

Susan Point: Spindle Whorl



Susan Point
Behind Four Winds, 2012
screenprint on paper
Courtesy of the Artist

**TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE
SPRING 2017**

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Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

Over the past three and a half decades, the Musqueam artist Susan Point has received wide acclaim for her accomplished and remarkably wide-ranging work, which reveals the vitality of Coast Salish culture both past and present. The exhibition *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl* surveys Point's entire career through more than a hundred artworks that take the spindle whorl as their starting point. It features a number of new works made specifically for this exhibition.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl*. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl* has three main goals:

- to introduce students to Susan Point's work and artistic practice,
- to consider historical and contemporary artistic traditions and disciplines,
- to examine works of art in terms of ideas, materials, techniques and inspiration.

THE EXHIBITION

SUSAN POINT: SPINDLE WHORL

Over the past three and a half decades, the Musqueam artist Susan Point has received wide acclaim for her accomplished and remarkably wide-ranging work, which reveals the vitality of Coast Salish culture both past and present. During that time, she has produced an extensive body of prints, as well as sculptural works in a wide variety of materials including glass, resin, concrete, steel, wood and paper. The range of techniques she has employed is as diverse as her selection of materials; they include screen and woodblock printing, wood carving, paper casting and industrial methods of cutting steel, and the scale of her work ranges from the intimacy of the jewellery she produced in the early 1980s to the monumental public sculptures she undertook in the 1990s and continues to make today.

The Coast Salish spindle whorl has been a persistent motif in Point's work since the beginning of her career. Consisting of a small (usually) wooden disc with a pole inserted through the centre, this tool was traditionally used by Coast Salish women to prepare wool that would be woven into garments and ceremonial blankets. Point has drawn upon the spindle whorl to provide a formal structure for her art while combining this motif with a uniquely Salish vocabulary of circles, crescents and curved triangles, elements that distinguish the art of her people from the formline-based art of northern First Nations peoples.

While Point's practice is informed by a profound respect for Coast Salish traditions, she has pushed the boundaries of tradition in her desire to articulate Salish culture in contemporary terms. When she embarked on her career there were few precedents for a First Nations woman to carve or work with sculpture, as these were activities traditionally undertaken by men. Nonetheless, as this exhibition shows, Point embraced both carving and sculptural work and has continually pushed the traditional form of the spindle whorl in extraordinary new directions.

Susan Point: Spindle Whorl surveys Point's entire career through more than a hundred artworks that take the spindle whorl as their starting point. It features a number of new works made specifically for this exhibition, and it will be accompanied by an extensively illustrated 160-page hardcover book.

Organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Ian Thom, Senior Curator-Historical, and Grant Arnold, Audaun Curator of British Columbia Art.

ARTIST'S BACKGROUND

"I want people to understand that we do have a beautiful, unique art form."

—Susan Point

Susan Point (b. 1952)

Susan Point is a Musqueam Coast Salish artist from Vancouver, British Columbia, who works in the Coast Salish tradition. Point was born in Alert Bay, BC, and grew up with her family in their home on the Musqueam Indian Reserve in Vancouver. At the age of nine, Point was sent by government decree to Sechelt Residential School for five years. She then returned to Vancouver and resumed living on the Musqueam Reserve. In the early 1980s, Point became interested in reviving the traditions of Coast Salish art and design. Little research had been done on Salish art, so Point taught herself the Salish traditions. She studied the collections of Coast Salish art at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum. Point's parents and uncle, who were highly regarded designated leaders of the extended family and strongly believed in Musqueam traditions and culture, were important mentors to Point. She spent much time questioning and learning directly from them, drawing upon their stories, values and traditions, and folding them into all aspects of her work.

Point's career spans more than three decades. She first began making art in 1981, when she took a jewellery-making course at Vancouver Community College while she was on maternity leave with her third child. Much of her art practice has involved the adaptation of traditional spindle whorl carvings into the medium of screen printing. Point incorporates non-traditional colours into her work, integrating shades of blue, green and silver, especially in her print works. Her work helped revive Coast Salish design and brought new scholarly attention to her culture. She is the first Musqueam artist to have a solo exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Point's works include public pieces installed at the Vancouver International Airport, Stanley Park, the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC, the UBC Museum of Anthropology and the city of Seattle.

