)
 5. *Untitled* (2013)
 6. *Greatest Echo* (2014)
- Have each group present to the class about the formline shapes they identified in their assigned artwork.
- Pose the following discussion questions:
 - What do you notice about the shapes used in this artwork?
 - How has Robert Davidson altered and transformed the formline shapes within this artwork?
 - How has Robert Davidson combined the formline shapes within his artwork?
 - What colours have been used? Why do you think these particular colours have been used?
 - Where do you think Robert Davidson finds inspiration?
- Discuss with students the term **abstract art** and brainstorm a definition as a class.
- When viewing artworks by Robert Davidson with students, such as *Untitled* (2013), emphasize that it is an example of an artwork in which Robert Davidson has used and altered some of the traditional Haida formline shapes to create a design that might remind us of aspects of the natural world, but that is also **abstract** (it uses shape, form, color and line to create a composition which may exist with a degree of independence from visual references in the world).
- Project images of Robert Davidson's artwork and share with students information about him and his work:

Robert Davidson:

Robert Davidson, whose Haida name is Guud San Glans (Eagle of the Dawn), was born in 1946 in Hydaburg, Alaska. He moved with his family to



Masset on Haida Gwaii in 1947 and lived there until 1965 when he moved to Vancouver to complete his education. In 1966 he met Bill Reid and soon after, began an 18-month apprenticeship that launched his career as an artist. He is a master carver of totem poles and masks and works in a variety of other media as a printmaker, painter, and jeweller. He is also a leading figure in the renaissance of Haida art and culture. An impeccable craftsman, Davidson's creative and personal interpretation of traditional Haida form is unparalleled. Davidson's artwork has encompassed both a visual language primarily concerned with traditional Haida narratives, animal imagery, and the simplified use of colour, as well as a movement towards abstraction through a more formalist approach. He has received the Order of British Columbia and in 1996 was awarded the prestigious Order of Canada.

1. *T'sillialis (Raven Fin)* (2014):

This artwork is made of cedar panels and consists of sculptural relief as well as intricately painted designs. The fin motif is elaborated with both carving and paint. The raven can be seen in the diagonal channel that crosses the work. The use of both black and red paint, together with the varied topography of the piece and the images of both marine and sky animals, allow the piece to speak of the whole Haida natural world within a single image. The raven is the crafty denizen of the skies and the killer whale the monarch of the oceans. The work uses asymmetry and relies on colour and form to bring equipoise to the composition (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).



Robert Davidson, *Greatest Echo*, 2014, Acrylic on Cedar, 55 x 112 cm. Image courtesy of the Spirit Wrestler Gallery.

2. *Butterfly* (2005):

This painting is an example of how dramatically stylized a creature can be. Davidson has placed great emphasis on the proboscis of the butterfly and this part of the insect's anatomy occupies almost half of the composition. The butterfly is a companion of the Raven and is therefore associated with trickery or flights of fancy. The vivid use of red, yellow, blue and black combined with the insistent curves of the composition give the image a vivid sense of life. Davidson has taken a motif, which was often used by carvers such as Charles Edenshaw, and reworked it. The resulting image has a startling sense of both modernity and strangeness and yet it is still clearly Haida (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).

3. *Sea Anemone* (2008):

This print is at once extremely simple and revealing of the complexity of Davidson's work. The simplicity is seen in Davidson's employment of only two colours – black and red. Complex in that it is emphatic in the creation of both pattern and form. Remnants of the formline tradition occur in the ovoid that defines the creature's eye socket but this ovoid is distorted at the tip to become a nose. (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).

4. *Bird in the Air* (2009) (painting):

The trigon shape is used to create the head of the eagle and within that shape there is a stylized eagle head forming the eye of the bird. A vivid image of blue, red, yellow and white, the composition has a forward sense of movement despite its rectangular form (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).

5. *Untitled* (2013):

This image explores the use of colour and form and hints at the possible changes to traditional Haida form. It makes use of a split-U form, but the U is not symmetrical and is angled to the left (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).

