Knowledge area: Tools, Weapons and Utensils

TEACHING NOTES

Grinding Ochre (Video)

Text type: spoken, online, multimodal

VISUAL STIMULUS FOCUS

In the video Grinding Ochre, Aunty Lynn Chapman demonstrates the activity of grinding ochre, just as traditional Aboriginal people have done and used for special ceremonies and paintings for thousands of years.

PRIOR TO VIEWING

Introduce the Grinding Ochre video to students.

Start the video on the website.

To engage your students, explain that long, long ago, Aboriginal artists only had access to a few colours. The main colours were red, yellow, brown, white, black and grey. Ochre, which is a mixture of iron, lime and clay found in swampy areas, provided the red, yellow and brown. Lime, special clay and sometimes crushed gypsum rock were used to create the colour white. Charcoal was used to make the colour black. Ash and animal fat produced a bluish/grey colouring.

Have these materials ready so the students can follow along with the video:

- large coloured chalk
- small bowls
- water
- paper, with or without templates.

Background

- Aboriginal people painted and carved on rock and wood. They told stories through pictures they drew in the sand, and they painted their bodies in images and shapes that were thousands of years old.

- Ochre was the most important painting material used traditionally by Aboriginal people. It is mined from particular sites and is a crumbly to hard rock heavily coloured by iron oxide. The source material was traded extensively across Australia in the past, with some material traveling many hundreds or even thousands of kilometres from where it was mined to where it was used. It comes in a variety of colours from pale yellow to dark reddish-brown ... Paints are made by grinding the source rock to a powder and then mixing it with a fluid to bind it together.¹

- Aboriginal people also used small grinding stones to crush soft rocks and clays (such as ochre) to make pigments. The pigments were used to decorate bodies for ceremonies, to paint rock art, and to decorate objects such as possum skin cloaks and weapons.²
SHARED VIEWING

Aboriginal people used ochre to paint themselves for special occasions. Areas where you could get ochre were special and important places. Ochre was ground to a powder then mixed with water or emu egg, then applied to areas of the body. The colours were red, white, yellow and brown. This video is presented by Aunty Lynn Chapman, an Aboriginal woman from Wakka Wakka country of Eidsvold, Queensland. Together with some helpers, Aunty Lynn uses this wonderful craft activity to demonstrate how to grind ochre.

9 sec

Aunty Lynn introduces the activity and explains what ochre is — a material found in the ground that comes in many different colours.

12 sec

She shows some different colours of ochre — red, yellow and white.

23 sec

Aunty Lynn explains that ochre is used for special ceremonies and for paintings, and that she will be using chalk for the activity.
Aboriginal ceremonial performances

Ceremonial performances are the centre of cultural life for Indigenous people. 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.

People often exchange songs and dances at large ceremonial gatherings. Singing plays a large part in ceremonies, and songs help create a ‘songline’. A songline is a map of the country that is based on the travels of 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, which help tell the stories.

Today, all these elements of ceremony are reflected in Indigenous festivals, as well as Aboriginal dance and theatre.
**Totems**

A totem is a natural object, plant or animal that is inherited by members of a clan or family as their spiritual emblem. Totems define peoples’ roles and responsibilities, and their relationships with each other and creation.5

A person can have an individual totem and a tribal group totem. Every baby born in ancient times was assigned a totem by an Elder in the language group — it was that baby’s connection to the landscape they were born into.

Each ancient Aboriginal person also inherited the family design of their totem, which had been handed down only through family knowledge for thousands of years. This special design was used to honour each person’s totem in ceremonies and rituals.

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**ACTIVITY 1**

**Grinding Ochre (use Worksheet 1 and the Learning Aboriginal Art Symbols 1 document)**

**STEP 1**

Supply students with the following:
- large pieces of chalk in red, white, brown, orange and yellow colours
- small bowls or plates
- water for mixing
- paintbrushes

**STEP 2**

Have the students grind the ‘ochre’ (pieces of large chalk) together. Collect the powder in a bowl or plate positioned underneath the chalk.