Among her numerous achievements, she has received honorary doctorates in Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia (2000), University of Victoria (2000), Simon Fraser University (2008) and Emily Carr University of Art + Design (2008). In addition, she has received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award (2004), a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal (2012) and a Mayor's Arts Awards Civic Merit Award (2016). She was appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (2004) and to the Order of Canada (2006), and she is recognized as one of BC's 100 most influential women (2010). She currently lives and works in Vancouver.

COAST SALISH: A Brief Introduction

“The Coast Salish native peoples are indigenous to the lower mainland of Vancouver and southern tip of Vancouver Island, B.C., extending to the northern Washington State in the U.S.

Although there are many First Nation tribes in B.C., 30+ years ago the Coast Salish were the least familiar to the general public, and their art was almost completely unknown subject to early settlement by Europeans. Historically, the Coast Salish were one of the most numerous indigenous groups and their art was unique and powerful both in subject and form. Not only did they carve large-scale houseposts adorning their longhouses (which were mainly used for structural purposes to hold up the crossbeams for the roofs of the longhouses) but they also carved figures and delicate engravings that embellished ritual implements, utilitarian tools (e.g., spindle whorls) and personal ornaments, including textiles and blankets that were considered items of wealth and worn on ceremonial occasions. Today, the Coast Salish territory is the most heavily populated part of the province and their unique art form has again flourished.”

— www.susanpoint.com

COAST SALISH ART

Much of Northwest Coast art is representational: the images represent animals and figures from stories and legends. Unlike the work of Haida and other First Nations communities whose artists use formline, ovoids and U-forms to create their designs, Coast Salish art appears more minimalist, with less focus on detail and pattern and more on round edges and expressive faces. Coast Salish art can generally be recognized by small, round eyes in circular faces, and simplified human figures.

Coast Salish design comprises an outline form that defines the space and boundaries of the overall design and connects all other elements. The outline form reflects a central belief in the interconnectedness of all things, and that humans, the natural world and the universe form a whole entity.

Coast Salish Style - Formal elements

The circle

- is a prominent design element in Coast Salish art because it represents unity and centrality,
- is seen throughout nature; for instance, in the sun, moon and sky,
- represents the cyclical seasons of nature and of human life,
- expresses a philosophy of closure, completion and empowerment,
- reminds us that it is important to consider how our actions affect ourselves, our people and generations yet to come.

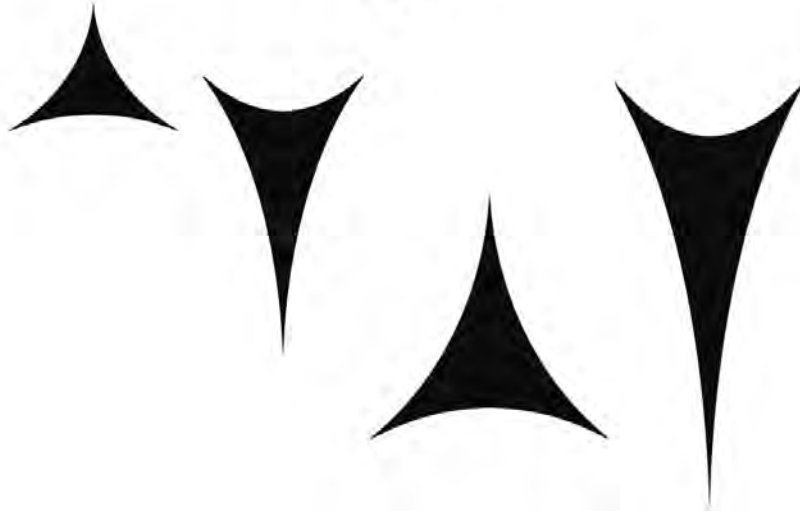
The crescent

- is understood as a phase, such as phases of life or phases of the moon,
- can be characterized as a marking of the passage of time in seasons rather than in weeks, months or years,
- reminds us that the evening hours are the most productive time to teach and counsel, and that the nighttime fire is a tool for visualization as the flames display myriad forms of the modified crescent,
- mimics the shapes of the flames, as the repeated crescent shapes help us focus our mind's eye on the information being visually conveyed.

