

# Abstract Haida Explorations: Painting using Stencils

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**TOPICS:** Haida formline design; Painting using stencils; Abstract art

**SUBJECT(S):** Visual Arts      **GRADE(S):** K-3

**UNIT DURATION:** 2 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 and 3D 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):**

- People create art to express who they are as individuals and community. (Arts Education K)
- People connect to the hearts and minds of others in a variety of places and times through the arts. (Arts Education 2)

### **CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES (What students will do):**

- Explore elements, processes, materials, movements, technologies, tools, and techniques of the arts
- Describe and respond to works of art

### **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 dynamic abstract compositions?

### **FIRST PEOPLES' PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING:**

Learning recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge.

## MATERIALS & TECHNOLOGIES:

- digital images of ovoid, U-shape, and trigon (see end of document)
- digital images of artwork by Robert Davidson (see end of document)
- digital projector/computer
- pencils
- blue, yellow, red, and black tempera or acrylic paint
- brushes
- water pots
- paint trays
- 8.5"x11" thick white paper (i.e. cardstock or opaque vellum) (1 per student)
- class set of Robert Davidson K-3 Formline Design Templates (printed on and cut out from 8.5" x 11" cardstock)

## VOCABULARY:

abstract art, formline design, ovoid, U-shape, trigon, stencil, 2D and 3D art

## 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/>

## ADAPTATIONS & MODIFICATIONS:

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

## DISCUSSION & ACTIVITIES (Teacher Action/Student Action):

LESSON #1 (intro to Northwest Coast formline design and the art of Robert Davidson):

- Introduce the concept of **formline design** to the students by displaying the images of the **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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

- Distribute set of Robert Davidson K-3 Formline Design Templates (see end of document for templates). Each student should receive one template (either an ovoid, U-shape, or trigon). If required, cut out the templates in advance. Otherwise, have the students cut out the grey shapes.
- 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. *Bird in the Air* (2015) (sculpture)
3. *Bird in the Air* (2009) (painting)
4. *Sea Anemone* (2008)
5. *Untitled* (2013)

- When viewing each image, have students hold up their template if they can spot their shape (or a version of their shape) within the artwork. Pose the following discussion questions:

- What do you notice about the shapes used in this artwork?
- What colours have been used? Why do you think so few colours are used?
- Where do you think Robert Davidson finds inspiration?

- Share with students information about Robert Davidson and his artworks:

### **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 Massett 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).

### **2. Bird in the Air (2015) (sculpture):**

Beginning in 2004, Robert Davidson has produced a series of sculptural works that use cut aluminum shapes that are coated with

epoxy powder-coated paints. This process has allowed Davidson to produce a number of vividly coloured sculptures in varying sizes. *Bird in the Air* elegantly evokes the flight of the eagle, as the head seems to shoot up from the base (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).

### **3. 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).

### **4. Sea Anemone (2008):**

This work 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. The work is enlivened by Davidson's use of points of near intersection, the outline of the eye with the ovoid of the socket, the stretched tri-neg shape in the lower right that almost touches but doesn't several parts of the composition, the aggressively attenuated trigon that plunges into the mouth stops a breath away from the back of the lips. All of these elements ensure that the image has a vitality that suggests the sea anemone is a living thing and not simply an abstraction of a sea creature (adapted from Curator's Essay by Ian M. Thom, Gordon Smith Gallery, 2015).



Robert Davidson, *Bird in the Air*, 2015, Epoxy Powder-Coated Aluminum, 213.4 x 127 x 19 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist.



## 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).

LESSON #2 (abstract painting creation):

- Review with students Robert Davidson's painting *Untitled* (2013) by posing the following discussion questions:
  - What shapes has Robert Davidson used to create this painting?
  - What colours has Robert Davidson used? How many colours?
- Emphasize that *Untitled* (2013) 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).
- Explain to students that, inspired by Davidson's artwork, they will create their own abstract design using one of the 3 formline design elements discussed in the previous lesson: ovoid, U-form, and trigon.
- Distribute the stencils from the previous lesson (1 per student). On an 8.5" x 11" sheet of white cardstock or opaque vellum, have students trace around their stencil using a pencil. Instruct students to divide their sheet of paper into 2 or 3 sections (depending on the stencil that they are using). Use the following questions to encourage students to carefully consider the placement of their stencil:
  - Where on the page will you place your shape (i.e. bottom, top, corner, edge, on the diagonal, etc.)?
  - How will you divide up your sheet of paper?
  - What other shapes can you create on your paper by moving your stencil to different locations?
- Once students have traced their shape, collect their stencils.
- Have students carefully paint each shape in their composition using 1 solid colour per shape. Provide students with the following 4 colours of paint (inspired by Robert Davidson): red, yellow, blue, and black.

### FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

At the end of Lesson #1 pose the following reflection questions: What is something new that you have learned about Haida art? What are some key words you have learned to help you talk about and understand Haida art? What is abstract art?

### SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

After students complete their paintings pose the following reflection questions: How did you choose the placement of your formline shape? Are you surprised by the variety of abstract compositions that were created using the 3 formline shapes and 3 colours? If you could ask Robert Davidson about his creative process, what would you ask him?

### EXTENSIONS & POSSIBLE CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS:

Connected to their investigation of Robert Davidson's artwork, students may further their learning about the history, culture, and artwork of the Haida peoples.

### 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, AFK.



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, *Bird in the Air*, 2015, Epoxy Powder-Coated Aluminum, 213.4 x 127 x 19 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.

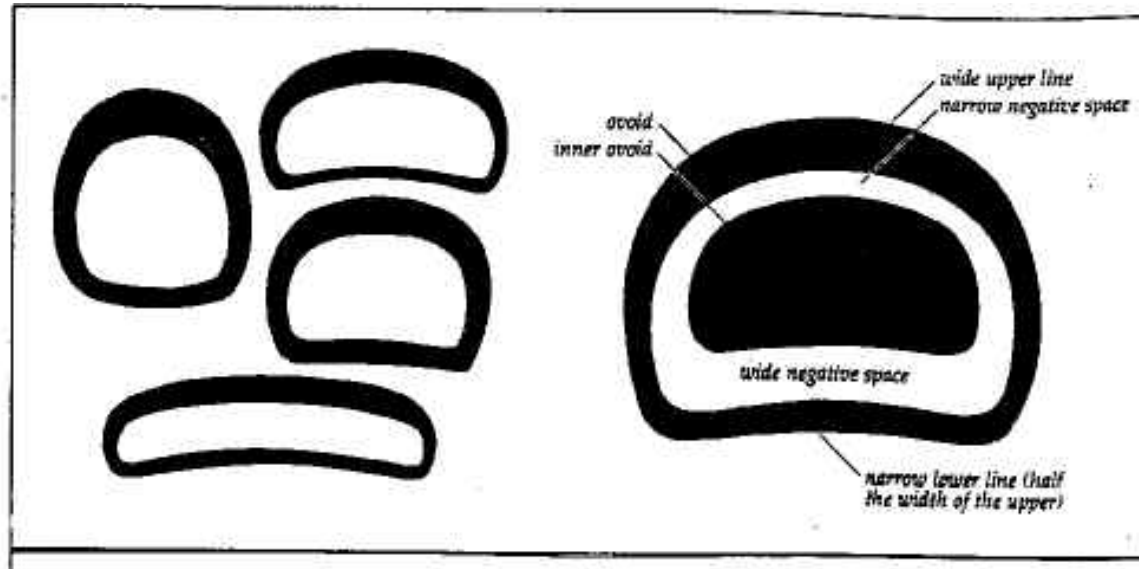


Robert Davidson, *Sea Anemone*, 2008, Serigraph, 101.6 x 76.2 cm.  
Image courtesy of the Artist.



