

**WEEK 3
OJIBWE ART**



**Lasting impressions on rocks, and temporary Birch
Bark Baskets**

It seems that every culture has its own art forms. Often these art forms reflect the time period, political ideologies, and some are just for pure pleasure. Much of the world's art is considered devotional or spiritual art. Art is always created, and since many people feel that some art is so good it must have been conjured up by a higher spiritual presence. Whatever the cause, art is always a pleasure to stumble upon, especially when its found in the wilderness.

Perhaps the most fascinating art left by the Ojibwe are pictures painted onto rocks. These pictures are called pictographs. These are different than petroglyphs, which are images carved into the actual rocks. **Pictographs are abstract drawings that are usually red in color.** The most interesting thing about the pictographs of the boreal forest is that people don't know why they were made or why they were placed where they are.

The Ojibwe civilization underwent many cultural changes after they first encountered European traders. Rifles, clothing, language, and Christianity are only a few of the major influences to the Ojibwe. These influences dramatically altered the Ojibwe way of life that had been adhered to for hundreds, if not thousands of years prior to contact with European traders.

Pictographs



Perhaps the most interesting art the ancient Ojibwe have left are their pictographs. Pictographs are scattered throughout the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota and the Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario. These drawings are usually found on cliffs that rise sharply out of the water. Some of the pictographs are abstract shapes, but the majority of them are pictures of living creatures. There are pictographs of moose, ravens, and people. There are also pictographs of abstract beings, usually thought of as Ojibwe spirits or gods.

Surprisingly little is known about the pictographs, known to the Ojibwe as *muzzinabikon*, meaning “markings on the rocks.” Other than the pictographs themselves, nothing is left of the Ojibwe artists except what archeologists, Native American elders, and Ojibwe legends tell us. Perhaps that’s the most fascinating aspect of the pictographs themselves.

The various Ojibwe clans shared a common written language, mostly symbols (totems), with other clans. The symbols are thought to have indicated directions, time, family, and other day-to-day affairs. Since so much of the cultural beliefs were passed down through oral stories, the Ojibwe had little use for writing about their history. However, many of the same symbols used in the written language are similar to the symbols painted on the vast granite cliffs scattered throughout the boreal forest. This is why the pictographs have become associated with the Ojibwe and not civilizations that came before them.

Yet, it is clear that the pictographs served a purpose other than simply telling the reader where to go.

Most people believe that medicine men or shamans painted the pictographs. Yet, scholars cannot identify why they were painted or what they represent.

Many scholars believe that part of why we don’t know what the pictographs represent is probably because very few Ojibwe knew their meaning. To be a shaman in Ojibwe culture was a great honor. Many of the shamans were very strong, respected, and wealthy members of the community. They were called to make decisions, heal the sick, help the crops grow, and lead prayers, dances, and other rituals. They were the ones in the community who knew the most secrets of medicinal plants. However, the healing that the shaman or medicine men practiced was not without payment. Michael Furtman compares the shaman selling their information to a modern doctor. “Shaman provided services, both physical and spiritual, as their trade.” He continues to hypothesize that the shaman were the only ones to have the knowledge to interpret the pictographs.

Shaman sometimes used their dreams, or visions, to interpret natural signs or help to ensure the safety of the tribe. The dreams had their own ceremonies associated with them, and were very important to all the Ojibwe. The dream world was closely related to the spirit world. If the dreams detailed a place or animal, perhaps a pictograph would have been used to symbolize or remember the dream. Some scholars believe that the pictographs were painted while in a trance, and perhaps the artist wouldn’t even know the significance.



Perhaps the pictographs' meaning was in the sky. Ojibwe legends are very easily connected to the sky and stars. The sky would indicate the change of seasons and migration patterns of animals, and virtually all Ojibwe could read and interpret the sky. All constellations had stories associated with them, and many of the stories had animals or mythical creatures as characters. **Could these characters be the same ones illustrated on the granite cliffs?**

Pictographs could have also been used for ceremonies. The pictographs may have served as a plea with the spirits to give the painter health, strength, successful hunting. Perhaps by painting a moose, real moose would return to be hunted. It is also thought that pictographs could have been used to initiate boys and girls into adulthood.

Added to the unknown artist and meaning of the pictographs is the fact that **no one knows when they were painted.** Modern day techniques for dating historical or geological artifacts don't work on the pictographs. This is because the paint used on them is so unique. The paint was made from red ochre, called *onamin* or *wunnamin* by the Ojibwe. Red ochre is a rock that was ground up into a fine powder. This was a very special rock, held sacred to the Ojibwe. The red powder was then mixed with the cartilage from a sturgeon, and bear fat.

So, why haven't the pictographs disappeared?

The paint and location are what have kept them around for so long. **The paint, over time, actually becomes part of the rock through a chemical reaction.** Pictographs are also usually painted on granite cliffs that face south, so they receive sunlight that would keep them dry. The artists also sometimes used the natural shape of the rock to their advantage. A deep gouge in the rock could become an arm or tail. If the paint was sheltered from the outside elements, it was safer.