The trigon

- reflects light,
- has four points: three surface points and a fourth inner point,
- reminds us that this quadripartite aspect was central to Coast Salish teachings: four is a ritual number, there are four major directions and they are offered four times,
- remind us that the medicine wheel is divided into four parts, representing the four aspects of human nature—the physical, the mental, the emotional and the spiritual.

Trigons



Crescents



PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: About the Artist (all grades)

Objective:

Students explore the life of Susan Point, her art practice, influences, interests and processes.

Materials:

- access to the Internet
- access to library for art books on the artist
- Artist Information Sheet and Student Worksheet (pp. 9 and 10)
- writing materials

Process:

1. Divide the class into small groups. Give each group one of the categories from the Information Sheet (p. 9).
2. Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 10) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section. Have them conduct research using the Internet, either at home or at school.
3. Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it into the space provided on the Worksheet.
4. Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

Conclusion:

- Points for class discussion and/or individual writing assignments: What makes Susan Point a significant or important artist?
- What is interesting about her work and life?
- In what ways does her work connect to or resonate with students' lives?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Artist Information Sheet

Susan Point

Her Life

- Born Alert Bay, BC, in 1952
- Grew up and currently lives in Vancouver, BC
- Started to work as a visual artist in the early 1980s
- Has been recognized in Canada as an artist who has brought renewed attention to traditional Coast Salish art

Her Art

- Works in wood, glass, paper and screen printing
- Best known for her public artworks, such as those in Vancouver International Airport
- Taught herself Salish traditions and studied collections of Coast Salish art at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum
- Has used the Coast Salish spindle whorl as a persistent motif in her work since the beginning of her career

Major Achievements

- Has had her work exhibited throughout the world in galleries, museums and institutions
- Has received honorary doctorates in Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia (2000), University of Victoria (2000), Simon Fraser University (2008) and Emily Carr University of Art + Design (2008)
- Was appointed to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (2004)
- Received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award (2004)
- Received a Mayor's Arts Awards Civic Merit Award (2016)
- Was named an Officer of the Order of Canada (2006)
- Was named one of BC's 100 most influential women (2010)
- Was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal (2012)
- Is the first Musqueam artist to have a solo exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Student Worksheet: SUSAN POINT

Her Life	
Type of Art	
Her Works	
Important Achievements	
An Artwork: Title & Description	

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Stylized Animal Creations (all grades)

Objective:

Students create a stylized and abstract animal focusing on shape, form and colour.

Background:

Animals play an integral role in Northwest Coast First Nations art. Illustrated in a highly stylized and abstract way, these animal designs, called spirits or crests, tell stories about a family's common history. They are not supposed to look realistic, but as in real life, each animal has distinctive features that tell us what it is. Through simplification and abstraction, both historical and contemporary First Nations artists such as Susan Point explore, describe and create images using visual elements of line, shape and colour, and principles of symmetrical balance.

Materials:

- old magazines, or access to the Internet and a printer
- drawing paper
- Optional:* rulers and other stencils
- drawing materials—pencils, coloured pencils, markers

AND/OR

- Optional:* coloured construction paper
- scissors
- glue

Process:

