

In the Present Moment

BUDDHISM, CONTEMPORARY ART AND SOCIAL PRACTICE



TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE

FALL 2019

A R T GALLERY

O F G R E A T E R V I C T O R I A

Welcome to the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria's Teacher Resource Guide inspired by *In the Present Moment: Buddhism, Contemporary Art and Social Practice*. This project explores the influence modern Buddhism has had on contemporary art in Canada and the United States, and questions the idea of Buddhism as a static, unchanging tradition. It focuses on Buddhism as a living practice that has considerable impact and relevance in the West.

THE "BIG IDEA"

The artists in this guide invite new and unexpected ways to think about modern Buddhism and its impacts. The guide invites students to explore and discover the ways exciting artists like NAKAHARA NANTENBO, MARK TOBEY, PAULINE OLIVEROS, TENZING RIGDOL and DYLAN THOMAS think about and make art informed by this fascinating tradition. Some people have found that connecting with Buddhism through art has inspired them to live more healthy, aware, peaceful lives in their own minds and bodies, and in their communities. We hope you enjoy trying these ideas and activities and discovering if this is true for you!

What is "modern Buddhism"? Buddhism is a practice of working with the mind for the purpose of ending suffering and letting go of attachments to the world (a process known as "awakening"). Its teachings came from the Buddha, Shakyamuni, who lived in India more than 2,500 years ago. From India, the Buddha's teachings spread rapidly to Nepal and Tibet, where rituals and mandalas play an important role in Buddhism; to China, where Buddhism is known as Chan and has a meditation focus; to Japan, where Zen became an important form of Buddhism, among other popular forms; and to Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia), where Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the importance of monks. As Buddhism spread across the world, it came to encompass many practices, beliefs and artistic traditions. Buddhism became popular in these various forms in Canada and the United States in the early twentieth century through teachers from Asia who brought Buddhist ideas and teachings to the West, and through Westerners who studied Buddhism in Asia. Buddhism has had an important impact on artists in North America, introducing new ideas of beauty and aesthetic experience, and transforming ideas about the purpose of art in the world.

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discover. explore. make.

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USING THE GUIDE: THE BASICS

- 1** Print out the guide for yourself, or download and project it.
- 2** Read through the guide carefully.
- 3** When you are ready to engage with it as a class, project the images of the artworks and explore them together as a group. For best results, download high-resolution projector images [with this link](#) and view full screen, single page. Use the questions and activities provided to lead the discussion.

MAIN GOALS

-  To share the exciting work of 5 artists who are influenced by modern Buddhism.
-  To invite learners (you!) to explore a wide variety of approaches to art making.
-  To inspire curiosity and experimentation! And to connect learning with the wider community.

This guide is designed to complement a wide range of BC Curriculum Competencies and subject-specific curriculum goals. Skills that students practise in the activities are observation, interpretation and inter-cultural sensitivity, as well as critical and creative thinking.

The content of the guide directly relates to the following competency profiles and subject areas: Communication Competency, Critical Thinking Competency, Social Responsibility Competency, Positive Personal and Cultural Identity Competency, Art Education, Science Curriculum and Social Studies Curriculum.

The activities in the guide require few materials and can easily be adapted to the age, grade level and needs of learners. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

discover:

WHO IS NAKAHARA NANTENBO?

(b. 1839–d. 1925)