The pictographs are thought to be at least 100 years old, and some scientists think that they are more than 300 years old or older. Of course they weren't all painted at the same time, so it's even harder to guess how old they really are.

Why are the pictographs painted on cliffs?

The Ojibwe believe that there are special spirits, called maymaygwayshi, who lived in the cliffs. These spirits had the ability to live above and below the water. Cliffs themselves were also very special to the Ojibwe. The cliffs touched all of the worlds: the sky, the land, and the water.

And who knows, maybe there were more pictographs painted elsewhere that have either disappeared or not yet been found.

Other Ojibwe Arts

The Ojibwe were skilled artists. Their art was usually made for decoration. Most of the clothes worn by Ojibwe people were ornamented with beads. Baskets, pots, and mats were also ornamented. Before the Europeans came and began trading glass beads from Germany and Asia for furs, the Ojibwe were left to decorate their clothes with objects they found in the forest. As with so many other facets of Ojibwe life, birchbark provided a great writing surface and could be the canvas for drawings.

Drawings were usually made with a stick or hand by smearing ashes onto bark or rocks. That is not to say that these drawings were crude in any way. Many of the patterns and drawings were improved upon as time went by. The artists became more skilled and simple geometric designs from generations past gave way to intricate floral designs.



Once beads were introduced to the Ojibwe, clothes and moccasins were intricately adorned with every color of the rainbow. The patterns used on clothing were passed from generation to generation. Women were the bead weavers of the Ojibwe. They would create intricate bands with beautiful patterns on them. Most bands were worn on the head, arm, or leg. Beads were also used to make jewelry. Bead pendants, like tightly woven balls of beads, were used as earrings or were put on necklaces.

Most of the bead-work was done on a loom, unless the beads were being embroidered on a piece of cloth or leather. The looms were made of wood, mostly ash or birchbark. As beads became more plentiful, the size of the bands woven grew. It is said that in the old days the fronts of women's dresses only contained two rows of beads. Only 50 or so years ago, there were intricate designs put on clothing of up to 100 rows!

Baskets were used for everyday chores, such as gathering berries or water. Birchbark was the most common material used to make baskets. The baskets, or makuks, were made from a single piece of birchbark, usually white side out so they would be water proof from the inside, and tied together using spruce root.

Some baskets were woven, although the makuks served most purposes. The woven baskets were made from reeds or in more recent times, cloth. Belts, hats, bags, and rugs were all woven from cloth during the later days. Previously, mats were woven with cedar bark.



IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Objective: Students will gain a greater understanding of Ojibwe arts through poetry. Students will create their own art by using new knowledge of Native American art forms.

Skills Used: Interpretation of poetry, speculation, artistic evaluation and criticism, vocabulary building, group collaboration, creativity, historical and social research skills.

Procedure: Students will divide up into partnered groups. No groups of more than three people are allowed. The students will read the poem by Earth Walks grandfather to themselves to become familiar with it. The students will then dramatically recite the poem to each other.

The group will then collectively pick a Native American civilization, which they wish to write about following the previous poem's structure.

Then students must visually re-create their poem in the style of an Ojibwe pictograph. The pictograph may be abstract or conventional. The pictograph must hold meaning and representation to the poets only! A logical explanation must only be given to the evaluator, if any.

*Dream catchers,
Star Gazers,
Earth watchers,
Myth makers
As well as painters of the rocks.
They came
By boat,
Along the trade routes,
By snowshoe
Along the shores,
With Earth dreams
To paint on mornings cliff face,
And star scenes
To draw on evening's shore,
They were the painters of the rocks.*

Create your own poem!

Native American Civilization chosen: _____

Where did they live? _____

What are two aspects of this culture that makes them unique?

1. _____

2. _____

What forms of art did this culture create? Where was it made?

Use the space below to draw your pictograph depicting your chosen civilization. Your pictograph can be abstract (like a dream or spirit) or conventional (like an animal hunted by your chosen civilization).

Write your poem line by line, like the poem by Earth Walk's grandfather

Remember don't reveal the civilization you're writing about!

1. What did they do?
2. What did they do?
3. What did they do?
4. As well as something else they did
5. They came
6. By form of transportation
7. Along where were they traveling?
8. By form of transportation
9. Along places
10. With earth dreams
11. To where or how did they create their art?
12. And what did was the art about?
13. To where or how else did they create their art?
14. They were _____

Week 3 Chat Room Session

When/Where: September 30, 2002, 9:00 AM – 10:00 AM Ely, MN

Topic: Pictographs

Suggested Questions for Dave and Eric:

What are pictographs?

Who made them?

When were the pictographs painted?

What is the paint made out of, and how has it stayed on the rocks for so long?

What do pictographs mean? Can you read them?

Where do you find pictographs?

How does it feel to look at pictographs? What do they make you think of?

How did the painters paint the cliffs? What time of year do you think it would be easiest to paint the cliffs?

Can you touch the pictographs? What would happen if you did?

Why are there so many pictographs of animals?

What's the most amazing pictograph you've ever seen?