**STEP 3**

Use paintbrushes to mix the powder with water to create ‘paint’.

**STEP 4**

Have the students paint designs onto Worksheet 1, a piece of paper or themselves. Provide each student with a copy of the Learning Aboriginal Art Symbols 1 document (see the Additional Resources section) to show them some examples of Aboriginal symbols and patterns. Alternatively, have the students create their own symbols or use their handprints. The designs can then be used to create a classroom mural.
Grinding Ochre Body Painting (use the Learning Aboriginal Art Symbols 1 document)

**STEP 1**
Using some large butcher’s paper, have the students pair off to draw an outline of each other’s bodies.

**STEP 2**
Once each outline is completed, have them cut out the paper bodies.

**STEP 3**
Have the students grind the ‘ochre’ (pieces of large chalk) and mix the powder with water to create their ‘paint’ (see Activity 1).

**STEP 4**
Provide each student with a copy of the Learning Aboriginal Art Symbols 1 document (see the Additional Resources section) to show them some examples of Aboriginal symbols and patterns. Alternatively, have the students create their own symbols.

**STEP 5**
Have students decorate their paper bodies with Aboriginal symbols and patterns.

EXTENSION IDEAS

Animal Totems and Tracks (use Worksheet 3)

**STEP 1**
Explain to the students that ancient Aboriginal people would often decorate themselves with their individual or family totem. Have the students come up with a totem to represent themselves. Find pictures or examples in books to pass around to help students with their ideas.

**STEP 2**
Provide each student with a copy of Worksheet 3. Explain that the worksheet shows the Aboriginal symbols for emu and snake tracks. Show students the Aboriginal Art Symbols F–2 game (see the link in the Additional Resources section) to give them more ideas for Aboriginal art symbols of animal tracks.

**STEP 3**
Have the students decorate their paper bodies with the totems and animal track symbols. You may wish to provide the students with feathers and fur to add to their paper bodies.
AFTER VIEWING DISCUSSION

- Ask the students why they think ancient Australians painted on rock walls or in caves. (Answer: Aboriginal people created art using whatever things were available in the Australian bush around them. They chewed or hammered the ends of sticks to make paintbrushes. They also made colours from rocks, ash from fires or even used white clay to colour their bodies for ceremony. There was no paper or cardboard to decorate or paint on, so they used rock walls, trees or wooden items as their canvases.)

- Access the Twelve Canoes website (see the link in the Additional Resources section). Click on the image that says ‘Ceremony’ to watch an explanation from the traditional owners of Ramingining in Central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Note: The traditions in this video are for this specific language group; however, the reasons for the ceremonies of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people are very similar all over Australia.

SUPPORTING WORKSHEETS

Worksheet 1: Platypus Painting
A painting activity where students paint and decorate the platypus artwork from the Grinding Ochre video. (The platypus artwork can be used for the Shared Viewing Activity ‘Grinding Ochre’.)

Worksheet 2: Painting with Ochre
A drawing and colouring activity where students draw and colour in the body, the boomerang and the tree using Aboriginal symbols or their own designs.

Worksheet 3: Animal Tracks
A drawing activity where students draw one emu and one snake track in the sand around the scrub. (The animal tracks can be used for the Shared Viewing Activity ‘Animal Totems and Tracks’.)
Knowledge Areas and the National Curriculum

Visual Arts

Aboriginal people created art using whatever things were available in the Australian bush around them. They chewed or hammered the ends of sticks to make paintbrushes. They also made colours from rocks, ash from fires or even used white clay to colour their bodies for ceremony. (ACAVAM106)

Aboriginal people painted and carved on rock and wood. They told stories through pictures they drew in the sand, and they painted their bodies in images and shapes that were thousands of years old. There was no paper or cardboard to decorate or paint on, so they used rock walls, trees or wooden items as their canvases. (ACAVAR109)
REFERENCES

4. Ibid.