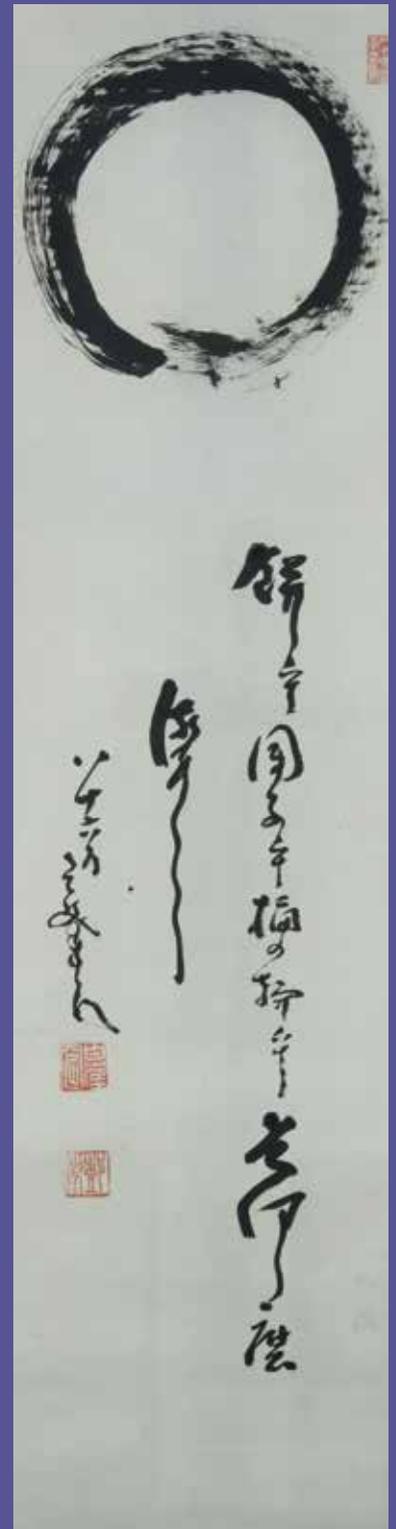
“My writing is quite fast, as I am not concerned with the rules of calligraphy or whether it is good or bad. I write a page a minute, so it is nothing for me to write sixty sheets in an hour.”

Nakahara Nantenbo was seven years old when his mother died. After her death, he was determined to become a monk to learn the mysteries of life and death. Nantenbo did become a Japanese Zen master as well as a talented artist who created many works of art during his lifetime. He was born into a samurai family and into a tradition where calligraphy is considered a fine art, encompassing rhythm, emotion, beauty and spirit. Nantenbo held true to those traditions in his art, wielding the brush with tremendous energy, strength and intensity, and by doing so may have had an influence on twentieth-century action painters and avant-garde calligraphers.

Nakahara Nantenbo (1839–1925, Japan) | Enso (1925)

Hanging scroll: Ink on paper; 126 x 31.8 cm

Gift of Judith Patt | Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria | 2012.023.020.



explore: WHAT IS AN ENSO?

An enso is a symbol and is one of the most famous motifs of Japanese Zen calligraphy. The symbol relates to emptiness, unity and infinity. It is also closely linked to the act of meditation, which is an important aspect of Zen practice.

In Zen, an enso is a circle that is hand-drawn in one or two unbroken brush strokes to express a moment when the mind is free, supporting the body to create.

The enso has been depicted by calligraphers, artists and monks. It conveys simplicity in Japanese aesthetics. Sometimes you will see ensos that are not complete. The creation of an enso is associated with the Zen ideal of wabi-sabi, a word that doesn't have a direct English translation, but which signifies that life and art are beautiful because they are simple, imperfect and here for only a moment.

make: CREATE AN ENSO

THE IDEA

This activity is inspired by the work of artist Nakahara Nantenbo. He produced a significant number of Zen paintings, and the enso is among his many artworks (see image on page 5.) Most of his enso paintings are close-ended, meaning the circle is complete.

You create an enso with just a few breaths and one or two brush strokes from beginning to end. You never go back and rework an enso, because it is an expression of your state of mind at the present moment.

When creating an enso, you take a deep breath in and then begin and finish your mark as you exhale slowly. Part of the exercise is getting your mind ready and then expressing your natural state of mind when you brush your enso. Don't worry about making "perfect" circles. Remember the wabi-sabi aesthetic of the beauty of imperfect things. A mistake is no less perfect than a non-mistake.