1. Have students look at examples of Susan Point's work on p. 12. Discuss how the animals are stylized and abstract and are presented in simple forms, shapes and colours. Point out that they do not look realistic, but still have features and attributes that tell us what they are.
2. Have the students find an image of an animal they like, taken from old magazines or printed from the Internet.
3. Encourage students to look at the image as if it were a combination of simple shapes. What shapes do they see?
4. Have students create an abstract image of their chosen animal, either by drawing it or making a collage. Their work does not have to mimic a First Nations art style. This activity is an exercise in transforming an image through abstraction.
5. If students are drawing the image, provide them with drawing paper and materials. This approach is recommended for older students in particular.
6. Have the students create an abstract version of their found image, using stencils and rulers or drawing freehand. See examples on p. 13.
7. If students are working with collage, provide them with a selection of construction paper in a variety of colours.
8. Have students draw out major shapes onto construction paper.
9. Have them glue shapes onto a background sheet of construction paper to create a bold and simplified animal image. See examples on p. 13.
10. Display the finished work in the classroom.

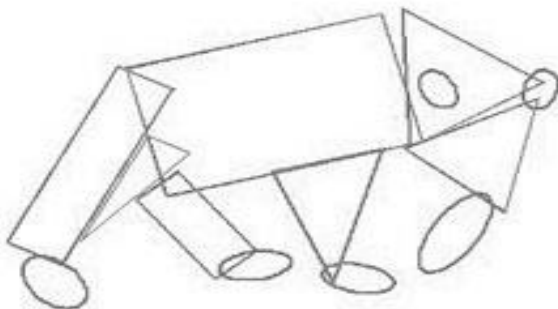
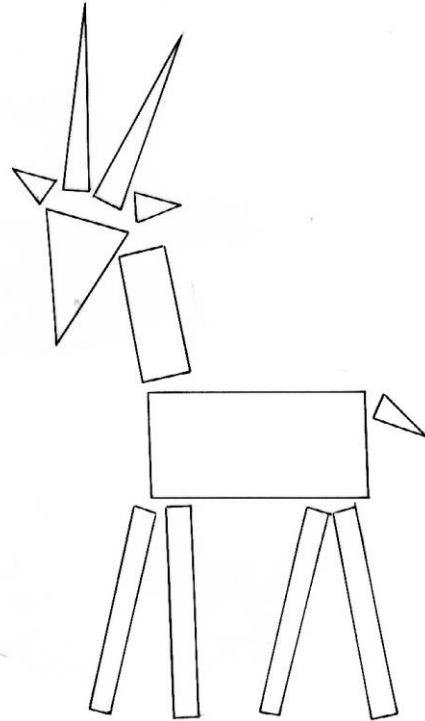
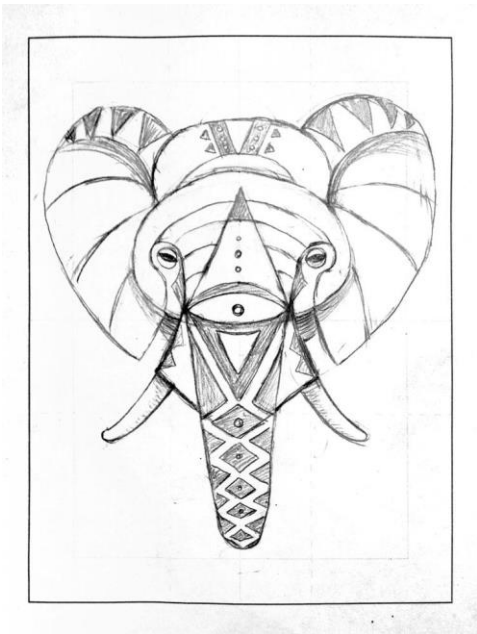
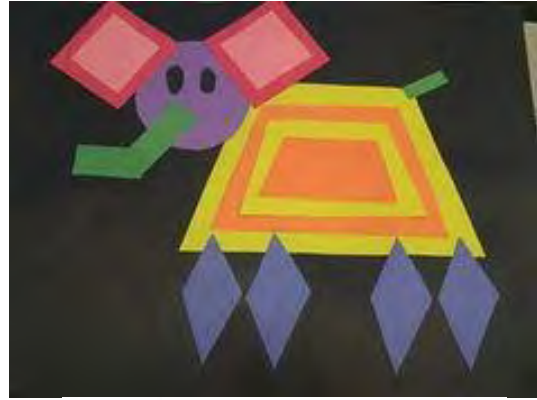
Conclusion:

- Have students look at all the finished work and discuss similarities and differences in colours, shapes and compositions.
- Discuss the process. How easy or hard was it to create the work?
- Do students perceive animals differently now? How so?

