

SYMBOLS

PRE-TEACH/PRE-ACTIVITY

Symbolism is important in all aspects of Indigenous life but is different for each Nation and peoples. Discuss with students how we use symbols every day to convey meaning. For Indigenous Peoples, some symbols may look the same but have different meaning. Colour choice, size, number, placement and orientation can also play a significant role in interpretation. For example, the infinity symbol has a mathematical application but has also been adopted by the Métis in modern times to represent the immortality and unity of the Métis Nation. Discuss with your students the power of a symbol and the underlying meaning it can have. Ask students to brainstorm what kinds of symbols they see in their community.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Students will engage local Elders, knowledge keepers and community leaders to learn about important symbols at the local level.
- Students will understand the meaning and “practical” application of symbols (e.g., inukshuk, stone circles).
- Students will understand the connection between land/place and symbols of a nation, and the difference between nations and communities.

Foundational knowledge and perspectives

FIRST NATIONS

The medicine wheel is a well-known symbol among First Nations. It has various symbolic connotations. Usually, it is shown as a circle divided into quadrants and represents the interconnectivity between the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional states with nature. Physical medicine wheels exist in places like the plains of Alberta, where there are large sites of stone circles.

— from *“Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula”* http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/policy/abpersp/ab_persp.pdf

Turtles are a symbol of the world (or among some First Nations, turtles symbolize the land of North America) and stem from the creation story about Turtle Island and how the world came to exist on the back of a turtle.

— from *“Turtle Island - where’s that?”*
<http://www.cbc.ca/kidsCBC2/the-feed/turtle-island-where-s-that>

“...I received my first drum. It was a double-sided shaman drum, made in a traditional way, by the giver’s grandfather. I was gifted with my second drum from an Elder in Vancouver, and later a third, which started my journey as a drum carrier. I didn’t feel worthy of this title at the time, however I recognized that this was not my decision but one made for me by my ancestors.

In some Indigenous belief systems, drums are considered sacred. For me, they are, and the most significant rhythm pattern is the heartbeat — a slow double beat with a stronger accent on one. People of all backgrounds really respond to this sound. Before we come into this world, the first sound we all hear is our mother’s heartbeat while we grow in her womb. All life shares this memory, connecting us. The drum is like the heartbeat of Mother Earth, and its vibrations are healing.”

— from *“Arts and Culture”* by Veronica Johnny, in the *First Nations* volume of the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*

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Foundational knowledge and perspectives

MÉTIS

“Red River carts were noisy but versatile carts that criss-crossed what are now the Prairie provinces, North Dakota, Montana and Minnesota during much of the 19th century. Among First Nations and Euro-North Americans, the carts became associated with the Métis. In fact, Plains First Nations even referred to the Métis as ‘half-wagon, half-man.’”

“For the Métis, the Red River cart was an all-purpose utility vehicle and a makeshift home. Métis families used Red River carts to move their possessions while migrating or resource harvesting. The carts also provided migrating Métis with temporary living quarters and shelter from the elements. Women fashioned decorated covers for the carts from bison hides or canvas, which were supported by an arched frame of cut saplings. In the winter, the Red River cart’s passenger box, when placed on runners, served as a temporary horse-drawn sleigh. Red River carts were also used as a defensive mechanism when the Métis were threatened. Inside a protective circle of carts, women, children and animals could hide safely, while men would attend to the defences.”

“Red River carts are an important Métis symbol, demonstrating the Métis’ freedom and skill as business people. Today, the Red River cart appears on Métis flags, including the Manitoba Métis Federation flag. It also appears on logos such as those for the Clarence Campeau Development Fund (established by the Métis Society of Saskatchewan), the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Métis Nation of British Columbia.”

— from “Red River Carts” in the Métis volume of the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*

“The Métis are heirs to a vibrant culture of decorative arts that emphasizes the brightly coloured floral motif in beadwork and embroidery. The Dakota and the Cree, in fact, referred to the Métis as the ‘Flower Beadwork People’ because of the preponderance of flower designs in their beadwork and embroidery. Early 19th-century European and Euro-North American observers and travellers also made constant reference to the decorative beadwork on Métis clothing. Over time, floral beadwork has become one of the most distinctive Métis symbols.

The Métis developed beautiful beadwork patterns that combined First Nations beadwork with the floral embroidered patterns introduced by French-Canadian nuns working in the Roman Catholic missions. By the 1830s,

increasingly naturalistic and colourful floral designs became evident on Métis products from the Red River region. Beadwork was found on almost every item of traditional Métis clothing and functional hide and cloth work. The glass beads they used were procured from the trading companies. Beaded clothes included moccasins, coats, vests, belts, bags and

mittens. Beadwork was also done on tablecloths, wall pockets and cloth frames for religious pictures.”