Because so many things go into the creation of each enso, such as water, pigment and paper, along with your focus, concentration, mood and confidence when creating with the brush, you never really know how the brush stroke will appear. The enso is like a mirror, providing a place and space to see one's mind captured for a moment on paper.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED



Sheet of paper



Pencil, pen, stick of charcoal or paintbrush



Thick wash of paint or ink (if you are using a paintbrush)

THE PROCESS

- ▶ **Step 1:** Look at Nakahara Nantenbo's *Enso*. What do you see? What do you notice about his circle? What other elements are part of his artwork?
- ▶ **Step 2:** Place your paper on your work surface. Place your hand at the bottom of the paper to not only hold the paper in place but also create a connection between you and what is happening.
- ▶ **Step 3:** Close your eyes and look within. Notice what your emotions and thoughts are like in this moment.
- ▶ **Step 4:** Breathe. Be aware of your breath. See how the breath is a circle of in and out. Follow the circles of your breath for a few moments.
- ▶ **Step 5:** Visualize an enso. See that circle in your mind's eye. Imagine what it might look like as you make your mark across the paper.
- ▶ **Step 6:** Take a breath and pick up the pencil, pen, charcoal or brush in your hand. Be aware of how it feels and how you are holding it.
- ▶ **Step 7:** If you are using a brush, load it with enough ink or paint to make a circle in one or two strokes without needing to reload your brush.
- ▶ **Step 8:** Take a deep breath in and draw your enso as you exhale on a full circle of the breath.
- ▶ **Step 9:** Stop. Remember this is one moment in time. Your enso is a capture of this moment.
- ▶ **Step 10:** Sign your enso. Let it remind you of the importance of mindfulness and the simplicity of the present moment.

REFLECTIONS

Display the enso artworks together. As a class, discuss the process and materials. If you created several ensos using different materials—a pencil, charcoal and paint, for example—how did the materials change the process? Look at the works and talk about similarities and differences in styles, perspectives and composition. Was creating a circle more difficult than you expected? Why? How did breathing play a role in your process? Do you feel your enso reflects what you were experiencing in your mind in that moment? Why or why not?

PROJECT EXTENSION (for those excited to keep exploring)

Poetry is also a traditional Zen art. The form of Zen poetry best known in the West is haiku. Haiku evolved from another poetic form called renga.

Renga is a kind of collaborative poem that originated in China during the early first millennium. The oldest example of renga in Japanese dates to the eighth century. By the thirteenth century, renga had developed into a uniquely Japanese style of poetry.

Renga was written by a group of poets under the direction of a renga master, with each poet contributing a verse. Each verse began with three lines of five, seven and five syllables, followed by two lines of seven syllables each. The first verse was called the hokku.

Haiku is a way to express what is happening in the exact moment of the experience, not an expression of an experience after it happens. It brings you into the moment.

Haiku poems are based on a five-seven-five syllable pattern. What does this mean? Clap out your name. For example, if your name is Emily, you will create three claps. Em-i-ly. Emily is a three-syllable name. When you are creating a haiku poem, the first line is five syllables or five claps. The second line is seven syllables or seven claps. And the third line of the poem would again be five syllables, which is five claps.

Now that you know something about Zen poetry, create a haiku expressing your direct experience while creating your enso. If you choose to add your haiku to your enso artwork, think about the composition of your piece. Take another look at Nantenbo Nakahara's *Enso* and closely examine how he added poetry to his art.

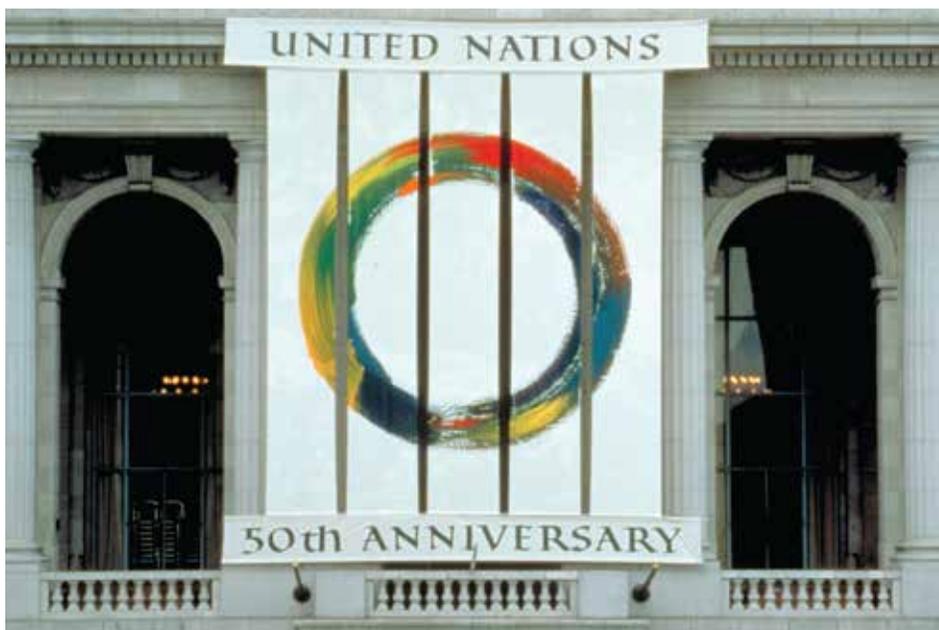
The following two images are of a site-specific collaborative painting, a huge enso, that was installed on the front side of the War Memorial Building in San Francisco for an official United Nations celebration.