Examples of Works by Susan Point



Examples of Abstract and Stylized Animals
(Student work)



PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: The World of Spindle Whorls (all grades)

Objective:

Students learn all about spindle whorls through research and process.

Discussion:

Susan Point initiated the use of the spindle whorl form in contemporary Coast Salish art. This form is based upon a traditional tool for spinning wool. Historically, the disc on the spindle whorl was often carved or decorated. The Coast Salish spindle whorl has been a persistent motif in Point's work since the beginning of her career. Consisting of a small (usually) wooden disc with a pole inserted through the centre, this tool was used by Coast Salish women to prepare wool that would be woven into garments and ceremonial blankets. Point has used the spindle whorl to provide a formal structure for her art while combining this motif with a uniquely Salish vocabulary of circles, crescents and curved triangles, elements that distinguish the art of her people from the formline-based art of northern First Nations peoples.

Materials:

- Student Worksheet (p. 16)
- access to the Internet

Optional:

- unused or old CDs
- Sharpie pens in different colours
- pencils or dowels
- masking tape or rubber bands
- small metal hook
- yarn

Process:

1. Introduce the title of the exhibition, *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl*, to the students. Ask them if they know what a spindle whorl is.
2. Show students the historical images on p. 15. What do they notice? How do they think a spindle whorl is used?
3. Have students work in pairs. Give each pair a Student Worksheet (p. 16).
4. Have the students fill out the worksheet, in order to learn more about spindle whorls. Internet access will be required.
5. Have students watch videos about spindle whorls and drop spindles. (See video links on p. 17.)
6. *Optional:* Have students decorate a CD with coloured Sharpie pens. Have them create a design pattern with pencil and paper before using Sharpies on their CDs. Ask them to think about the significance of their designs and try to connect them to their own life, culture, or experiences. See examples on p. 17.
7. Intermediate students can make their own drop spindles using their decorated CDs. An Internet link with step-by-step instructions is provided on p. 18.

Conclusion:

Discuss:

- What was the most interesting aspect of learning about spindle whorls?
- How do students perceive the tradition of spinning and weaving differently now?
- What inspired the designs of their CD spindle whorls?



Woman spinning yarn at the Coast Salish village of Musqueam, 1915



Coast Salish spindle whorl, 19th century



Susan Point, *Salish Vision*, 2002

Student Worksheet: SPINDLE WHORLS

When were they invented?	
How are they made?	
What are they used for?	
Name two cultures that have traditionally used spindle whorls	
A drawing or other image of a spindle whorl	

Videos

- Master carver P'áwu "Johnnie Abraham," explains the replica spindle whorl, one of the main exhibits welcoming guests to the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre.
<https://youtu.be/c16GkBAspnc>
- This video shows how to spin yarn using a drop spindle.
<https://youtu.be/bKAJTKvIOnE>

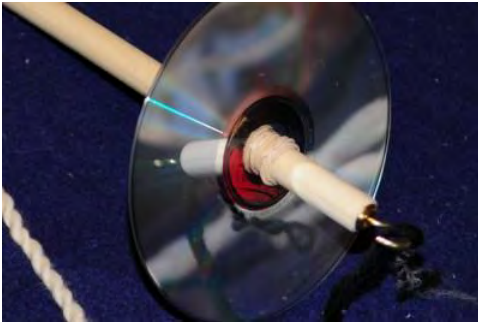
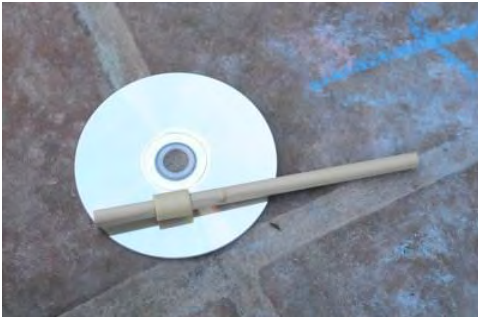
CD Spindle Whorl



How to Make a Drop Spindle

One Inch World.com — How to Make a Drop Spindle

- <http://oneinchworld.com/blog/index.php/2011/12/how-to-make-a-drop-spindle/comment-page-1/>



PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Location Points (all grades)

Objective:

Students learn about Susan Point's public works of art.

