

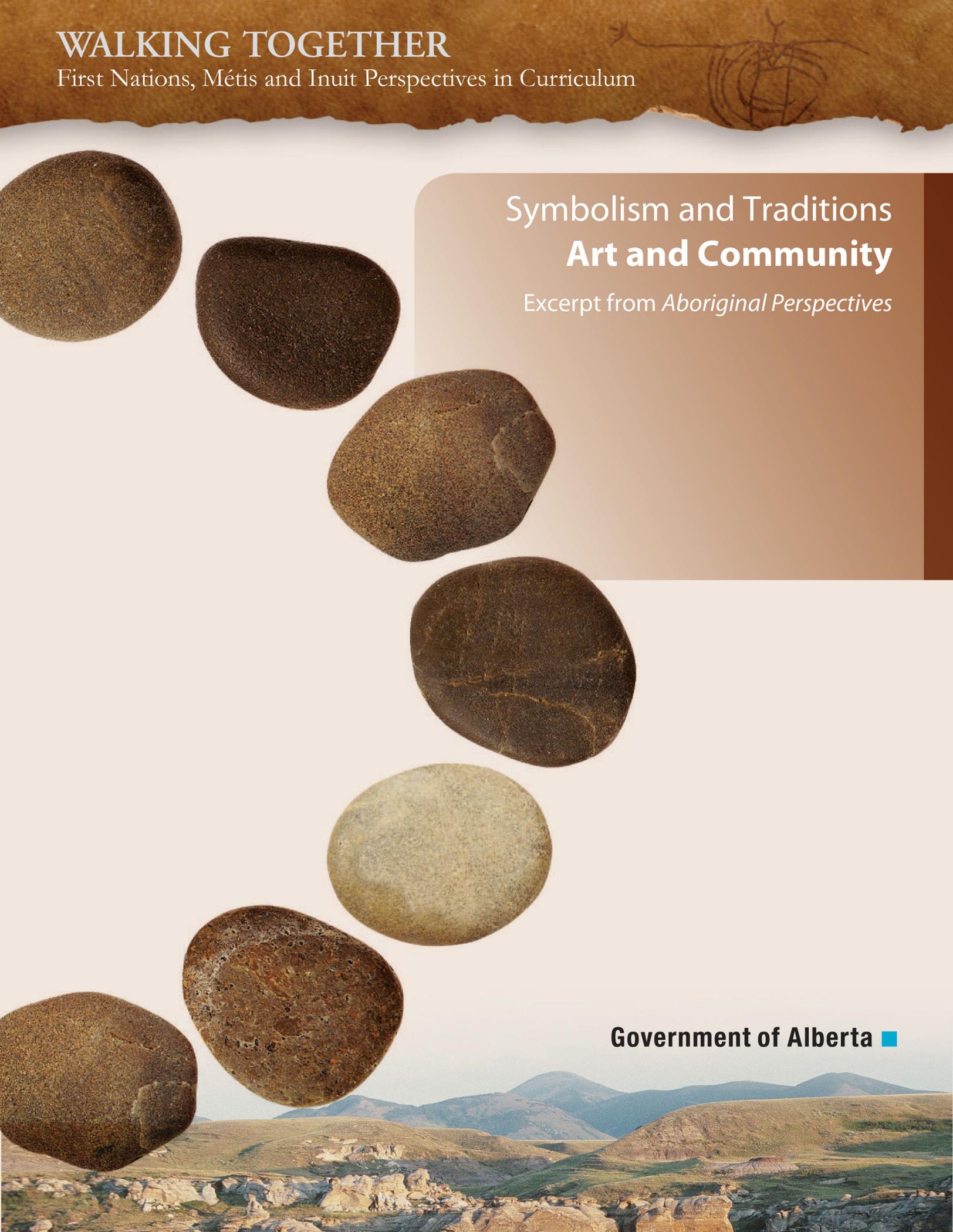
# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## Symbolism and Traditions **Art and Community**

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





## **ART AND COMMUNITY**

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

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### **ART AND COMMUNITY**

In traditional First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, art was a holistic part of everyday life, which means it was so much a part of day-to-day living that it could not be separated as a distinct activity. Creativity was not an activity carried out by a segment of the community who called themselves artists. Everyone expressed themselves through song, dance, and the tasks of everyday life. There were, of course, individuals with certain gifts — a good ivory carver, for example — but every individual was an artist of one kind or another.

