

# THE TRANSFORMING IMAGE

Education Program for Grades 8 – 10

## Teacher's Notes



Infrared photography and painting, MOA



Bentwood Boxes with infrared photography, MOA

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Book your Education Program at 604 822 3825 or [bookings@moa.ubc.ca](mailto:bookings@moa.ubc.ca)  
Museum of Anthropology, 6393 N.W. Marine Drive, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z2

# Planning Your Visit

## Booking Information

Please access our online bookings guide, **Booking Education Programs: What You Need to Know**, available on the MOA website at [www.moa.ubc.ca/programs/resources.php](http://www.moa.ubc.ca/programs/resources.php).

## Class Guidelines and Requirements

All Educational Programs are led by trained Volunteer Associates (VAs). Accompanying adults and teachers are responsible to supervise their group **at all times**. Upon arrival, please check in with the Admissions desk and make arrangements for payment. The Volunteer Associates responsible for your group will meet you in the Museum lobby.

Teachers are asked to review and communicate the guidelines for supervising adults available in our online bookings guide, **Booking Education Programs: What You Need to Know**, at [www.moa.ubc.ca/programs/resources.php](http://www.moa.ubc.ca/programs/resources.php).

## Program Description and Objectives

**The Transforming Image** is a one and a half hour program designed to develop an awareness of the skills and technologies required to research, and create Northwest Coast (NWC) art. This program aims to encourage a respect for NWC cultures, and an understanding of how NWC paintings were, and continue to be, created today. During this program, students are introduced to the Image Recovery Project. The Image Recovery Project explores the ways in which infrared photography is used to reveal painted images on a range of objects.

Note: **The Transforming Image** is a Volunteer Associate guided program and does not include a full tour of the Museum. We welcome you to extend your visit before or after your scheduled program as there are many more exhibits to explore with your class.

## Curriculum Relevance

**The Transforming Image** is designed to complement the BC Grade 9 Social Studies and Visual Arts Curriculum. Skills that students practice during the program include: analysis of artistic expression, and historical and contemporary relevance. The content of the program relates to the following subject areas: First Nations History, BC History, Language Arts, Visual Arts, and Comparative Civilizations.

## Program Outline

### Meet and Greet in the Lobby

The class is greeted in the Museum lobby by an Education Volunteer Associate (VA) for a brief introduction to the program and associated activities. Students are then led to the classroom for an introductory presentation before continuing into the Museum galleries.

### Slide Presentation

In the classroom, students receive a visual introduction to the Image Recovery Project. They are shown how Museum researchers and contemporary First Nations artists utilize different technologies to uncover the work of past masters, and to recreate these historic works. The class is then divided into two groups for the gallery tour and art activity.

### Gallery Tour

In the Museum galleries, the class tours several the NWC sections of the Multiversity Galleries, viewing objects that were part of the *Image Recovery Project*, including Kwakwaka'wakw bentwood boxes, Tsimshian housefront boards and intricately woven Haida hats. Students see firsthand historic and contemporary Northwest Coast objects, some which were created as a result of the *Image Recovery Project* research.

### Art Activity

The program includes a hands-on art activity which aims to develop an understanding and awareness of First Nations art. Students are provided a brief introduction to the complex symbolism expressed through Northwest Coast formlines. Using a pencil and tracing paper, students are given an opportunity to learn about Northwest coast formlines using an infrared image as a reference.

### Wrap up

Students review key themes introduced throughout the program. Classes are encouraged to revisit the galleries, if time permits.

## Pre or Post Visit Activities

The following readings, mapping and art activities are designed to give students more in-depth knowledge about the *Image Recovery Project*, and Northwest Coast art and design. The readings are excerpted from the book *Transforming Image: Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations* by Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek.

### Reading #1: What is the Image Recovery Project?

Abridged Excerpt from "Transforming Image: Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations."

At first glance, the pile of old, weathered boards stored at the Museum of Anthropology resembles nothing more than aged planks. There are no known written records that tell how the boards were acquired, nor do we know the identities of the carvers and painters who created them. We know that the boards were collected in the early 1900s by a Methodist missionary, Dr. George H. Raley, probably in the Lax Kw'alaams (Fort Simpson) area. They were purchased for the University of British Columbia by H.R. MacMillan in 1948. Their acquisition data describe them as part of a pile of waterlogged boards collected from an old Fort Simpson house.

