

Role Models who Shape Identity: Mixed Media Collages Inspired by George Littlechild

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TOPICS: Using photographs, colour, and symbols to represent personal identities, cultures, and communities; Creating abstract imagery and collage techniques

SUBJECT(S): Visual Arts

GRADE(S): 8-12

UNIT DURATION: 4 lessons

OVERVIEW & CULMINATING TASK: In this unit students will learn about the mixed media artworks of artist George Littlechild who addresses topics of identity, history, story, and memory. Students will be asked to research and represent role models that reflect their own identities, cultures, and communities.

Students will collect photographs or create drawings of their role models and will develop personally meaningful symbols and colour palettes in order to create a mixed media collage representing their own identities. Students will explore collage processes, symbolism, and layering.

INTRODUCTION:

"For my ancestors, I thank you for surviving when many did not. You make me proud of who I am because of who you were."

-George Littlechild from *"This Land is My Land"*

The above dedication succinctly describes the primary goal of this art focused unit. It is an attempt to instill pride, understanding, and respect for the heritage of Indigenous peoples as well as for every student's individual identities, cultures, and communities. It is hoped that the following activities will allow students to explore ideas and images about their own personal role models and to share their discoveries with their classmates in an atmosphere of trust and respect.

Few artists speak as directly and powerfully to children about overcoming prejudice and promoting pride in one's heritage and identities as does George Littlechild. His spirited work, full of symbols, bright

colours, strong shapes, photographs, and unusual collage elements, reflects a highly individual style and interpretation of his ancestry. He documents not only the struggles of Indigenous peoples but his own experience as a person of mixed race. His work is ideally suited to initiate students into an exploration and artistic interpretation of their own identities, cultures, and communities.



George Littlechild, *Plains Cree Chief*, 1996, 17 colour serigraph, 29 x 22.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

This art unit is intended to be integrated with other subjects and skill areas in the curriculum. There are many social, political, and historical issues that are integral to Littlechild's work. Through discussion, art making, writing, and research the students will be able to clarify and articulate their own identities, cultures, and communities.

BIG IDEAS (What students will understand):

- Individual and collective expression can be achieved through the arts. (Arts Education 8)
- Visual arts offer unique ways of exploring our identity and sense of belonging. (Art Studio 10)
- Purposeful artistic choices enhance the depth and meaning of artistic work. (Art Studio 12)

CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES (What students will do):

- Explore relationships between identity, place, culture, society, and belonging through arts activities and experiences
- Reflect on works of art and creative processes to understand artists motivations and meanings
- Describe, interpret and respond to works of art

CONCEPTS & CONTENT (What students will know):

- Traditional and contemporary Aboriginal arts and arts- making processes
- Elements of visual art; principles of design
- Symbolism as expressions of meaning

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

- How can you make use of shapes and colour to reflect your own identity?
- How do artists use symbolism to explore ideas?

FIRST PEOPLES' PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING:

Learning requires exploration of one's identity.

MATERIALS & TECHNOLOGIES:

- digital image of *Plains Cree Chiefs* by George Littlechild
- copy of book *We Are All Related: A Celebration of Our Cultural Heritage* (can be borrowed from the AFK Library)
- digital projector/computer
- 14"x16" pre-cut thick white paper (i.e. cardstock or opaque vellum) (1 per student)
- oil pastels
- paint brushes
- rulers
- 6" x 6" pre-cut thick white paper (1 per student)
- glue sticks
- scissors
- colourful and metallic paper
- pencil crayons
- pencils
- 6-8 paint colours (tempera)
- watercolour paints (optional)
- student sketchbooks
- copied or printed photographs of students' role models
- printed photographs of students

VOCABULARY:

collage, identity, culture, community, role model, elders, ancestors, serigraph, silkscreen print, artists proof, symbol, symbolism, warm/cool colours, thumbnail sketch, pattern, balance, movement

RESOURCES & REFERENCES:

- <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/identity-charts>
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/>

ADAPTATIONS & MODIFICATIONS:

Students with difficulties using scissors may require assistance or may carry out the assignment using a computer and design software such as Adobe Photoshop.

DISCUSSION & ACTIVITIES (Teacher Action/Student Action):

LESSON #1 (discussion, research, and writing):

- Before embarking on this project it is important to discuss with students how to create a safe and respectful space for discussion and sharing. Discuss with students the following questions: What makes a space safe for you? How do you make others feel safe?
- Introduce the concept of **identity** and create a word map based on students' responses to the following questions: What is identity? Why do identities change over time? What role do other people have in shaping our identities? For additional resources to assist students in exploring the concept of identity visit: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/identity-charts>.
- Introduce the concept of **culture** and create a word map based on students' responses to the following questions: What is culture? What are some examples of culture?
- Introduce the concept of **community**, explaining that it can be defined as a group of people who share common beliefs, heritage, cultural values, and geographic location. Ask the students to consider and write about the communities they belong to.
- Have students discuss the concept of a **role model**. Explain that role models can be living individuals (i.e. elders) or people from the past (i.e. ancestors). Pose the following discussion questions: What makes someone a role model? Who are your role models? How do role models shape our identities?
- Have the students identify 1-2 personal role models (living or from the past) who have influenced their identities. These role models may include students' family members, community members, and/or individuals who share their culture(s). *Encourage students to choose role models to whom they have a personal connection, rather than celebrities, etc.* Ask students to write about each of their role models and to brainstorm 3 questions they would ask these role models, if given the opportunity. If possible, have the students present their

questions to 1 or more of their role models and record their responses in writing. For role models who are no longer living and who cannot be interviewed, have the students record their ideas about what messages they feel these individuals would want to pass on to them.