6. *Greatest Echo* (2014):

In this red cedar panel Davidson displays his great skills at controlling line, colour, shape, and relief. The paint is at the highest or surface point of the work. As the title suggests, Davidson provides a visual echo of the forms, with the primary formal interest being the dramatic diagonal. (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).

- Have students choose one of the 6 artworks by Robert Davidson provided in this document. Provide students with printed copies of the artworks.
- Students should study the artwork with attention to the formline shapes and the composition that Davidson has created. In their sketchbooks students should visually analyze the painting's composition, paying attention to its abstracted design components. Students should use tracing paper to deconstruct the artwork and draw each formline shape and motif separately in their sketchbooks.

LESSON #2 (discussing cultural appropriation and ownership of imagery; researching Northwest Coast artists):

- Before starting the next step in the project, introduce the concept of **cultural appropriation** to students. The following definitions and discussion questions are adapted from online lesson plans provided in the Resources & References section of this document. Refer to this section for additional ideas for activities and discussion topics.
- To introduce the topic of cultural appropriation to students, pose the following questions:
 - How do we borrow from the world around us when creating art?
 - Have you ever heard the term "cultural appropriation"?
 - What do you think it means?
 - Can you give any examples of what "cultural appropriation" might be?
- Ask the students:
 - How would you define **culture**?
- After brainstorming, share the following definition:
 - culture**: The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.
- Ask the students:
 - What are some examples of things considered "culture" by this definition?
- Share with students the following definition:
 - appropriation**: The practice of artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation of the original.
- Explain to students that the use of appropriation has played a significant role in the history of the arts (literary, visual, musical and performing arts). In the visual arts, **appropriation** occurs when artists adopt, borrow, or sample aspects of visual culture. Sometimes the source materials are reinvented completely. At other times, they remain almost unchanged.
- Explain to students that an artist who plagiarizes and passes work off as their own, without crediting the source, is committing a serious

transgression in the creative community. Any borrowing and appropriating of work must be done mindfully, respectfully, and in a way that properly recognizes the original.

- Ask students:
 - How might appropriation apply to culture? Can you think of any examples?
- Share with students the following definition of cultural appropriation by Fordham law professor Susan Scafidi:
 - cultural appropriation:** "Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission...[especially] when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways."
- Further to this definition, explain to students that **cultural appropriation** takes the form of an unequal exchange in that the appropriators often use stolen elements for monetary gain or prestige, without regard for the value, respect, or importance paid to these images and traditions in the original culture.
- Ask students:
 - Can you think of any examples of cultural appropriation in visual arts, music, film, television, magazines, fashion, etc.?(see lesson plans in Resources section for examples of cultural appropriation to share with students)
 - Are there right/wrong ways to use imagery from cultures that are not your own?
- Have students in small groups research examples of cultural appropriation from the realms of visual arts and popular culture. Have students present their examples to the class. Alternatively, print examples of images from art and popular culture representing cultural appropriation. Have students discuss these examples in small groups and present highlights of their discussion to the class. (see lessons listed in the Resources & References section of this document for examples of cultural appropriation)
- Have students read the following information on the ownership of crest emblems, adapted from the Sealaska Heritage curriculum document *Introduction to Formline Design* (see Resources section for link to pdf):

Many, though not all formline designs depict crests that belong to a clan. A clan is the basic social unit in Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian societies. The clan is the unit that owns property, which includes physical property, land, songs, names, stories, and crests. Individual representations of those crests, the designs themselves, are transitory, differing from one artist to



Robert Davidson, *Butterfly*, 2005, Acrylic on Canvas, 101.5 x 152.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist.

another, and art not usually clan-owned. A crest emblem is an image representing a physical entity with which the clan claims a significant relationship. Crest emblems depict certain animals or creatures that played a major role in the history of a clan.