As you learned in previous chapters, people in traditional communities worked hard to provide for themselves and their families. Yet they also took time to create objects or experiences of beauty and celebration.

Among traditional Woodland Cree communities, for example, fine quillwork, and later beadwork and embroidery, decorated clothing. An individual with fine decoration on his or her clothing had prestige. Its presence meant the person's family was well equipped with the necessities of life and had the time to pursue such creative expression. It spoke to the talent and skills of the whole family.

People from all cultures feel pleasure listening to music, watching dance, or looking upon a painting or other work of art that stirs their emotions. Such feelings can make them feel connected to the world. This sense of connection, especially when shared with other people, gives individuals a sense of being part of a community.

People of all cultures often express great pleasure in the act of creating art. Many explain that moments of creation draw them closer to the Creator or another spiritual force. Participation in community dances and songs, for example, builds and reinforces a sense of connection to other people and to the Creator.

Seen in this way, the act of creating something beautiful can be a spiritual pursuit, like a prayer. Using the Earth's gifts to create beauty honours Mother Earth's beauty. In First Nations traditions, artwork takes from the Earth, but gives thanks at the same time. It is part of the reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving that is part of First Nations cultural traditions.

In traditional First Nations and Inuit communities, art was also important because it recorded past events and visions of the future. It helped transmit culture and knowledge from one generation to the next. On the Plains, for example, buffalo hides were often painted to relay the story of a great battle, hunt, or act of heroism. Such paintings served as a support for the oral tradition — acting as memory aids for those who know the oral history.

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Dances and songs often served similar purposes among traditional peoples. They helped record ideas, prayers, and traditions. Many traditional songs repeat phrases, refrains, or rhythms to make them easier to learn, share, and remember .

## **SYMBOLISM**

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples have many traditional symbols that reflect their spirituality and relationship with the environment.

Among traditional Plains First Nations, every object, from clothing to buffalo hides covering tipis to ceremonial tobacco pipes, was adorned with symbolic designs. These designs made the objects beautiful and told stories. Symbols sometimes represented spiritual journeys, important events, and accomplishments of the people who created them.

Particularly powerful symbols were repeated often on many different objects. Through repetition, the symbolic meaning of each design formed a visual language that was understood by members of a community. Among the nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy, for example, the circle represents the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. As you learned on pages 87-88, most other First Nations use the circle to represent similar meanings. Many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists practicing today continue to use traditional symbols. For many, the symbols are as powerful now as they once were.

Symbols are often rooted in the spiritual beliefs of a community. Creative expression was traditionally a way of connecting with and honouring the spiritual world. For example, symbolically adorned tobacco pipes and drums are an integral part of many First Nations spiritual ceremonies. Use of these objects is seen as a form of prayer or other communication with the Creator.

The symbols found in traditional works of art are as varied as the cultures and lifestyles of the people who created them. However, because the natural environment played such a central role in the spirituality of traditional First Nations and Inuit societies, the source of many cultural symbols can be found in the natural world.

Traditional stories and objects depicted animals or elements of nature that held sacred meaning. Among the Inuit, for example, the polar bear figures prominently in many ivory and soapstone sculptures. According to Inuit beliefs, the bear is a helping spirit.