- Ask students to collect photographs of their chosen role models (if possible) to be photocopied or printed and used in Lessons #3-4. If photographs cannot be obtained, have the students create drawings of their role models.

LESSON #2 (responding and reflecting, choosing symbols and colour, photographing students):

- Project the artwork *Plains Cree Chiefs* by George Littlechild (provided at the end of this document).
- The following are questions that may be used to guide a discussion and analysis of the artwork with students:
 1. Who are the Plains Cree people? Where in Canada do they live?
 2. What do you see? Who are these four people? How would you know they are chiefs or respected elders?
 3. How is the space divided?
 4. What could the number four symbolize for the artist (i.e. four corners of the earth, four elements, etc.)?
 5. What words would you use to describe the facial expressions of the four Chiefs?
 6. Describe the overall feeling this print gives you. What words would you use?
 7. What symbols can you identify? What meaning do you give to them?
 8. Why is the star so prominent?
 9. Can you find any hidden or half hidden images?
 10. How has Littlechild altered the original photographs?
 11. How does your eye move through the composition? In what direction? Why do you think this is?
 12. Where can you find an example of:
 - the use of complimentary colours
 - the use of warm/cool colours
 - the use of repetition
 - the use of contrast
 - the use of overlapping
 13. What do you think the artist is trying to express?
 14. Why do you think the artist would feel the need to return to his past and honour his ancestors or role models?
 15. What is a serigraph or silkscreen print? What is an artists proof?

- After responding to the work, share with students information (provided below) about the print and about George Littlechild.
- The following is information about the print *Plains Cree Chiefs* by George Littlechild:

This serigraph was created in honour of George Littlechild's ancestors and the Plains Cree people. It is dedicated to the Chiefs' legacy and stamina in maintaining culture, pride, and traditions in a time when old ways were being challenged and replaced by new ones. Three of the Chiefs are Littlechild's great, great, great uncles; Chief Bobtail (top left); his brother, Chief Erminskin (top right); and chief Samson (bottom right). Shown bottom left is his great, great grandfather, Chief Louis Bull. The careful juxtaposition of ancestral portraits fused with contemporary vivid colour creates a style and visual impact which is unmistakably Littlechild.

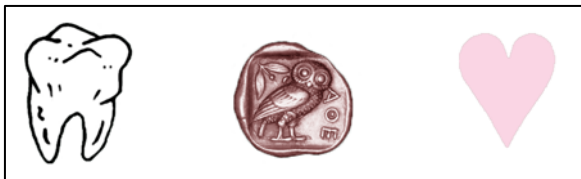
- The following is information about George Littlechild:

George Littlechild is known for creating culturally rich imagery and for his use of vibrant, high chroma colour. He has exhibited his artwork in numerous solo and group exhibitions in commercial and public galleries and museums in Canada, the United States, Japan, and in Germany. He is also the author and illustrator of three children's books.

George Littlechild was born in 1958 in Edmonton. He is a member of the Plains Cree Nation, which is part of the Cree Nation. His mother, Rachel Littlechild, was a Plains Cree member of the Erminskin Reserve in Hobbema, and his father, James E. Price, was of Scottish/Micmac descent from New Brunswick. Littlechild lived with his foster mother, Mrs. Winnie Olthius, from the ages of five to eight.

George Littlechild received a Diploma in Art and Design from Red Deer College and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Nova Scotia College of Arts and Design in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Littlechild currently lives in British Columbia.

George Littlechild's interest in his heritage led him to relearn his past and to explore many socio-political issues related to his people, including the Reserve system and Residential schooling. Through his art, Littlechild seeks to promote understanding of Indigenous cultures in order to alleviate prejudice and naïveté. He hopes his work contributes to stopping racism which he feels is one of the most destructive forces in our contemporary society.



Example of 3 personal symbols chosen in Lesson #2.

- Have students discuss the use of symbolism and colour in art by posing the following questions: What is a symbol? Why might artists use symbols in their artwork? How can



Example of photograph taken holding one of the 6" x 6" personal symbols created in Lesson #2.

- colour be used to convey different meanings in artworks?
- Have students identify and sketch the symbols that George Littlechild used in his print *Plains Cree Chiefs*.
- Have students identify the colours used in the print.
- In a sketchbook, have students brainstorm and sketch 3 symbols to represent their own identities, cultures, and communities (see examples to the left). Prompt students to consider the influences of their role models (identified in the previous lesson) when

developing their personal symbols. Encourage students to sketch and refine their symbols several times as they develop finished versions.