Kazuaki Tanahashi (b. 1933, Japan) | Circle of All Nations (1995)

Performance and site-specific painting at the United Nations Plaza, San Francisco; one hour
 A project of the American School of Japanese for the 50th anniversary of the signing
 of the United Nations Charter.

Courtesy of the Artist | Photo: Kazu Yanagi



Circle of All Nations (1995)

installed on the front side of
 the War Memorial Building in
 San Francisco for the official
 celebration of the 50th
 anniversary of the United Nations.
 Photo: Kazu Yanagi

discover:

WHO IS MARK TOBEY?

(b. 1890–d. 1976)

“On pavements and the bark of trees I have found whole worlds.”



Mark Tobey was an American painter working in the mid-twentieth century. Although he attended some classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, he was mostly self-taught. Tobey started his career as an illustrator at *McCall's* magazine in New York before moving to Seattle, where he was one of the founders of an art movement called the Northwest School. In 1934, Tobey spent a month in a Zen monastery, which had a significant impact on his painting and teaching. In the year following his stay at the monastery, Tobey began making “white writing” paintings, the style that he became famous for. The white lines were a result of his experiments with Asian calligraphy. The paintings were Tobey’s visual expression of the inter-relationship between humans and the universe. Another influence on his work came later in life when he learned how to play piano and studied music. His brush strokes were sometimes very bold but more often were delicate and fine, like strands of a spiderweb. He created complex compositions with no single focal point, and although his art resembles Abstract Expressionism, the reasons for his compositions and how he created them differ philosophically from most Abstract Expressionist painters because of their spiritual and meditative intent.

Johsel Namkung

Photograph of Mark Tobey with Mineko Namkung painting at the home of George Tsutakawa, c1961.

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of Irene Namkung

Tobey travelled to Asia in the 1930s, and it was here his eyes were opened to the various ways artists treated space in their artwork. Although he had already studied Chinese calligraphy while living in Seattle in the 1920s, and could write in Chinese, his trip to Asia gave him a better understanding of how writing and symbols fit into the larger aesthetic cultures of Asia. The trip taught him he should not just study the way his American culture made art, but also open his mind to learn everything possible about the ways all cultures made art.

As an artist, Tobey's philosophy was to read widely so he could learn about and experiment with many different creative approaches, using what worked and abandoning what did not to create his art. He even learned Japanese sumi-e. This philosophy grew out of his study of Zen and his deep search for a higher, spiritual purpose for art.

explore: WHAT IS ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM?

Abstract Expressionism refers to a movement of largely non-representational painting, which flourished in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s. In non-representational art, the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality. For example, if you paint a picture of a car, that is a representation of the object you intended it to be. When your art is non-representational, you create marks that don't refer to any specific object or thing.

WHAT IS ACTION PAINTING?

Action painting is a term created by art critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952 as another name for Abstract Expressionism. Action painters were focused on creating works of art that showed the energy and movement of life in a visible way on the canvas. The idea behind action painting is that the creative process involves a conversation between the artist and the canvas. How does an artist have a conversation with a canvas? Rosenberg explained it this way: "Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question." In other words, an artist makes a mark without worrying about what's next. Once the artist looks at this mark on the canvas, the mark will make the artist pause and think of what mark to add next.