What images and histories can still be gleaned from these planks of cedar, 150 years or more after their creation? Two periods appear to be represented: while some planks are handsawn and block planed, others are hand split and surface knifed, indicating greater age. Several of the planks are only portions of boards that were once up to a meter wide. Traces of painted forms remain, but these are largely eroded by the weather or are barely discernible on the boards' surface.

A startling transformation takes place when the planks are photographed with infrared and high-contrast orthochromatic films. Where the naked eye sees only darkened, weathered cedar, the camera reveals portions of complex and detailed compositions that once stood as massive house-front screens. Indeed, these are some of the last remaining sections of perhaps three or four different screens. They were probably assembled and painted in the early to mid-nineteenth century by commissioned artist; some may have been family heirlooms already passed down through several generations. Displayed on the large lineage houses of Lax Kw'alaams during its heyday from the 1830s to the 1860s, such screens would proclaim the inherited family crests and histories of high-ranking Tsimshian chiefs.

Painted on house-front and interior screens are one part of the Image Recovery Project. More numerous are the paintings on storage chests and boxes, basketry hats, and other artifacts that are also emerging from beneath the patina of age. Adding to the newly recovered information are the computer-assisted studies of historical photographs and spectral analysis of traditional pigments. The result is a growing inventory of photographed paintings that would otherwise have remained invisible to contemporary eyes. Now their recovery and reconstruction are leading to new questions about the nature of Northwest Coast painting and a renewed understanding of its creative possibilities.

## Reading #2: The Painted Line by Lyle Wilson

Abridged Excerpt from "Transforming Image: Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations."

The general public is familiar with Northwest Coast images through the proliferation of silkscreen prints. Most people equate the qualities of a print with the qualities of two-dimensional Northwest Coast imagery. In *The Transforming Image*, we deal with two-dimensional imagery as an act of painting rather than of printing.

Printing and painting are two distinct processes that produce images with different characteristics. In my view, silk-screening, or serigraphy, is much closer to the carved tradition because of the way a print is made: by cutting material away to produce an image. The standard procedure for the creation of a print remains a collaborative effort between two personalities: the artist and the professional printmaker. Generally the artist creates a painted image and brings it to a serigrapher, who carefully cuts out (read carves) an amberlith positive. Then, using photographic techniques a negative is made on the serigraph stencil. When ink is forced through this stencil, the positive, printed image is produced.

The act of forcing ink through the stencil with one smooth stroke produces an even distribution of ink on the paper's surface. This even quality, combined with the two translations of the original painting, has a filtering effect. The painterly nature of the brush stroke and line has been primped and preened to a look of graphic perfection.

Since working on the Image Recovery Project and looking at older Northwest Coast paintings, my original contention has been reinforced: printmaking and painting are distinct processes. The introduction of printmaking techniques profoundly changed the outlook of many Northwest Coast artists. In essence, they came to value the look of graphic perfection, which edits the subtleties of the human touch. Painting has this personal touch – the direct liveliness of the painter's hand is easily recognized and, once seen, is missing when viewing a print.

Anybody who has ever signed a document knows that individuals can recognize their own handwriting. It is a system of lines that has a personal and recognizable quality. When someone else signs your name you can generally see the difference. The idea of a personal line – how it becomes personal – exists in different cultures. Chinese calligraphy, for example, has some graphic qualities but also incorporates the action of the paintbrush to give it a personal touch. The human quality or personality is very much alive in the lines of calligraphy and in the painted images of the Northwest Coast. In example after example we see that the Northwest Coast artist made no attempt to be precise. He played a balancing act, neither perfect nor sloppy. The acceptance of the qualities of the paintbrush to translate creative ideas into visual form is obvious in the results. Logic dictates that processes usually evolve from simple to more complex forms. Northwest Coast painting is like that. The oldest paintings, for instance, are simpler and have a heavier look because of their massive lines. At some point in this history, an artist stumbled onto a visual phenomenon: varied line textures create visual color tones.

I say “stumble” because I believe an artist was improvising or invention a solution to a specific problem.

The techniques of dashing, hatching, and cross-hatching constitute a system of fine lines placed in a close and particular order. They are usually located in secondary areas of a composition, such as U-shapes, inner ovoids, and negative spaces. My guess is that an artist had already started painting, ran low on paint, and decided the solution to ‘completing’ the painting was to paint the equidistant lines within the given spaces – the space was still, in a sense, ‘filled’ with paint. I assume that parallel dashing may have come first because it is technically easier, followed by the more rigorous hatching, and then by the extremely time-consuming process of cross-hatching.

