

Indigenous arts and culture

Indigenous Australians have a rich history of arts and culture. These complex and diverse Indigenous cultures of Australia represent the oldest living cultural history in the world. In Australia, Indigenous communities keep their cultural heritage alive by passing their knowledge, arts, rituals and performances from one generation to another. They tell their stories, speak and teach Indigenous languages, protect cultural materials, and look after sacred and significant sites and objects. This unit of work explores Indigenous cultural heritage, art, ceremonies and the Dreaming. It also looks at four significant Indigenous events and celebrations: Sorry Day, Reconciliation Week, Mabo Day and NAIDOC Week.

Curriculum focus

- HSIE/SOSE: Patterns of Place and Location, Significant Events and People, Change and Continuity
- Mathematics: Mapping
- English: Reading, Writing, Research, Talking, Listening, Presenting
- Creative and Practical Arts: Design, Drawing
- Science and Technology: Using Technology, Design and Make

Learning outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- explain the significance of particular people, actions and events in the past
- describe events that demonstrate their own heritage or the heritage of others
- understand the significance of particular people, places and events in developing Australia's heritage
- explore, identify and learn to respect and value the shared and unique characteristics of individuals
- develop an understanding of the diverse values, beliefs and practices of groups of people
- make artworks about cultural experiences, using a particular style of art
- design and make products to meet specific needs
- debate social issues relevant to the past and the present.



Lily Karedada, Ponnai Wandjina, 2000

Website resources

www.culture.gov.au/articles/indigenous/

(Australian Indigenous cultural heritage)

www.culture.gov.au/articles/indigenous/art/

(Australian Indigenous art)

www.culture.gov.au/articles/indigenous/ceremony/

(Australian Indigenous ceremony — song, music and dance)

www.culture.gov.au/articles/indigenous/dreamtime/

(The Dreaming)

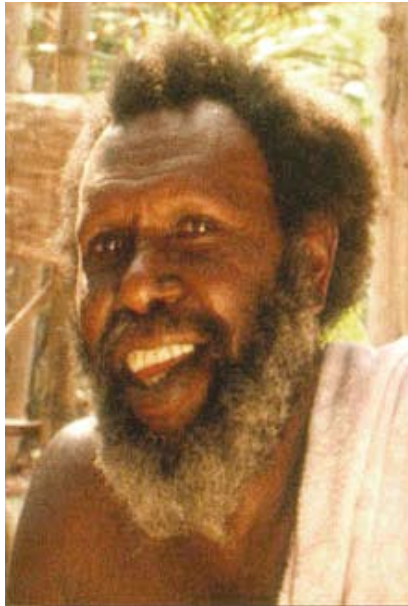
Indigenous culture

The Indigenous cultures of Australia go back at least 50,000 years, and possibly as far as 65,000 years. One of the reasons Aboriginal cultures have survived so long is their ability to adapt and change over time. Cultural heritage means 'the total ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is passed from one generation to the next'.

At the core of Indigenous cultural heritage is the land. Land is vital to the wellbeing of the Aboriginal people. It is a complete environment that sustains and is sustained by the Indigenous people and culture. It is the core of all spirituality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples identify themselves through their land areas, their relationship to others, and their language and stories. Their heritage is passed on from one generation to the next.



Nungalka Stanley & Ungakini Tjangala of Ernabella Arts

Trevor Graham Mabo, *Life of an Island Man*, 1997, Documentary

Garma Festival (138). 2005

Discussion questions

Use these questions as a guide for discussion.

1. What does the word 'Indigenous' mean? Who are the Indigenous Australians?
2. How do Indigenous people pass their cultural heritage on from generation to generation?
3. All of Australia's Aboriginal peoples were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers. Each clan had its own territory from which they 'made their living'. What does this mean? How did Aboriginal clans live and survive in the past?

Activities

Telling a story

Invite the students to select a way of passing on their history to the next generation. Encourage them to use oral storytelling, art, song or dance to tell a story about their past to someone from the present generation.

Talking about the land

As a class or in small groups, discuss the following statement by Tom Dystra, an Indigenous Australian:

We cultivated our land, but in a way different from the white man. We endeavoured to live with the land; they seemed to live off it. I was taught to preserve, never to destroy.

Indigenous art

Art has always been an important part of Aboriginal life. It connects past and present, the people and the land, and the supernatural and reality. Australian Indigenous art is the oldest ongoing tradition of art in the world. The first forms of Aboriginal art were rock carvings, body painting and ground designs.