Background:

Susan Point is an incredibly prolific artist, with experience in carving, painting and weaving. Several of her large carving pieces are installed at Vancouver International Airport: two traditional Musqueam welcome figures and a large spindle-whorl design called *Flight* greet guests approaching Customs and Immigration. These works, among other public commissions in Vancouver and surrounding communities, are widely known and familiar to many.

Materials:

- Student Worksheet, p. 21
- pencils
- access to the Internet
- printer

Process:

1. Discuss public art with the students. What is public art? What are some possible reasons cities choose to have public art? Name some examples of public art in Vancouver.
2. Discuss Susan Point. She is an example of an artist with numerous public commissions. Many students may already have seen her work, knowingly or unknowingly, at Vancouver International Airport or elsewhere.
3. Have students work in pairs or groups. Assign each group one location from the List of Locations, p.20.
4. Have the groups conduct research on the Internet to find the Susan Point work connected to their location.
5. Have each group fill in their worksheet and print an image of the work.
6. Have the groups present their research to the class and share their findings.

Conclusion:

- Ask students how their understanding about public art has changed after doing this activity.
- If they had to commission a public art piece, which artist would they commission and where would they place it in the city? Why?
- Is public art necessary? Why or why not?
- How does public art transform a city?
- Why is Susan Point's work so significant for Vancouver and Seattle?

List of Locations

1. Vancouver International Airport
2. Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver
3. Manhole cover, Vancouver
4. Canada Line station, Vancouver International Airport
5. Tree grate, Seattle
6. Brockton Point, Stanley Park, Vancouver
7. River Green, Richmond
8. West Seattle Pump Station, Seattle
9. Victoria Conference Centre, Victoria
10. Museum of Anthropology, UBC

Student Worksheet: Public Works by Susan Point

Location	
Title and Information	
An image of the work	

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Positive and Negative Space (all grades)

Objective:

Students explore the relationship between positive and negative space as an element of art.

Background:

Space, in a two-dimensional artwork, includes the background, foreground and middle ground. It also refers to the areas around, between and within the forms, shapes, colours and lines that compose the work. There are two kinds of space: positive and negative. Positive spaces are those occupied by the main subjects of the work. Negative spaces are the areas around and behind the positive spaces. Negative space can also be referred to as the background. Coast Salish art, unlike most northern-style indigenous art, is not based on the formline, in which a boldly outlined perimeter contains images in positive space. Instead, it features the creative use of negative space, somewhat like a cutout design created with paper. A subtle and stylized technique, it features circles, ovals, crescents and trigons. Susan Point emphasizes the balance of positive and negative space in the process of creating her designs.

Materials:

- pencils
- black construction paper
- white or coloured construction paper
- scissors
- glue