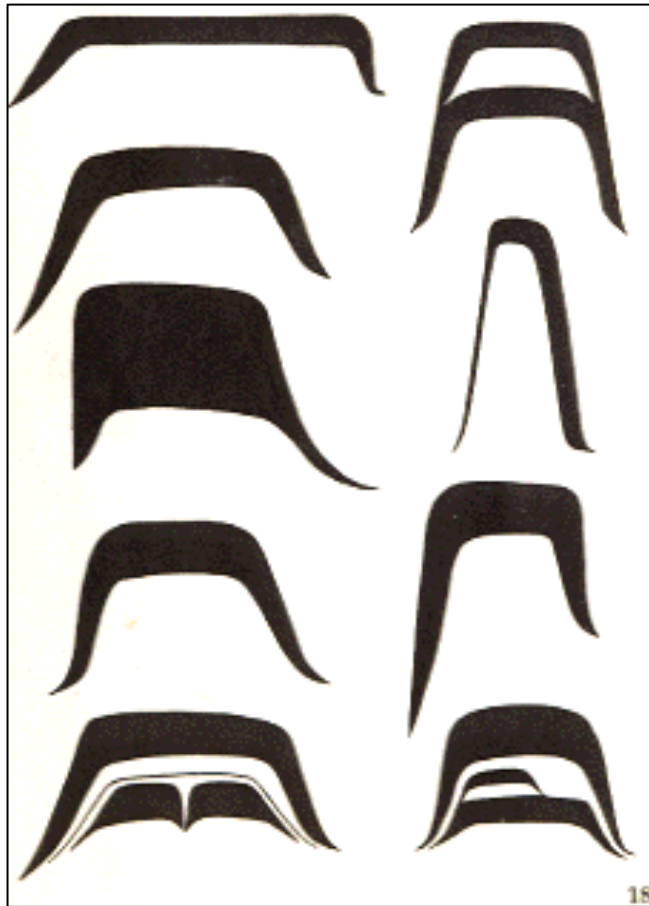


Robert Davidson, *Untitled*, 2013, Acrylic on Canvas, 76.2 x 101.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist.



## 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



## U-shape

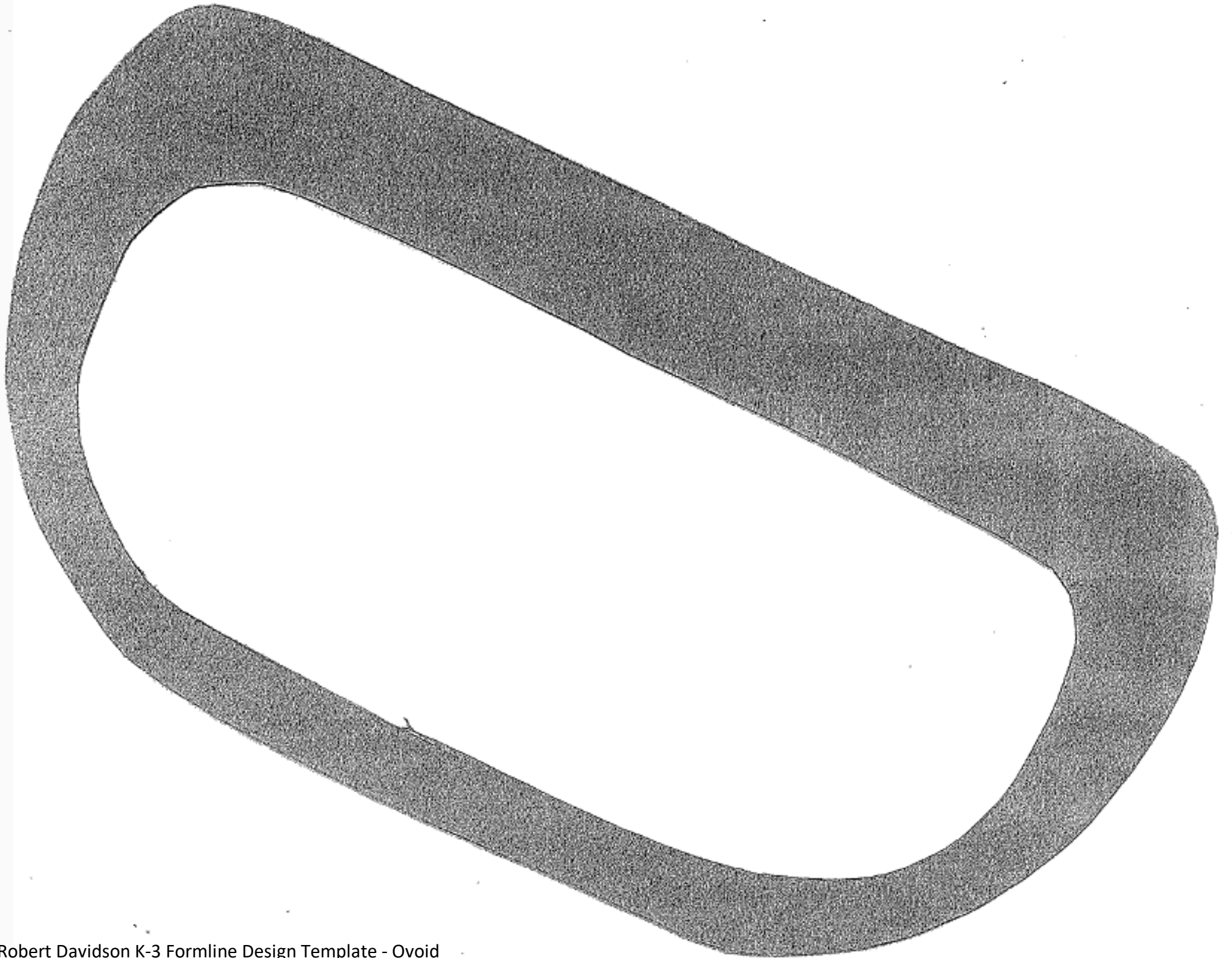
- thickest on top, thinner on each side, and taper down to a fine tip
- often used for ears and tails
- traditionally connect with other design elements