- Explain to students that for this project they will create their own abstract designs inspired by Robert Davidson's artwork. They will use the formline shapes discussed in the previous lesson (ovoid, inner ovoid, U-shape, and trigon) to create their artworks.
- Pose the following discussion questions relating to cultural appropriation and Robert Davidson's artwork:
 - Considering what you have learned about cultural appropriation, formline design, and ownership of crest emblems, do you think that there are right or wrong ways to incorporate formline shapes from Robert Davidson's artwork and Haida formline design into your own artwork?
 - What is the difference between appreciating culture and appropriating it? How might this apply to the creation of an abstract design inspired by Robert Davidson's artwork in the context of this class?

-In displaying your finished artwork, how might you acknowledge Robert Davidson and the elements that have been borrowed from Haida formline design?

- Have student research historical and contemporary Haida and Northwest Coast artists and include examples of their chosen artist's work in their sketchbook. Have students write about the formline designs used by the artist, as well as the elements and principles that can be observed in the artist's work (i.e. balance, unity, symmetry, juxtaposition).
- Examples of artists that students could research include: Bill Reid, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, Charles Edenshaw, Don Yeomans, Doug Cranmer, Dempsey Bob, Freda Diesing, and Florence Davidson.

LESSON #3 (composition planning):

- Make copies of the 2 Formline Design Templates as well as the 3 pages of ovoids, U-shapes, and trigons provided at the end of this document.
- Have students choose 5-9 different formline shapes, drawing from the different categories of shapes (i.e. ovoids, inner ovoids, U-shapes, or trigons).
- Ask students to study these shapes carefully and draw them in different scales on 11" x 17" paper (from small to large).
- Ask the students to cut the shapes out and place them on sheets of 24" x 30" newsprint paper.
- Ask the students to move the shapes around and to juxtapose them in different compositions until they create a balance in the negative and positive space.
- Once students have decided on their composition have them glue down their formline shapes onto the 24" x 30" sheet of newsprint.
- Using transfer and carbon paper, have the students transfer their compositions onto 24" x 30" canvas or thick white paper (i.e. opaque vellum).

LESSON #4 (painting):

- Before students start painting their designs, review with them the following artworks by Robert Davidson:

1. *Butterfly* (2005)
2. *Sea Anemone* (2008)
3. *Bird in the Air* (2009) (painting)
4. *Untitled* (2013)

- Pose the following question to spark discussion:

-How does Robert Davidson use colour in his compositions to create unity and juxtapositions?

-How does Robert Davidson create balance amongst the shapes he includes in his paintings?

-In what way does Davidson's art connect to traditional Haida formline design and in what way is it different?

-Do Davidson's paintings convey a meaning?

- Explain to students that they will paint their abstract designs using black and red, as well as 1-3 of the following colours: green-blue, cobalt blue, yellow, green or white.
- Before students start painting, have them draw 4 thumbnail sketches of their abstract design in their sketchbooks. Have students use pencil crayon or markers to experiment with different colour combinations in each of the 4 sketches before deciding how they will paint their final work.
- Have students paint their abstract designs (see sample, below).



Teacher sample of finished painting.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

- After creating their 4 thumbnail sketches in Lesson #4 have students answer the following questions in their sketchbooks:
 - List the colours that you have chosen to include in your composition. Why have you chosen these colours?

-How will you use colour to create unity and juxtaposition in your composition?

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

- After students complete their abstract paintings, view finished works as a group and discuss the following questions:
 - Is there a sense of unity in the painting? How is it accomplished?
 - Is there a sense of balance in the painting? How is it accomplished?
 - How does the use of colour contribute to the overall composition?
- Have students title their finished paintings and write an artist statement that addresses the following questions:
 - What formline design shapes have you used in your painting? How did you decide on your arrangement of these shapes?
 - Identify the elements and principles of design that you have used in your painting.
 - What have you learned through the process of creating your own design using formline shapes?
 - If you could ask Robert Davidson about his creative process, what would you ask him (write at least 2 questions)?
- Have students compose a short text to be shown with their finished painting acknowledging the source material and inspiration for their designs.

EXTENSIONS & POSSIBLE CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS:

Ask the students to choose one of the formline design shapes (alone or in combination) and to make a 3D version of the form using cardboard and scissors.