I suspect it wasn’t immediate, but that an artist stood back to take a look at what was initially a solution to a problem and discovered a new visual effect. Finely painted lines placed equidistantly are still one colour. Stepping back a few paces, however, the artist discovered that the lines ‘blended’ visually with the background and changed the tone of the original colour. Black dashing created a light grey, hatching a middle grey, and cross-hatching a darker grey. Red could also be manipulated in this manner. Moving closer to the painting, the ‘blended’ tone gave way to the fine-line visual texture. Artists could therefore exploit the visual magic of the finely painted line in numerous ways.

I place Northwest Coast paintings somewhere between calligraphic and graphic traditions. They have a painted tension but never quite explode into a released calligraphic line, nor lapse into the static images of graphic perfection. Although such tensions are present in bold, massive lines, they are more easily demonstrated by finely painted lines.

The paintbrush is an ancient tool, remarkable for its sensitivity. The liquidity of paint on supple bristle means that every movement is recorded – whether the painter wishes it to be or not. The intense focus and concentration of the painter is a must. The fineness of line, tight curves, and arcs usually have an artist holding his breath lest the paintbrush reveal the movements of his lungs and impair the path of the painted line. It is, however, human to breathe – the resultant squiggles, wiggles, and bumps the brush imparts to the composition are ultimately an asset. It is this compromise between the idea, the artist, and the medium that is incorporated into the painted line. The brushwork is a device to give the image life and, by extension, a very human quality.

## Questions for written homework and/or discussion

1. Lyle Wilson describes the artistic process involved in producing a Northwest Coast painting. What are some key ideas that he raises?
2. What is the relationship between the painter and the painted line?
3. Do an internet search on Lyle Wilson and write a short artist biography about him.

### Reading #3: Pigments into Paint

Abridged Excerpt from "Transforming Image: Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations."

The Northwest Coast painter's palette was, and still is, formed of three main colours: black, red, and blue green. White and yellow were mentioned in the diaries of early European explorers, although these colours were only rarely used by northern painters. Whereas a more diverse use of colour characterizes the art of southern groups, often only black and red are present in a northern-style composition. Black is usually the primary, or dominant colour. Red is generally used as a secondary colour and is occasionally complemented by blue green. Using this limited palette, nineteenth-century painters employed a wide array of pigment types to produce variations in the tone, hue, and intensity of colour.

Most paintings were prepared by mixing ground pigments with binder, or medium, to give the paint fluency and allow it to form a cohesive film that adhered to the wood or other surface. Protein from fish eggs was commonly used for this purpose even in the mid-nineteenth century, when trade pigments were predominant. The painter would chew salmon eggs – usually dried and wrapped in a cedar bark pouch to catch the egg membranes – and then spit the liquid into the dish. The resulting mixture of saliva and proteinaceous oil would then be mixed with the pigment to make paint. Toward the late nineteenth century, drying oils derived from fish oils or commercial linseed oil became more common binders. Such oils form a solid, elastic film when exposed to air. Commercially prepared paints used at this time were generally based on a drying oil medium.

Trade pigments were adopted as soon as they became available from Europeans, possibly as early as the late eighteenth century. Certainly by the mid-nineteenth century, vermilion had been in use for several decades at least, and most painters were choosing to use such pigments as ultramarine blue, Prussian blue, and red lead in preference to, or in combination with, native mineral-based pigments. Trade pigments allowed painters to expand their palette beyond earth tones into brighter colours with improved adhesion. By the late nineteenth century, commercially prepared oil paints became available. The readiness with which painters saw the potential of these new materials and incorporated them into their kit illustrates the creativity and change that has shaped Northwest Coast painting for 200 years and more.

#### Black Pigments

Black is the primary colour of northern coast painting, used to create the framework or structure of most compositions. Throughout the nineteenth century, bone black, magnetite, or a mixture of the two was the most common sources of black pigment. Bone black was produced by charring animal bones, while magnetite was obtained as an inorganic earth pigment: black iron oxide. Both were ground into a powder and combined with proteinaceous binder made from salmon eggs. Bone black and magnetite occurred naturally locally and also became available commercially in the late nineteenth century.