WHAT IS SUMI-E?

Sumi means “ink” in Japanese and *e* means “painting,” so *sumi-e* simply means “ink painting.” The idea is to capture the essence of a moment with just a few strokes or lines. In *sumi-e* an artist moves with grace, strength, flexibility and balance to create paintings of simplicity and beauty. In *sumi-e* there is no sketch and an artist is open-minded about what happens as the ink and brush meet the paper. It was first practised by Zen priests to improve their focus through artistic concentration, inspiration and perfection.

make: EXPERIMENTS WITH YOUR NAME

THE IDEA

After Tobey’s trip to Asia in the 1930s, he started making paintings that were referred to as “white writing,” with white or light-coloured calligraphic symbols on top of an abstract background that is often composed of thousands of small brush strokes. You cannot read the letters or words in the writing; they simply become interesting shapes and forms. This approach to painting was unique at the time.

Ultimately for Tobey, he wanted to use his art as a way to help humanity achieve unity and peace, and he used many different approaches drawn from his life experiences to reach this goal.

In this activity you will have the opportunity to explore the creation of abstract artwork using your name, inspired by Mark Tobey’s “white writing” paintings. Using some of the concepts of Zen, such as being open-minded, observing, experimenting and using what works for you and discarding what doesn’t, repeat the letters/characters/symbols of your name and abstract them with gestural lines, filling the paper to create a composition.



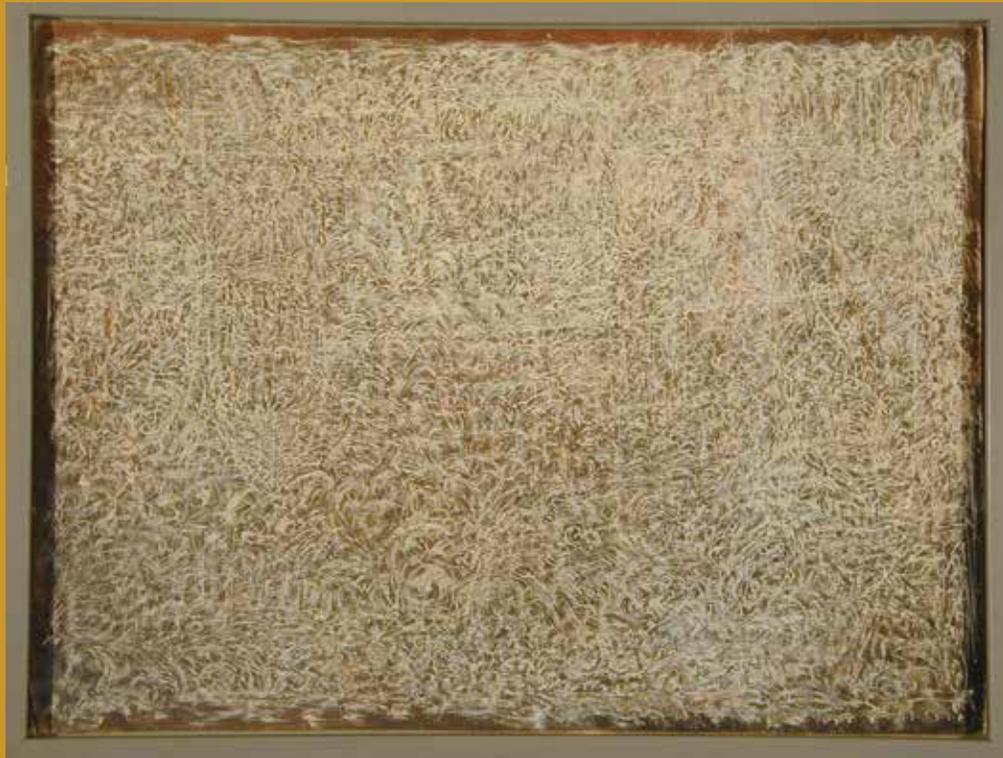
Mark Tobey (b. 1890, USA; d. 1976, Switzerland)
Untitled (1957)

Sumi ink on paper; 40.2 x 28.5 cm

Gift of Mr. & Mrs. C.D. Graham in
recognition of the artist’s 85th birthday
Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

1975.060.001.