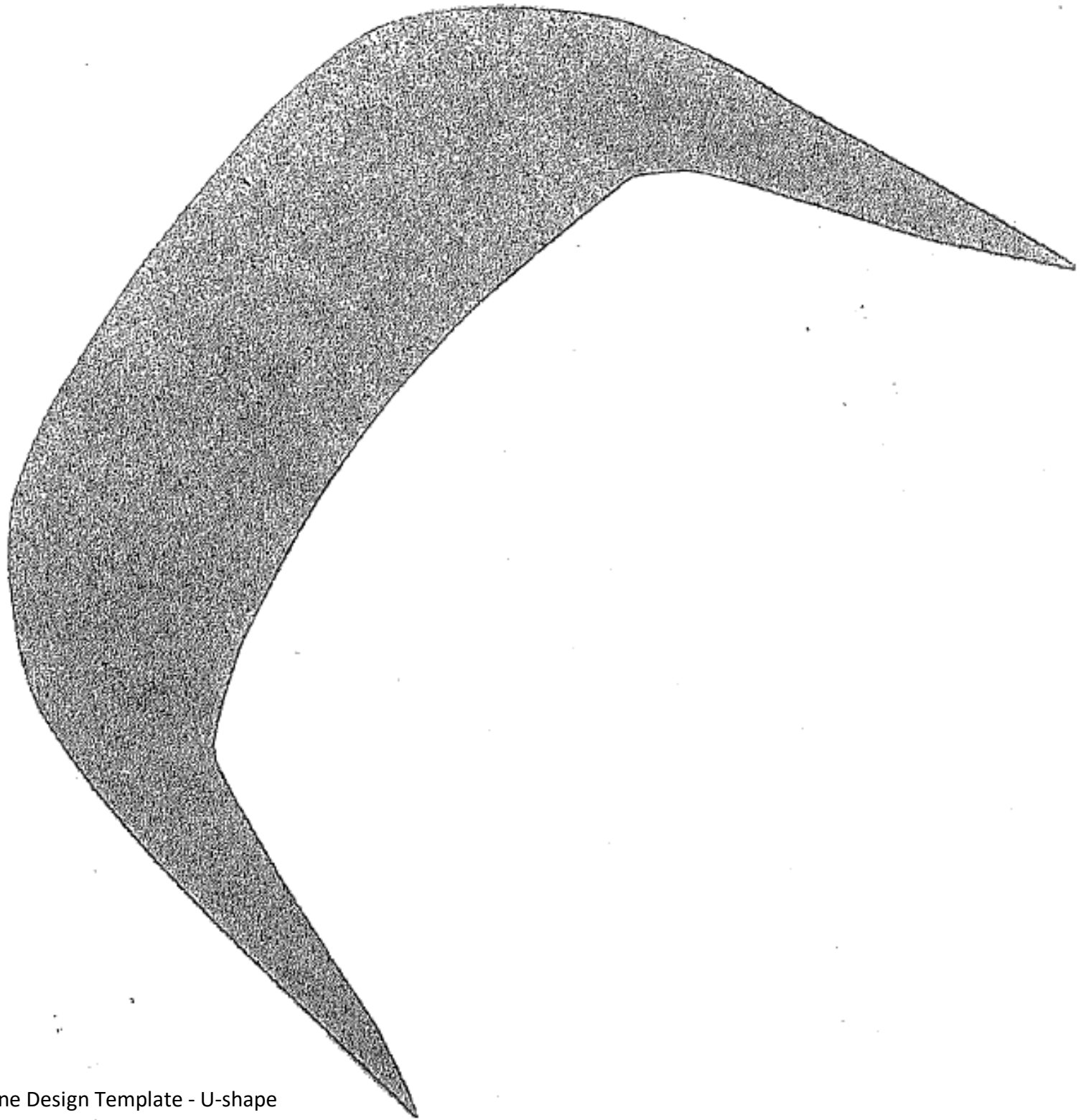


## **trigon**

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



Robert Davidson K-3 Formline Design Template - Ovoid



Robert Davidson K-3 Formline Design Template - U-shape



