
Aboriginal Art and Sea Journeys

Level

2-8

Key question

How can features of the environment and journeys through that environment be visually represented on a piece of paper?

Key Outcome

Develop ideas for interpreting, mapping or telling a story about the environment using symbols.

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Art and maps and the marine environment seem to go together! Most of us have used maps to explain features of the coastline to our students, but using some of the techniques developed by Aboriginal people may provide an exciting challenge for students.

There are numerous ways of introducing children to Aboriginal art. Most states have an Aboriginal Education Unit that will assist with speakers, materials and references. Local Aboriginal communities may be able to provide a speaker. Pictures by Aboriginal artists in books can be useful reference and display resources. A pre- or post-activity visit to an art gallery displaying Aboriginal paintings and crafts may serve to show students alternative methods of drawing routes and mapping the coast. This activity has been developed in conjunction with Charmaine Wall of Tasmania, and is on trial at the Marine Discovery Centre. It can be used prior to, or following a field trip to a marine area.

What you need

- Pencil or neo-pens or charcoal or paint or coloured pencils, paper (can be recycled)
- Sea chart of any area (can be local), navigational maps, or ortho-photo maps of a coastal area
- Satellite imagery of the same area can be used as an extension

What you do

(a) Looking at sea charts

Look at the sea charts or navigation maps of an area. These could be of the area to be visited later. Look at the symbols on the charts.

- What shapes and symbols are used?
- What do they mean?
- How are they made?
- Do we know of any stories (historical, geographical, exploring, treasure, shipwrecks) associated with this chart?
- How are ideas, rather than features, represented?
- What other ways of communication use symbols? (Remind students about music, science, semaphore, flashing lights from lighthouses and beacons, safety symbols, computers).

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- What other perspectives use a 'bird's eye view'? (Aerial photos, satellite imagery, weather maps, Aboriginal art).
- Try to describe a journey from point A to point B on the map, referring only to the symbols (if you are Level 5 and above you should refer to compass directions, associations between features, etc).

(b) Looking at aboriginal art techniques

1. Look at the examples of aboriginal art – greeting cards, books, posters and possibly some artifacts. You will see that different art styles are used in different regions, for example, X-ray styles, stick-like figures from Oenpelli, cross hatching from Arnhem Land, circles and dots from the Central Desert, and many modern interpretations.

2. Now identify:

- What patterns are used?
- What symbols are used?
- Where do these symbols come from (are they taught or ...)?
- What sort of environments are shown?

Can we identify the intended meaning from looking at this art? How would our European charts be seen from an Aboriginal perspective?

- good camp sites
- first contact with explorers or ships
- permanent water?

(c) Looking at our environment

1. How can we map/tell a story about our environment using the ideas gained from looking at maps and Aboriginal art techniques?

Micro-journeys

Visit the mud flats, foreshore, or any inter-tidal area, and look for patterns that could be used as symbols, for example, mollusc trails, bird prints, human foot prints, wave ripples, shell patterns. If you can't get there, think about areas you know.

- Create a micro journey of shore and inter-tidal animals using the symbols/patterns that you have found or make up symbols of your own.

Create a story/assumption/hypotheses about your micro journey. Draw this on paper using coloured pencils, crayons, charcoal or paint.

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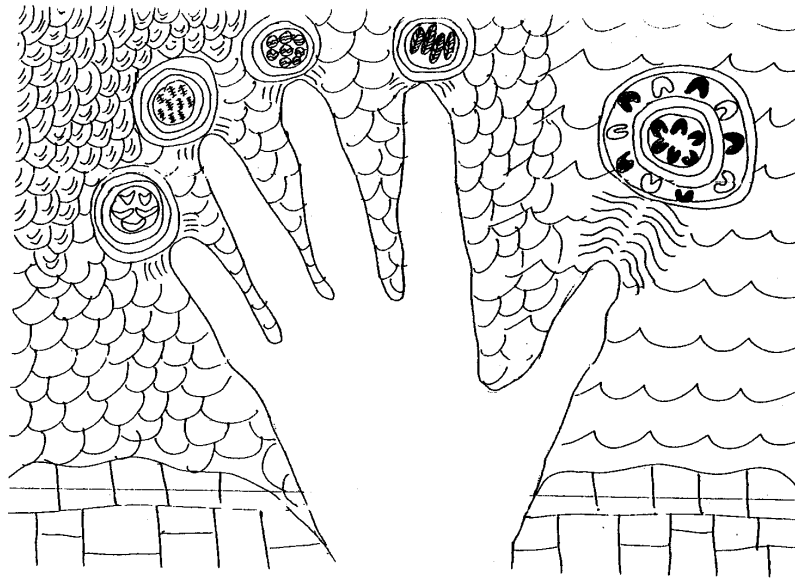
Macro-journeys

Use a longer journey for this next activity. This art will represent the bigger picture of a longer journey of a student from home, say, to a seashore. Use another piece of paper and do the following:

- Think about the symbols you would like to use; these can come from the environment or they can be creative or inspired by aboriginal techniques.
- Begin from home ending up at the local beach, and include any side trips made or things of significance to you.
- Use a key to explain the symbols drawn (see Figure 1 for an example).
- Language and other images/textures, for example, things that may have been found on the beach or inspire creation can also be incorporated. There are no best or correct maps either!

2. Now give your journey story to a classmate to read, so that the process of retelling is incorporated. Explain your journey, referring to your 'map'. Journey art maps can be displayed in the classroom later.

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Land bordering the D'Entrecosteaux channel



Hand represents the Marine Discovery Centre – the hand is used as a symbol in a lot of Aboriginal art. It represents meeting others



The fresh water coming into the channel from the Derwent river



The channel water



Side journeys to Snake Island, the oyster farm, the salmon farm, and to site of the water experiments



Figure 1. Illustration, in part, of a key to represent a sea journey