Aboriginal Australia: Geography, Land, and Stories

*Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art* showcases the diversity and richness of art from across the Australian continent. While all of the works in the exhibition were made within the past fifty years, many of them are imbued with knowledge shared across generations of Aboriginal Australians spanning millennia. The way the art looks and how it is made reflect the artists’ connections to the past, to the land, and to the social and cultural practices of their people.

This pre-visit lesson will prepare students for the Hood Museum of Art by familiarizing them with the geography of Australia. It will also help them learn about the connection between storytelling and art making in Aboriginal Australian communities, provide an opportunity to watch an Aboriginal artist working.

**Pre-Visit Activity**

**Objectives**

Students will:

1. Learn a few basic geography facts related to Australia that will provide some contextual background in preparation for their museum visit.
2. Think about ways in which storytelling is used to share knowledge within different cultures.
3. Watch a video of Aboriginal artists painting and discuss what they notice when looking at the video;
4. Learn that the art they will explore in the museum will reflect the traditions and values of diverse Aboriginal Australians, as well as the different environments in various regions of Australia.

**Materials needed for this activity:**

- map of Australia overlaid on the United States (located at the bottom of this document)
- glossary (provided at the end of this document)
- Access to the Internet
Geography

Explain to students that when they visit the Hood, they will be looking at an exhibition of art made by Aboriginal Australian artists from all across Australia.

Show the image of the map of Australia superimposed over the map of the United States. Point out that Australia is only slightly smaller than the United States. Invite students to share what they know about Australia, and then read the following geographical facts:

● Australia is the sixth biggest country in the world

● At one point there were over 600 native languages spoken across Australia. Today there are 300-400 native languages still spoken

● Australia is home to some of the world’s most unusual animals, including the kangaroo, echidna, emu, Tasmanian devil, thorny devil, and the koala

● Indigenous Australians have the world’s oldest continuously surviving culture, dating back more than 50,000 years

Stories: Why and how do people tell stories?

Invite students to brainstorm answers to the question, “Why do people in different cultures tell stories?” As you help them develop their answers, include the following ideas:

● Stories can teach younger generations valuable lessons

● Within a culture group, stories can help connect living generations to their ancestors from the past and create a sense of togetherness and belonging

● Stories can entertain

● Stories are a way for people to learn about cultures other than their own

Next, ask students to brainstorm answers to the question, “What are some of the different ways or methods people use to tell stories?”
After they share ideas, have them consider the four categories listed below. Help students brainstorm specific examples within each category. For example, under the Performative category, a specific example might be a song that tells a story such as *The Star Spangled Banner*:

- Oral: telling stories out loud
- Written storytelling
- Performative: dance, drama, movies, song, and music
- Visual: paintings and sculpture

**Aboriginal Australian art: What it looks like and how it tells stories**

Inform students that Aboriginal Australians have been sharing stories about their ancestors and the land they have lived on for thousands of years. Many of these stories are sacred and tell of deep connections Indigenous people feel to land and to their ancestors who created the land. One of the ways Aboriginal Australian people tell stories today is through their visual art. The paintings that they will explore on their visit to the museum will invite them to look and think differently about how knowledge is shared. Most of the art will appear to be abstract, and by looking carefully at colors, shapes, and lines, they will come to understand how these paintings tell important stories about connections between generations of Aboriginal Australian people and the land where they have lived.

**The painting process**

Log onto the link listed below.

http://www.creativecowboyfilms.com/documentaries/the-contemporary-art-of-angelina-pwerle/

This link takes you to the web site for Creative Cowboy films. Watch a 2:24 minute video of Aboriginal Australian artist Angelina Pwerle painting on a canvas. Before students watch, invite them to pay attention to both what they see and what they hear. Following the video, ask students to briefly share their thoughts about what they noticed using the following prompts:
● What did you see happening in this video?

● How is the artist making her art? What kinds of tools is she using?

● How is painting sitting on the ground different from painting standing up? How is her perspective different from that of someone painting standing up?

● The sounds you hear are sounds Angelina makes as she paints. How would you describe the quality of those sounds? (i.e. loud/quiet, rhythmic/dissonant, soothing/jarring, etc.)

● What does the art look like?

Share with students:

This brief video shows Aboriginal Australian artist Angelina Pwerle painting about the Bush plum. The Bush plum is a small, nutrient-rich fruit with black seeds that grows abundantly in the region where Angelina lives. For thousands of years it has sustained her people, and it is a fruit typically harvested by women. As she paints, she tells the story of the plant, where it might be found in the land, where her people live, and how it came to be. As she paints, she remembers the stories and the experiences she and her ancestors have had collecting this fruit. By painting this story, she is honoring the land that provides this sustenance and honoring her ancestors.

(For more information about the Dreamings, the complex set of stories Aboriginal Australian peoples use to pass on sacred and practical knowledge from generation to generation, see the pdf called the Dreaming that is also provided for teachers on the Hood Museum of Art’s website: http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/docs/2012dreaming.pdf)
Outline of the Australian continent over the map of the United States
Glossary

This glossary provides definitions to words used in the pre-visit material and also that are likely to come up during a visit to the exhibition.

**Aboriginal** refers to those people who were the first or earliest known of their kind to live in a region. The Aboriginal Australian people were the first people to live on the continent of Australia beginning more than 50,000 years ago. Europeans, who came to Australia only about 400 years ago, are not aboriginal people.

**Indigenous** is a synonym for aboriginal. The two words may be used interchangeably.

**Abstract art** can be a painting or sculpture composed from colors, shapes, and lines that does not show a person, place, or thing recognizable from the natural world.

**Ancestors** are people from whom one is descended through birth.

**Ceremony** is a formal event performed on a special occasion.

**Composition** refers to how colors, shapes, and lines are put together or arranged in a work of art.

**Culture** refers to the beliefs, social practices and characteristics of a group of people.

**Symbol** refers to something that stands for something else. In Australian Aboriginal art, sometimes a shape, like a circle, might be a symbol for something else like a watering hole, for example.