“Since the late 1700s, the Métis have worn sashes, and today the sash is considered to be an integral and highly symbolic aspect of Métis identity. No cultural or political Métis event is considered official until someone arrives proudly wearing a sash. In fact, Métis communities honour the social, cultural and political contributions of accomplished Métis by awarding them the ‘Order of the Sash.’

The variety of sash worn by the Métis, known in French as ceinture fléchée (sayncheur flayshii in Michif) or “arrow belt,” was originally crafted around 1870 by

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Foundational knowledge and perspectives

MÉTIS

French-Canadian artisans in the village of L'Assomption northeast of Montreal. Later, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) began to manufacture this fur trade staple as it gained popularity throughout North America. The sash was brought to what is now Western Canada by French-Canadian voyageurs and, to a lesser extent, Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg (Algonquin) voyageurs working with the North West Company. This first sash was based on First Nations finger-weaving techniques and European design and raw materials. As First Nations and Métis women gained access to wool from both Hudson's Bay Company and the NWC, they began to make sashes in distinctive colours and patterns.

For the Métis, the sash was more than a decorative piece of clothing. It could be used as a rope to pull canoes over portages or to harness heavy loads on the backs of the men and women who unloaded freight canoes and York boats. It could even be used as a dog harness. The Métis used the sashes' fringed edges as an emergency sewing kit, and the sash could carry personal

effects such as medicine, tobacco, a pipe or a first aid kit. It could also be used as a towel or washcloth, and during winter, it could keep a capote (hooded jacket) fastened to its wearer."

"Much like beadwork, embroidery was prevalent on clothing, as well as on personal and household items throughout the regions in which the Métis travelled and lived. A common motif is the floral pattern, which exists in a relatively narrow spectrum of colours. The flower designs are a carry-over from the time prior to the 1850s when women used quills in their embroidery. Flowers are usually embroidered in shades of pink through red, with the buds in shades of blues and purples. The flowers' centres are white or dark yellow, and the leaves are green. A three-dimensional effect is produced with a combination of layering."

—from *"Material Culture" in the Métis volume of the Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*



Foundational knowledge and perspectives

INUIT

The immediate environment and personal experience are the two most common sources of inspiration for traditional Inuit art; imagination also plays an important role.

The ulu, is an Inuit women's knife, and as a symbol is associated with women, as well as the harvest, because women used it for food preparation and for separating out animal skin from meat, to use later for clothing. Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier has said that when the owner of an ulu dies, the ulu retains her spirit.

—from “A powerful tool and symbol: Sheila Watt-Cloutier on the ulu knife of Inuit women” <https://www.cbc.ca/2017/whatsyourstory/a-powerful-tool-and-symbol-sheila-watt-cloutier-on-the-ulu-knife-of-inuit-women-1.4024247>

The inukshuk, a stone cairn, is a symbol of survival and would mark places where there was good fishing or hunting. A good example of an inukshuk is the one featured on the Nunavut flag. These structures were often designed as important messages that were meant to be fixed in time and space. Sometimes they were constructed to reflect personal notes or grief following the loss of a loved one. A star is also found on the Nunavut flag; this is the North Star, the traditional guide for navigation. The North Star has also been interpreted as a symbol of the leadership of the elders in the community.

The qulliq is a stone lamp, which represents the light and warmth of family and community. This lamp was usually made from soapstone and shaped into a bowl that could hold the oil from seal fat for burning.

—from “Inuksuk” <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/inuksuk-inukshuk/> and “Symbols of Nunavut”

http://www.nunavut-physicians.gov.nu.ca/pdf/Symbols%20of%20Nunavut_eng.pdf

One of the most popular carvings characteristic of Inuit art is the dancing bear. Skilled Inuit artists often produce carvings of bears balancing on one hind leg and raising its two front legs in joyous celebration. This depiction is inspired by the concept of transformation between a shaman and a spirit animal. Shamans traditionally served as intermediaries between the living, the deceased and the spirit worlds, thus maintaining a balance between all three. Sculptures of dancing whales, seals, walrus-es, caribou and hares also exist.