#### Red Pigments

On some screens and house-front paintings, figures representing spirit creatures are

painted in red above the main figure. In other compositions, painters chose red as the primary colour rather than the usual black. Red is more commonly used for the inner details of a composition. Mouth, tongue, cheeks, ears, and often arms, legs, hands, and feet are painted red in many representations of humans, animals, and other beings. Hematite, vermillion, and red lead dominate as the sources of this colour in painted Northwest Coast objects of the nineteenth century.

### **Blue-Green Pigments**

Colours ranging from a dull green to a bright blue green and later a bright blue were used on masks, bowls, and bentwood containers by nineteenth-century painters of the northern and central coast. Contemporary artists, as well, continue to use blue green or blue as a tertiary colour that complements the primary and secondary colours of black and red. Carved and painted bentwood chests often have areas of low relief that are either left unpainted or painted blue green. Blue green may also be applied to the recessed orbs of eyes on masks and to other concave areas of a carved image.

Almost without exception, the ethnographic literature states that native blue-green pigments were derived from copper compounds.

## MAPQUEST Activity

Using MapQuest ([www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com)) ask students to locate the First Nations highlighted in this program (listed below).

Once students have located each community, ask students to add the names of the communities to the First Nations of British Columbia map provided in this resource package.

- Bella Coola (Komkotes) - Nuxalk
- Port Simpson (Lax Kw'alaams) -Tsimshian
- Kitamaat - Haisla
- Metlakatla (Old Metlakatla) - Tsimshian
- Duncan (Coast Salish: Quwutsun) – Heiltsuk
- Masset - Haida
- Village Island ('Mimkwamlis) – Kwakwaka'wakw

## Extension Activity

Ask students to research First Nations artists from one or more of these communities, and then report back to the class. Students can research both historical and contemporary artists. A map of the First Nations of British Columbia is on the next page.

## Art Activities

**Materials:** Paper, pencils, paint, paint brushes

At MOA, students were shown several examples of crests from First Nations cultures, – commonly seen on poles, button blankets, and bentwood boxes. Crests are images from the animal, human, and spirit worlds, representing the history and lineage of a family or individual.

Using any painting style, encourage students to design their own family crest - paying careful attention to different uses of the hand-drawn line, and negative and positive space. Students can explain why they chose to represent themselves and their families. Encourage a discussion about the right to use crest images.

## Glossary

**Abstract:** That which does not represent or imitate external reality or the objects of nature.

**Anthropologist:** A social scientist that specializes in study of human beings and their achievements over time.

**Artifact:** Any object manufactured, used, or modified by humans. Common examples include tools, utensils, art, food remains, and other products of human activity. They can be classified into types.

**Bentwood Box:** A box, unique to the NWC, made of red cedar. Boxes are used for storage of food, ceremonial regalia, and tools, as well as cooking. The sides of the boxes are made from one plank of cedar, which is steamed, bent, and sewn together using cedar roots or wooden pegs.

**Calligraphy:** Elegant, decorative writing using flowing or rhythmic lines.

**Composition:** The arrangement of elements, shapes, and colors in a work of art.

**Hatching:** A series of parallel lines, used as carving or painting to create shading.

**Cross-hatching:** A type of shading, used in carving and painting, made up of regularly spaced lines crossed lines.

**Iconography:** The symbolic meanings of subjects and signs used to convey ideas important to particular cultures or religions, and the conventions governing the use of such forms; pictorial material relating to or illustrating a subject.

**Infrared film:** Infrared film is sensitive to the infrared radiation, or heat. Small traces of paint pigments either absorb or reflect heat when illuminated with visible light. Paints vary in the way they absorb or reflect infrared radiation. Infrared film is used in the restoration and investigation of paintings.

**Patina:** A surface color or texture that appears on material over time.

**Pigment** - Pigments are derived from natural or synthetic materials and mixed with binders to produce paint or coloured inks.

**Negative Space** - In painting or sculpture the “empty” areas are called negative space or background. In figurative sculpture, it is generally referred to as the space around the object or form; unoccupied areas or empty space surrounding the objects or figures in a composition.

**Positive Space** - Shapes or forms on a two-dimensional surface. In figurative sculpture, it is generally referred to as the shape or form of the figure; spatial area which has definite form and shapes.

**Symmetry** - A type of design where one side exactly duplicates the other. An 8-pointed star block is symmetrical because no matter how you rotate it, it looks the same. A figure has symmetry if it can be folded along a line so that the two resulting parts match exactly.

**Asymmetry** - Lack of balance or symmetry.