AFK RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS:

Looking for more art lesson ideas? Looking for ways to connect art to other areas of the curriculum? Visit the AFK Resources page to find lesson plans for all grade levels!

<http://tiny.cc/AFKResources>



Robert Davidson, *T'sillialis (Raven Fin)*, 2014, Acrylic on Cedar Panel, 173.5 x 81.3 x 4.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.



Robert Davidson, *T'sillialis (Raven Fin)*, 2014, Acrylic on Cedar Panel, 173.5 x 81.3 x 4.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.



Robert Davidson, *Butterfly*, 2005, Acrylic on Canvas, 101.5 x 152.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist.



Robert Davidson, *Sea Anemone*, 2008, Serigraph, 101.6 x 76.2 cm.
Image courtesy of the Artist.



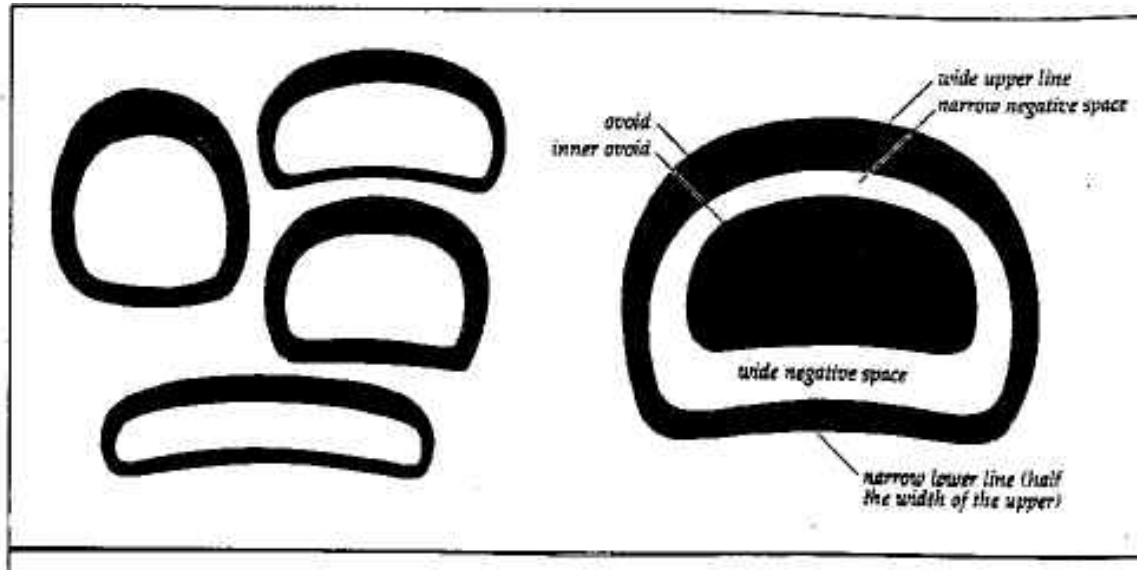
Robert Davidson, *Bird in the Air*, 2009, Acrylic on Canvas, 101.5 x 152.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist.



Robert Davidson, *Untitled*, 2013, Acrylic on Canvas, 76.2 x 101.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist.



Robert Davidson, *Greatest Echo*, 2014, Acrylic on Cedar, 55 x 112 cm. Image courtesy of the Spirit Wrestler Gallery.



ovoid

- egg shaped form
- thickest on top, thinner on each side, and thinnest on bottom
- takes several forms
- used to represent joints (shoulder, hip, wing), eye sockets, heads, and other body parts
- helps create the flow of the overall design

inner ovoid

- The smaller, same-shaped version of the ovoid that floats slightly above the center of negative space