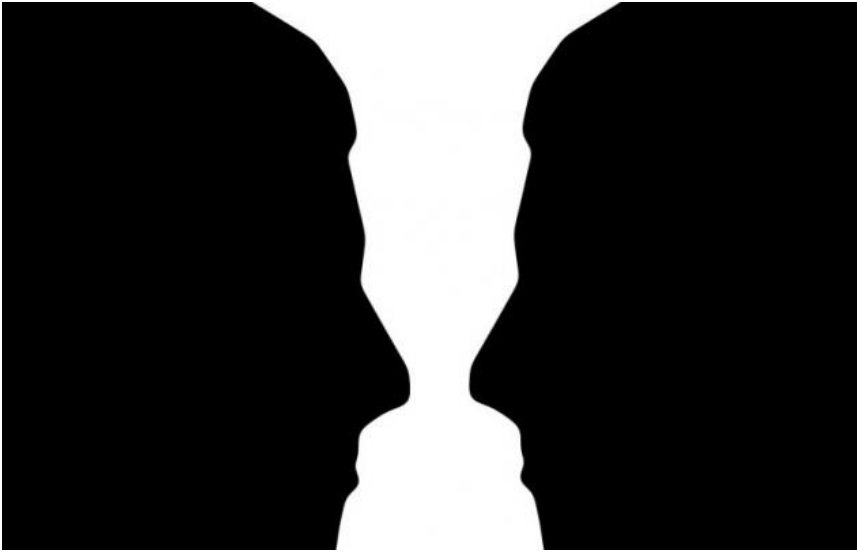
Process:

1. Discuss positive and negative space in art. Refer to the paragraph above and to examples on p. 23.
 - a. Positive Space – the object or objects you are drawing
 - b. Negative Space – the area around and in between whatever you are drawing
2. Provide each student with two papers, one smaller black square and one large white or coloured paper.
3. Have students use pencils to draw shapes, from the edge of their black paper toward the centre. These shapes can be purely abstract, or more representational, such as an animal or silhouette. See examples on p. 23.
4. Have students cut out their shapes. They can flip their cutout shapes to create a design. See examples of student work on p. 23.
5. Have students glue down the black paper onto the larger piece of background paper.
6. Display the finished work in the classroom.

Conclusion:

- Have students discuss how the completed works are similar, and different.
- Did students choose to work in a purely abstract style, or did they refer to recognizable forms? Why or why not?
- How might learning about positive and negative space influence the way they see things? Explain.
- Point out that when looking at art, it's easy to concentrate on the main objects of our work. We can easily forget about an equally important part of our work: the negative space. Encourage students to notice the negative space in images for the rest of the day.

Examples of Positive and Negative Space in Art



Do you see the profiles of two people facing each other? If yes, then the black spaces are the positive images and the white area is the negative background. Conversely, if you see a white vase in the centre of the picture, the black around it is the negative space.



Student work



Susan Point, *Pacific Spirit* (1998)



Student work (intermediate)

VOCABULARY

abstract: a style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

- the artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
- the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

contemporary art: created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Challenging traditional boundaries, many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its rejection of historical definitions of what constitutes art.

First Nations: Aboriginal cultures of Canada, consisting of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. There are currently 634 recognized First Nations governments or bands across Canada, roughly half of which are in Ontario and British Columbia.

formline: a primary design element in Northwest Coast aboriginal art. Artist Reg Davidson explains: "There are rules to go by... When I was working with Robert [Davidson], he explained that it was like learning to do the alphabet. He said, 'If you don't understand the alphabet, you can't make new words.' It's the same with Northwest Coast Art."

public art: art in any medium that has been planned and executed with the intention of being staged in the physical public domain, usually outside and accessible to all.

representational: representing or depicting an object or person in a recognizable manner.

screen printing: a printing technique in which a mesh screen is used to transfer ink onto a substrate, except in areas made impermeable to the ink by a blocking stencil.

traditional art: art that is a part of the culture of a group of people, whose skills and knowledge are passed down through generations from master craftspeople to apprentices.

woodblock printing: a technique for printing text, images or patterns used widely throughout East Asia. It originated in ancient China as a method of printing on textiles and later paper.

RESOURCES

Books:

Bennett, Bryan, and Constance P. Hall. *Discovering Canadian Art: Learning the Language*. Scarborough ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1984.

McLennan, Bill, and Karen Duffek. *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007.

Vancouver Art Gallery. *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2017.

Online:

www.artcyclopedia.com

www.nativeonline.com

<http://oneinchworld.com>

www.sfu.ca/brc/educator-resources/

www.susanpoint.com

<http://thehelpfulartteacher.blogspot.ca>

www.vanartgallery.bc.ca

www.wikipedia.com

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