(c) Mark Tobey Estate/Seattle Art Museum



Mark Tobey (b. 1890, USA; d. 1976, Switzerland) | Christmas Night (1943)

Tempera on paper mounted on board; 37.6 x 51.5 cm

Gift of Dr. Pierre R. Dow in memory of Berthe Pouncy Jacobson | Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria
1980.093.006.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED



Watercolour paper (or thick, good-quality paper)



White oil pastel



Watercolours



Brush



Water jug

THE PROCESS

- ▶ **Step 1:** Look at Tobey's artworks, *Untitled* and *Christmas Night*, and discuss what you see. What do you notice about the marks? How do you think he created these? What more do you see? How did he use colour? What happens when the marks are overlapped?
- ▶ **Step 2:** Write your name on a piece of paper. Looking at the individual characters/symbols, begin to abstract them. Look at the different shapes that make up the letters. Focus on the different directions of lines used in your name. Where do they curve? Where are they horizontal, vertical and diagonal? How can you simplify and abstract the characters? What shapes and lines interest you the most?
- ▶ **Step 3:** Using the white oil pastel, add different gestural shapes and lines on the paper that you discovered in the characters/symbols of your name. Consider making some marks large and some marks small. What happens when you repeat the same gestural line many times? Make some marks bold and some very delicate. Allow yourself to be open to creating different marks around the entire paper, weaving different marks together and just enjoying the process of creating.
- ▶ **Step 4:** When you feel you have covered your paper with the abstracted characters/symbols of your name, take a brush and wet your entire paper. Once your paper is completely wet, begin adding watercolours on top of the wet paper. What happens when a drop of colour hits the paper? What happens when you add another colour drop next to it? Cover your paper with watercolours until you are happy. Be mindful that adding too many colours could lead to a muddy brown.
- ▶ **Step 5:** Let your painting dry.

REFLECTIONS

Display the artworks together. Discuss similarities and differences in composition, colour, lines and shapes. Discuss the process. How easy or hard was it to create the work? What happened when you began abstracting the letters of your name? What were some of the most interesting things you learned or discovered?

CONNECTIONS

How could creating gestural marks on paper be connected to meditation?

How are Nakahara Nantenbo's and Mark Tobey's works similar? In what ways might Mark Tobey have been inspired by Nakahara Nantenbo's art?

discover:

WHO IS PAULINE OLIVEROS?

(b. 1932–d. 2016)

“Deep listening is my life practice.”



Pauline Oliveros is an American composer who dedicated her life to sound and to listening. Oliveros started playing music in kindergarten. Her mother gave her an accordion when Oliveros was nine years old, and although she learned to play the tuba and French horn in school, her first love was the accordion and she used it throughout her sixty-year career. By the time she was sixteen, Oliveros knew she wanted to be a composer and she studied music composition in university. When she was twenty-one, her mother gave her a tape recorder. With the recorder she started documenting sounds like those outside her apartment window, as well as dream sounds and sounds from inside her. She became even more curious when the recorder picked up sounds she had never heard before! Her experiments with new technologies made her one of electronic music's most important early leaders. She also explored new ways to invite people to pay close attention to sound, to really listen to all the interesting sounds that surround us. “Deep Listening” came from her practice of listening to the world around her, starting with a childhood fascination with all sounds. Insect, bird and animal sounds, and the pops, whistles and tuning of her grandfather and father’s crystal and shortwave radios are some examples of inspirations. Ideas also came from her work in concert music with composition, improvisation and electroacoustics.

In the artist’s words, “Deep Listening is listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing. Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, or one’s own thoughts as well as musical sounds. Deep Listening represents a heightened state of awareness and connects to all that there is. As a composer I make my music through Deep Listening.”

Pauline Oliveros playing a piano accordion.