Each creation was carefully thought out — no elements were left to chance because everything was believed to be connected. People chose colours to create visual effects and in reference to the natural forces that surrounded them. Among First Nations from the Plains, for example, yellow commonly represented the sun, blue was often sky or water, and red illustrated the earth. Since these essential elements of nature were also seen as having spiritual power, their associated colours carried the same symbolic meaning.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

In the past, materials and inspiration for creative works were found in the surrounding environment. Stones, wood, and animal parts such as teeth, bone, sinew, horns, and claws, formed the basis for many cultural objects. Natural dyes, pigments, quills, feathers, grass, hair, and shells served as adornments.

The kind of environment a group lived in was directly related to the kind of traditional creative work they pursued. This relationship was partly due to the supply of resources. In

heavily wooded regions, for example, birchbark was used for everything from canoes and water vessels to cradles. In the Pacific Northwest, massive cedar trees provided material for carvings and dugout canoes.

Although First Nations depended upon the resources of their immediate surroundings, they were not limited by them. For example, trade with other groups meant that, for example, Blackfoot nations acquired porcupine quills from First Nations living in woodland areas and Cree artists could trade for caribou hair, which was softer and easier to work with than moose hair.

The relationship between creative work and the environment was also practical. On the Plains, for example, the Siksika First Nation decorated their clothing with feathers and fringes. This type of decoration would have been impractical for a Woodland Cree hunter tracking game through thick forest. Hanging decorations would quickly become tangled or torn. The Woodland Cree hunter's clothing decoration was close to the body, made of quills and beads. Likewise, a large Haida dugout carved of wood made sense in the ocean's heavy waves, but would be a burden during a Subarctic portage.

For Plains First Nations, one animal, the buffalo, fulfilled nearly all basic needs. The buffalo also provided the materials for cultural expression. Hides were painted to portray visions and great achievements, untanned buffalo skins — called rawhide — were stretched over wooden forms to make drums, and bones were carved into delicate flutes and whistles. For northern Alberta First Nations, the moose fulfilled a similar role.

The music and dance of First Nations and Inuit peoples also reflected reverence and appreciation for the land, as did storytelling, another form of creative work. The themes of songs and chants often addressed the Earth, sky, water, planting and harvesting cycles, and animal spirits.

Certain stories, songs, and dances were part of seasonal ceremonies or events, in harmony with the natural world's time frame.

## IDENTITY

Music from drums and flutes brings people together. For many groups, the drum is of particular importance; its pulsating rhythm represents Mother Earth's heartbeat. Traditional dances, which could last for hours or days, connected people physically, emotionally, and spiritually with this same heartbeat and with each other.

Some forms of creative expression traditionally helped reinforce cultural and social identity. Many designs were unique to particular nations or clans. Use of them helped to enhance a common bond. For example, the salmon instantly speaks to First Nations from the Pacific Northwest, the polar bear to the Arctic Inuit, and the buffalo to the Plains First Nations and Métis peoples.

Traditionally, some significant designs were restricted to particular individuals, who were then responsible for passing on the design to the next generation. This practice ensured the integrity of symbols and designs from one generation to the next.

Creation stories and cycles of renewal were popular themes represented in artwork, reinforcing the importance of creation stories in traditional societies. Such affirmations are one of the elements that make First Nations and Inuit worldviews unique. Contemporary artists continue to use the cyclical theme in their work. Circles, cycles, and interconnection are all



concepts represented in visual and performing art by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples from past and present.

## **TRADITIONAL ART FORMS**

People in traditional societies had few belongings, but those they had were highly functional. These belongings were often decorated using many kinds of natural materials.

Each traditional art form was passed down from generation to generation. Some forms of expression, such as the designs on tipis, were only transferred to another individual through ceremony. Techniques like tufting, birchbark biting, and fish scale art, in contrast, were communal and learned by observation and careful practise.