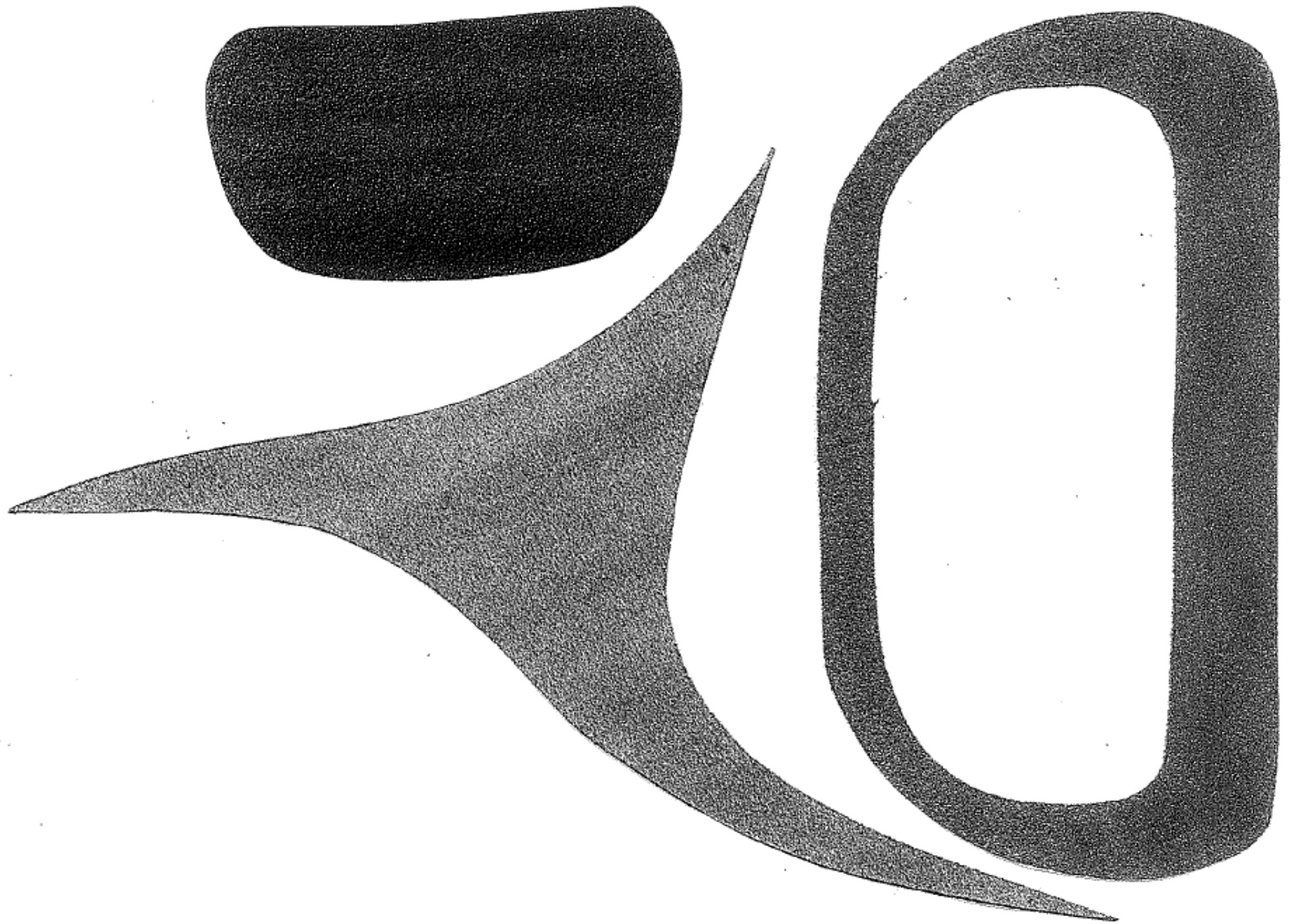
U-shape

- thickest on top, thinner on each side, and taper down to a fine tip
- often used for ears and tails
- traditionally connect with other design elements