Indigenous art reflects the differences between tribes, languages and landscapes. Art is one of the key rituals of Aboriginal culture and is used to mark territory, record history and tell stories about the Dreaming.

While Aboriginal painting traditions are many thousands of years old, it was not until the 1970s that Indigenous artists began to receive widespread recognition among non-Indigenous Australians, and in the wider world. One of the first — and perhaps most famous — group of Indigenous painters was the Australian Western Desert artists of Papunya Tula.

Discussion questions

1. What is Papunya Tula? Who are its members, and what do they do?
2. What are some themes and subjects in Aboriginal art?
3. Name some of the artistic media (e.g. bark paintings) that are commonly used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to express themselves. Has this changed over time?

Activities

Papunya painting

Encourage the students to research and look at the artwork of the Papunya Tula artists and explore the subject matter of the paintings. Invite the students to use some of the artworks of the Papunya Tula as inspiration for their own paintings.

Painting the earth

Ask the students to choose a theme or subject relating to the earth, and to represent this subject by creating their own painting.

Where is Papunya?

Provide the students with a map of Australia and an atlas, or the internet. Invite each student to locate and mark Papunya on the map of Australia.

Sorry Day 2008. Julie Dyson

Indigenous ceremony

Ceremonial performances are the core of Indigenous cultural life. These ceremonies bring together song, dance, body decoration, sculpture and painting, and are sometimes held at sacred places. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people celebrate events that have spiritual importance to them, such as birth, initiation and death. Hunting expeditions and other news are also represented in ceremonies, and stories of the Dreaming may also be incorporated.

Songs and dances are often exchanged at large ceremonial gatherings. Singing plays a large part in ceremonies — songs help create a 'songline', which is a map of the country based on the travel of the Dreaming ancestors. Dances tell stories, and many Indigenous children learn dance from an early age. Dancers' bodies are often painted with designs, using ochre and pipeclay, that help tell the stories. The didgeridoo is a well-known symbol of ceremony, although not all Indigenous groups played this instrument. Aboriginal law regulates who has the right to make and use the didgeridoo.

Today, all these elements of ceremony are reflected in Indigenous festivals, as well as Aboriginal dance and theatre companies across Australia.



Discussion questions

1. What are the names of some Indigenous ceremonies?
2. What are some musical instruments used in Aboriginal ceremonies? Talk about what they are made from, how they are played and who plays them.
3. What are the names of some Indigenous dance and theatre companies in Australia?

Activity

Indigenous festivals

Encourage students to research one of the following festivals (or others that they might find): Ngan Girra (NSW/VIC), Tarerer (VIC), Wardinji (WA), Kalkarindji Freedom Day (NT), Barunga (NT), Walking with Spirits (NT), Garma (NT), The Dreaming (QLD) or Laura (QLD).

Indigenous events and celebrations

There are many important Indigenous events held in Australia throughout the year. These include celebrations of Indigenous culture, and special days to remember important events in Indigenous history.

- National Sorry Day was first held on 26 May 1998. This was one year after the government report *Bringing Them Home* was tabled in Australian parliament (meaning that it was presented to parliament for discussion). This report was the result of an inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children — known as the 'stolen generations' — from their families.
- National Reconciliation Week (27 May – 3 June) aims to give people across Australia the opportunity to focus on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The date of 27 May marks the anniversary of the 1967 referendum, in which more than 90 per cent of Australians voted to remove clauses from the Australian Constitution that discriminated against Indigenous Australians.

- Mabo Day (3 June) commemorates the anniversary of the 1992 High Court decision, in the case brought by Eddie Mabo and others, which recognised the existence of native title rights in Australia. Mabo Day, the last day of Reconciliation Week, is often marked by events celebrating the culture of the Torres Strait Islands.
- NAIDOC Week (5–12 July) is a celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and achievements. NAIDOC stands for the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee. The committee originated with the emergence of Aboriginal groups in the 1920s, which sought to increase awareness in the wider community of the status and treatment of Indigenous Australians. The theme for NAIDOC Week in 2009 is 'Honouring Our Elders, Nurturing Our Youth'. Brisbane is the national focus city for 2009.



Additional text, questions and activities for this unit can be downloaded from the *Teachers' Toolkit* website. (Search in Download Lesson Plans.)



The Culture and Recreation Portal, www.culture.gov.au, provides online access to Australian culture websites. The Portal provides access to: ■ stories about Australian culture ■ evaluated Australian culture websites ■ news and events ■ online resources. The Portal is an initiative of the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. The Publishers acknowledge the assistance provided by the Portal, including the images displayed in this unit.