Photo: Pieter Kers ©2017 The Pauline Oliveros Trust

After decades spent at music's cutting edge, Pauline Oliveros became an inspiration to some of the most renowned figures in experimental composition, including John Cage, who once said, "Through Pauline Oliveros and Deep Listening, I finally know what harmony is . . . It's about the pleasure of making music." Oliveros inspired people to understand that listening is everything because to her listening was a spiritual path. "The more you listen, the more you learn and the more you are able to put yourself in someone else's position which is part of spirituality. It's not just about you."

explore: WHAT IS DEEP LISTENING?

Deep Listening explores the difference between hearing and listening. We are surrounded by sound: sounds from daily life, from nature, from music and even from our own thoughts. We hear so many sounds that we ignore many of them. Tina Pearson, a composer based in Victoria, BC, who first met Oliveros while at York University in 1979, said, "Pauline's legacy is listening. Hearing is the mechanism that enables you to take in sound; listening is what you can change and train. You've heard [couples complain to each other]: 'you're hearing me but you're not listening!' Hearing's great, but you listen with your heart."

Deep Listening involves a willingness to listen and receive new sounds we hear but don't usually listen to—whether pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent. Oliveros described Deep Listening as a way to listen in every possible way to everything possible, no matter what you are doing. She felt that we know more about hearing than listening, and one of her intentions was to show how powerful and healing sound can be if we take the time to really listen.

WHAT IS SONIC MEDITATIONS?

Sonic Meditations is a collection of written instructions and strategies for listening, presented as musical compositions. The instructions invite the participation of everyone, even if you have never had a music lesson. They involve easily created sounds and processes where music is produced naturally or by accident. *Sonic Meditations* are intended for group work, usually over a long period of time, but in this activity you will have an opportunity to try one in class. There are no special skills necessary. As long as you are willing to commit to the experience, you can participate. Once the meditation is complete, you may feel more connected to your classmates, more aware of your surroundings and possibly more relaxed.

make: TEACH YOURSELF TO FLY

THE IDEA

This activity will give you a chance to practise Deep Listening. It is designed to improve your sonic (sound) awareness, with the potential to increase creativity and enhance openness and possibly compassion.

While in her thirties, Pauline Oliveros became concerned about the culture of the United States. In response, she stopped doing concerts and spent more time alone. She began singing and playing long, extended musical notes, spending almost an entire year playing only the musical note A. She found this private music-making to be soothing, both mentally and physically. It was peace from a world full of really bad news. After a while she did begin to perform again, but the experiments in self-care she did during this time became a small collection of text-based scores called *Sonic Meditations*. She published them in 1971, and she shared her goals, which at first included “expanded consciousness.” Later she added “humanitarian purposes; specifically healing.”

Considered as a healing practice, a “tuning of mind and body,” Oliveros’s *Sonic Meditations* are unique in the history of musical experiments. In these works, experiments were not conducted on the music, but the music was an experiment on the person. In other words, how would the music change the person listening?

Although *Sonic Meditations* is a collection of compositions, we will focus on just one.

Teach Yourself to Fly is one of Pauline Oliveros’s compositions from *Sonic Meditations*. As you will notice, it is written as a paragraph of text that describes what should happen. (This may be different from other approaches to music composition that you have seen, but there are many ways to represent and document sound-making, depending on one’s culture and ways of experiencing the world.) The composition is dedicated to Amelia Earhart, the first female pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Oliveros was passionate about celebrating women’s achievements and creativity. *Teach Yourself to Fly* asks performers to observe their breath and eventually allow their voice to sound.

WHAT YOU’LL NEED



Space for the class to be able to sit in a circle



An open mind



Low light in centre of room (optional)

THE PROCESS

- ▶ **Step 1:** Discuss Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening and *Sonic Meditations* (from the EXPLORE section above).
- ▶ **Step 2:** Gather in a circle with everyone facing each other.
- ▶ **Step 3:** Open your mind to the experience. Although it may feel strange and new at first, remember to practise being curious while you try Deep Listening.
- ▶ **Step 4:** Read *Teach Yourself to Fly* as a class.

Teach Yourself to Fly | Dedicated to Amelia Earhart

Any number of persons sit in a circle facing the center.