—from “The Dancing Bear” <https://www.inuitsculptures.com/blogs/inuitart/the-dancing-bear>

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” **Nunavut: the official**
• **Animal:** the Canadian Inuit dog

(Canis familiaris borealis)

- **Flower:** purple saxifrage (Saxifraga oppositifolia)
- **Bird:** rock ptarmigan (Lagopus Mutus)

—from the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut: <http://www.assembly.nu.ca/about-the-assembly>

Northwest Territories: the official

- **Flower:** mountain avens (Dryas octopetala)
- **Bird:** gyrfalcon (Falco rusticolus)
- **Tree:** tamarack larch (Larix laricina)

—from the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories: <https://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/visitors/symbols-nwt>

Yukon: the official

- **Flower:** fireweed (Chamaenerion angustifolium)
- **Bird:** common raven (Corvus corax)
- **Tree:** subalpine fir (Abies lasiocarpa)

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Foundational knowledge and perspectives

INUIT

—from the Government of Yukon: <http://www.gov.yk.ca/aboutyukon/emblemsandsymbols.html>

Alaska: the official

- **Animal:** moose (*Alces alces*)
- **Flower:** alpine forget-me-not (*Myosotis alpestris*)
- **Bird:** willow ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*)
- **Tree:** Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*)

—from the Official Alaska State Website: <http://alaska.gov/kids/student.htm>



Points of inquiry and activation related to the Giant Floor Map



- **Have students look at the symbols used on the Giant Floor Map.** Can they identify why each symbol was selected? What symbols are located around or on their community?
- **Contact a local Indigenous group and invite an Elder to come in and discuss symbols that are important to them.** Have students make symbol cards and place them on the map in appropriate places.
- **Looking at the Giant Floor Map, discuss why symbols differ among Indigenous groups, identify themes or similarities among different Indigenous groups, and discuss why they may exist.**
- **Have students create their own symbols that highlight all the places they have visited, want to visit, and/or have lived.** How are these symbols different from the ones on the Giant Floor Map? Ask students to place their symbols on the map and discuss patterns and trends that they see.
- **Look at the Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada logo and refer to the Introduction activity to understand the meanings of the symbols used in its design.** Discuss with your class why these symbols were chosen and how they were used.

Age appropriate application and experiential learning

ELEMENTARY

K-6

- **Have students create personal connections** by creating a coat of arms or a family flag for themselves. For example, you may get a student who draws a set of tartan wooden shoes because they have a Scottish and Dutch background. The shoes may be sitting on a skateboard because the student likes to skateboard. Explore why they chose the symbols that they did and how important the selection of symbols is to them.
- **Arrange for a community walk**, and identify symbols used in your community. Discuss common understandings of symbols.
- **Learn about and read different Indigenous creation stories.** Have students identify the symbols used in the story.
- **Have students create new emojis** for things in their lives and explain that emojis are another type of symbol. Ask students to create reconciliation emojis.

INTERMEDIATE

7-9

- **Use a Venn diagram** to show which issues apply to more than one Indigenous group (Métis, First Nation, Inuit) and which are unique. For example, when your students look at the symbols of the Giant Floor Map, are treaties something that affect all groups? What about different language groups? Are they all unique or is there some overlap? Have students research other Indigenous ways of living such as cultural practices, relationship to land, residential schools and issues like the '60s scoop to see which groups they affect. Discuss how the symbols on the map help you to understand these issues and how they can help to tell stories. Ask students if they would add more symbols or change those on the map to better understand Indigenous Peoples.
- **Learn about and read different Indigenous creation stories.** Have students identify the symbols used in the creation stories and explore their significance.
- **Have students read “Pourquoi” stories**, also known as origin stories, and explore how they came to be well known. Next, have students write their own “Pourquoi” stories, using strong symbolism, and share them with the class.

Age appropriate application and experiential learning

SECONDARY

10-12

- **Reach out to a local Indigenous group** and learn about the importance and meaning of their creation stories. Discuss with the class that this is much more than a story, and have students relate it to examples in their own lives.
- **Have students explore stereotypical symbols vs. authentic symbols.** Discuss the misuse of symbols and cultural appropriation.
- **Have students explore the hidden meaning of symbols** and how symbols have different meanings for different people.
- **Discuss the use of mascots that dehumanize Indigenous Peoples.** Which teams have (or had in the past) these types of mascots? What has been done in protest? How does this type of image stereotype a group of people? What would be some demeaning mascots of non-Indigenous peoples (e.g. the Fighting Irish)? Often, the excuse that it is a “noble honour” to have a mascot based off your culture is used, but this is not an honour.



DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING

- **Create a logo for the classroom** based on local teachings/lessons and explain the meaning behind it.
- **Design a logo for a community organization or event** to show appreciation for the importance of symbols.
- **Make a sash using specific colours** to demonstrate understanding of different cultural symbols and colours.



LEARNING TO ACTION

- **Share creation stories** and allegory with younger grades or at a local area such as a library.
- **Create a wall or mural of the Seven Sacred Teachings** (albertaschoolcouncils.ca/about/first-nations-in-alberta/seven-sacred-teachings) in a school, arena or community place.
- **Advocate for locally significant symbols** to be included on graduation programs or school pamphlets, etc.