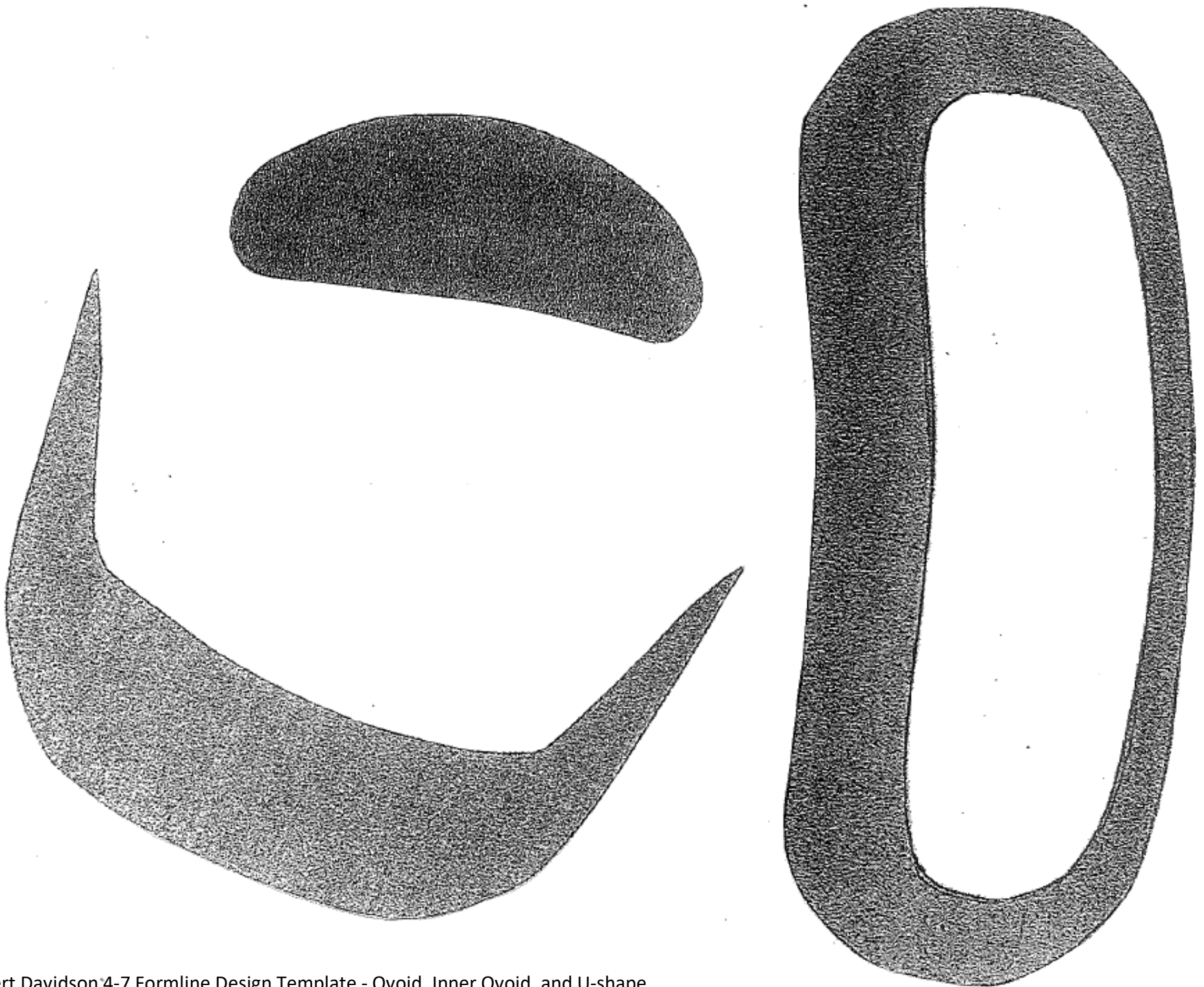


trigon

- three-pointed shape, like a stretched triangle
- often used to fill shapes, especially u-shapes
- often used for noses, feet, and claws