- Have the students brainstorm 4 colours that represent their identities, cultures, and communities. In a sketchbook, have students document these colours using oil pastel and write about the significance of each colour. Pose the following question to spark ideas: What colours will you use to represent your identities, cultures, and communities? Warm? Cool? Neutral?
- Have students choose one symbol and draw it on a 6" x 6" sheet of thick white paper. Have students colour the symbol and background (filling in all white space) using oil pastels.
- Have students work in pairs to photograph themselves in front of a blank wall holding their finished symbol. Students may choose whether or not to show their face in the photograph (see example above). Print the photographs in black and white to be used in Lessons #3-4.

LESSON #3 (planning, creating a border, and altering photographs):

- Explain to the students that they will create a mixed media collage representing their own identities, cultures, and communities. To create these collages they will make use of the photographs and/or drawings

of their role models, the photographs of themselves, the symbols they developed in Lesson #2, as well as the 4 colours that they chose in Lesson #2. Students will take inspiration from George Littlechild's artistic style and his use of altered photographs, colour, and symbolism in *Plains Cree Chiefs*.

- Have the students draw a 2.5" border around the edge of their 14" x 16" sheet of thick white paper using pencils and rulers.
- Share examples of student artworks from the book *We Are All Related: A Celebration of Our Cultural Heritage* (can be borrowed from the AFK library). This project was an effort to further understanding between culturally diverse students in a school community in Vancouver. Spark discussion using the following questions: How have the students altered the photographs in their collage? Describe the symbols the students used in their collages. Describe the students' choice of colour. How have the students chosen to place photographs of themselves and their ancestors or role models in their collages? What other designs and images have students included in their collages?
- Have students create a plan for their own mixed media collages by creating a thumbnail sketch. Ask students to plan out the following elements in their thumbnail sketch:
 - a repeated pattern inside their border using 2 or more symbols from Lesson #2.
 - the placement of their photographs
 - the placement of other images or design elements
 - the use of patterns or symbols within their composition
 - their use of the 4 colours they identified in Lesson #2
- The following questions can be used to support students in their planning work:
 1. How do you plan to balance your composition?
 2. How do you plan to create movement so your eye travels over the whole work?
 3. What do you plan to place in this large empty space in this area?
 4. Where will you place yourself in the image?
 5. What elements can you repeat to help unify your composition (i.e. colour, shape, symbol, etc.)?
 6. Can you find a way to contrast these small shapes within/around/under a large shape?
 7. Can you make the viewer work a little harder to make some surprise discoveries?
 8. Can you overlap/layer any shapes to give yourself a little more room?
 9. How can your words/text become more part of your entire image?

10. How can you place the photographs or drawings of your role models in your composition to show the impact they've had on your identity?

- Have students alter the photographs of their role models and themselves. They may cut out the figures or leave the photographs intact. Students may add colour and pattern to the photographs using watercolour paint, watered down tempera paint, oil pastels, and/or pencil crayons.
- Have students fill in the borders of their artwork by creating a repeating pattern using 2 or more of the symbols they developed in Lesson #2. Students may use tempera paint, oil pastels, and/or pencil crayons.

LESSON #4 (completing collages):

- Have students complete their collages by gluing the photographs of themselves and their role models within the composition.
- Students can then incorporate additional collage elements including the 6" x 6" symbol that they created in Lesson #2, colourful and metallic paper, etc.
- Have students fill in the remainder of their composition using pattern, drawn images, and colour. Students may use materials such as tempera paint, oil pastels, and pencil crayons (see Teacher Sample to the right).

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

After Lesson #3 have students share the plans for the collages with a partner. Have students first respond to the following questions in their sketchbooks and then share their responses with a partner: What is your plan for creating the border in your finished collage? How will you include the image(s) of your role model(s) in your finished collage? Why have you chosen this placement? Describe your colour plan for your finished artwork.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND PRESENTATION OF ARTWORKS:

Upon completion of their collages students should prepare a written description of their work. Focus should be maintained on the ways in which they represented their identities, cultures, and communities. Additionally, students should reflect on the representation of their role models and the message they feel their role models would want to pass on to them.

Upon viewing and discussing each class members' work, exhibit the students' artwork in a place of honour in the school. Invite parents and

family to view their child's art designed to honour and respect their individual identities, cultures, and communities.

EXTENSIONS & POSSIBLE CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS:

Have students carry out research on a contemporary artist of their choice who explores identity, culture, and community through their work. Have students document their research in their sketchbook and present on their chosen artist to the class.

Canadian artists for students to research include:

Sonny Assu, Rebecca Belmore, Carol Sawyer, Nep Sidhu, Graeme Patterson, Peter Morin, Dana Claxton, Meryl McMaster, Gu Xiong, Amalie Atkins, Abedar Kamgari, Ken Lum, Nataalka Husar, Annie Pootoogook, Stan Douglas, Althea Thauberger

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>



Teacher sample of finished collage.



George Littlechild, *Plains Cree Chief*, 1996, 17 colour serigraph, 29 x 22.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.