### **Quillwork**

One of the oldest and most widespread First Nations decorative styles uses porcupine quills in intricate designs. Preparing the quills was a delicate process. First the quills were sorted according to length — the shortest quills are found along the animal's underbelly, while the longest grow on its tail. The quills were then softened, traditionally using saliva. Next they were coloured, using natural vegetable and mineral dyes. Red and yellow, for example, were obtained from iron ore found in rocks. Other colours were mixed from materials such as crushed berries, bull rushes, and soot.

Once the quills were sorted, softened, and dyed, they were flattened and sewn onto a leather surface.

### **Bead work**

Like language and other aspects of culture, artistic techniques are often adapted to suit new circumstances. For example, beadwork is now considered a traditional form of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artwork, even though it was adopted after European contact.

Accustomed to adapting to new technologies, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women recognized that beads were easier to use than traditional materials such as porcupine quills. They quickly adopted beads as part of their decorative practice.

### **Tufting**

Moose or caribou hair tufting is primarily practiced by Dene and Woodland Cree people. It is another example of a traditional First Nations art form that incorporates new European technology.

While the use of moose and caribou hair to decorate clothing and other objects long predates European contact, tufting was developed in the late 1910s by Madeleine Lafferte, a Métis woman from Fort Providence, Northwest Territories. Lafferte was inspired by European wool punch work that she observed on the bishop's chair in Fort Providence. The punchwork had been done by a Grey Nun, Sister St. Gregory, around 1912. Lafferte applied the wool punch technique to familiar materials, creating a new and highly original art form.

Tufting involves twisting thread around small bundles of about twenty short, dyed hairs. Each bundle is sewn tightly onto a hide or cloth background, often of black velveteen, then clipped to form the desired shape.



### **Birchbark Biting**

One of the most labour intensive art forms is called birchbark biting. Also known as transparencies, the works are created by repeatedly biting into folded sheets of specially prepared birchbark. The folds allow the artist to create symmetrical designs that can be seen once the sheet is unfolded and held flat up to the light. Infused with sunlight, the tiny perforations made by the artist's eyeteeth reveal intricate designs of flowers, insects, and birds.

### **Fish Scale Art**

Fish scale artwork involves creating designs out of individually placed fish scales, bones, and vertebrae. It is delicate work that takes great patience and care. In northern Alberta, First Nations use white fish — called *atihkamek* in Cree — which have larger scales than other fish. This makes them easier to work with.

The scales are carefully washed, cleaned, and sorted in a process that takes up to two days. Then they are normally dyed a variety of colours and glued onto a hide or cloth backing. Fish scale designs are not normally used for clothing decoration because they can be easily damaged.

### **Inuit Sculpture**

Although contemporary Inuit artists use many different art forms, Inuit peoples are famous for their carving skills. Most Arctic communities began Inuit-owned cooperatives in the 1950s and 1960s to market and sell their work. Inuit sculptures today have an international reputation as an important contemporary art form.

Most traditional carvings were made from ivory. Contemporary carvers most often use stone. The word *soapstone* is often used to describe all Inuit sculpture, but this is misleading. Soapstone is quite soft and many carvers prefer harder material, such as serpentine or quartz. Some carvings are made with caribou antlers or ancient whalebone, or a combination of materials.

Many contemporary carvings portray traditional subjects, such as animals, hunting, and family life scenes. However, today spiritual images and figures from Inuit oral tradition also appear frequently. Different communities across the Arctic have unique styles of carving, as do individual artists.

### **Performing Arts**

Storytelling, music, and dance were important forms of communication for traditional communities, as they continue to be today. Songs, music, dance, and drumming bring people together for ceremony and celebration. As with other art forms, some sacred songs can only be passed down by certain clans, societies, or families. Others, such as those sung at powwows, are universal and are shared among many different nations and cultures.

Métis peoples have many innovative art forms. Community traditions such as the Red River jig, while incorporating aspects of European cultures, maintained the First Nations tradition of community bonding through song and dance. Métis people also have many other forms of traditional dance including the reel of four, the reel of eight, and drops of brandy.