Robert Davidson 8-12 Formline Design Template - Ovoid, Inner Ovoid, and Trigon



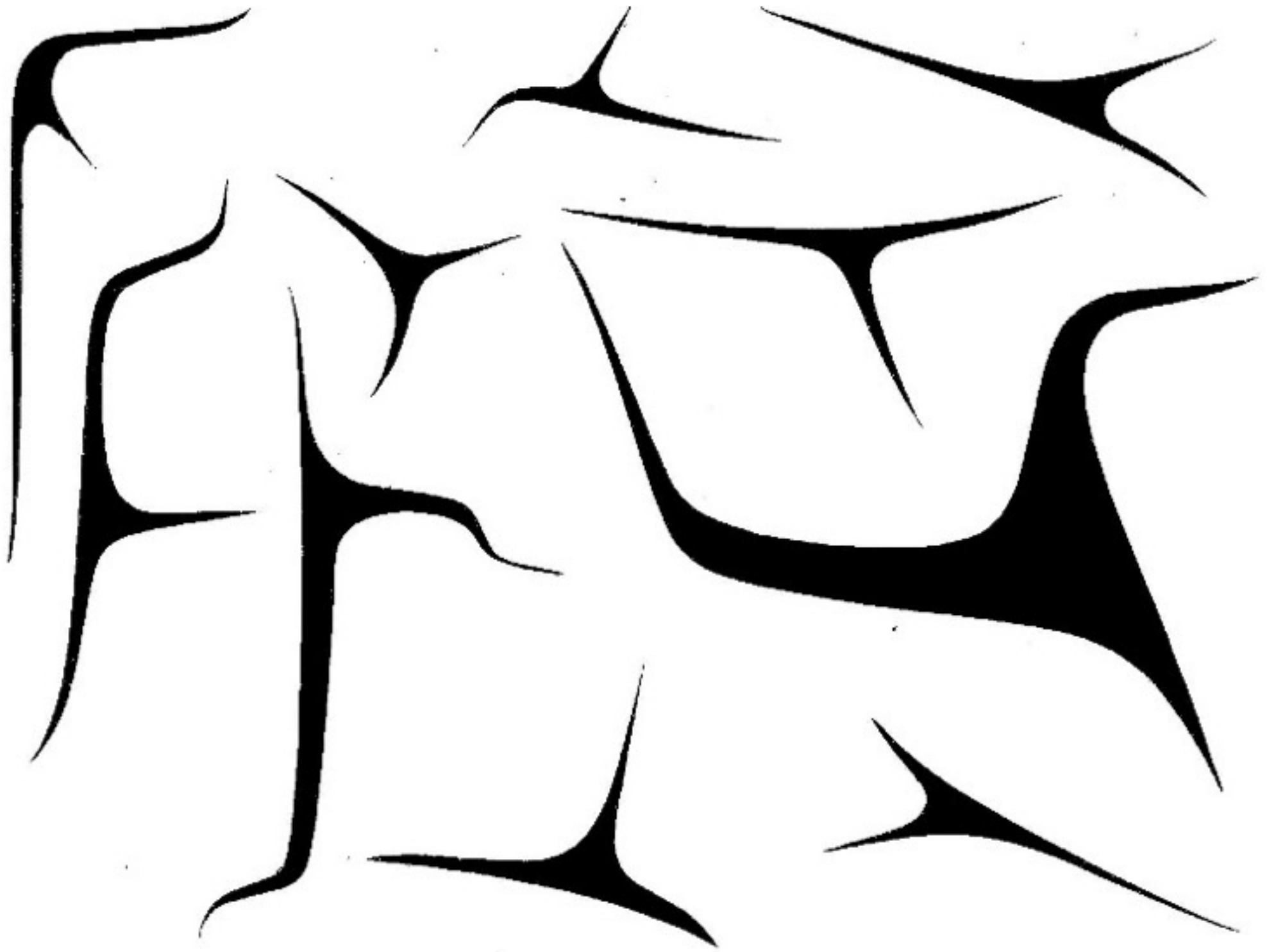
Robert Davidson 4-7 Formline Design Template - Ovoid, Inner Ovoid, and U-shape



Ovoids



U-shapes



Trigons