Illuminate the space with a dim blue light. Begin by simply observing your own breathing. Always be an observer. Gradually allow your breathing to become audible.

Then gradually introduce your voice. Allow your vocal cords to vibrate in any mode which occurs naturally. Allow the intensity of the vibrations to increase very slowly.

Continue as long as possible, naturally, and until all others are quiet, always observing your own breath cycle.

Variation: translate voice to an instrument

Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016, USA) | *Teach Yourself to Fly* (c. 1970) | Text score

Published in Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* (1974) | Courtesy of The Pauline Oliveros Trust and The Ministry of Maåt

© Smith Publications

- ▶ **Step 5:** Perform *Teach Yourself to Fly*. Remember to pay attention to and observe all the sounds, those in your head, in the group and in the room. This is your opportunity to try Deep Listening.

REFLECTIONS

Discuss the process. Did you notice sounds you had not paid attention to before? Did the sounds you heard while you were sounding and listening to *Teach Yourself to Fly* remind you of anything? How do you think the word “fly” in the title relates to your experience of the composition? Did anything surprise you?

PROJECT EXTENSION

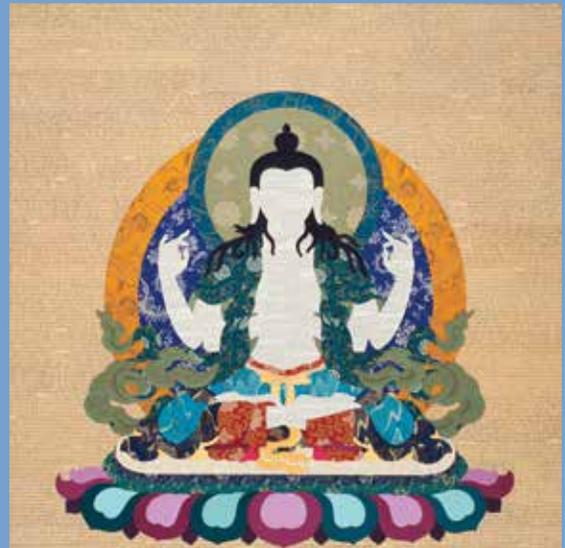
Perform *Teach Yourself to Fly* outdoors—in the playground, at a park or even in a forest!

discover:

WHO IS TENZING RIGDOL?

(b. 1982)

“Honesty is beautiful.”



Tenzing Rigdol is an artist, activist and poet. He is the first Tibetan contemporary artist to have his work collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and his work has been shown all over the world. He has even published three books of poetry. Rigdol was born to Tibetan refugees in Nepal. While living in Nepal, his parents designed and wove Tibetan rugs, but before fleeing Tibet they were producers of ink for woodblock prints. In 2002 he moved with his family to the United States, where they were granted political asylum (a kind of permission to stay in the country).

Rigdol began to study Western art before realizing he wanted to first study the art of his birth culture. So he travelled to India and Nepal, where he too learned Tibetan carpet design, traditional collage and thangka painting. He also studied Tibetan sand painting, butter sculpture and Buddhist philosophy. Tibetan Buddhism is distinct from other forms of Buddhism. Although it adheres to all the basic teachings of Buddhism, it is combined with Tibetan indigenous beliefs and practices to include many local deities and teachers. Tibetan Buddhism is very lively and colourful, and includes a great deal of ritual and ceremony that is considered an expedient way to achieve “awakening.”

Tenzing Rigdol (b. 1982, Nepal) | Afloat (2014)

Collage, silk brocade and scripture; 152 x 152 cm

Private collection

Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi

Rigdol tries as much as possible to be honest in his art and claims honesty is one of the most important pursuits of his artwork. His works range from paintings, sculpture, drawing and collage to digital video installation, performance art and site-specific pieces. He feels art is one of the most poignant ways of being non-violent. Through art, artists can say, “Hey! Come look at my opinion,” and he thinks that is beautiful. He would like to go to Tibet one day, a place he only knows through his parents, friends and the media.

explore: WHAT IS A THANGKA?

A thangka is a Tibetan hanging scroll. These scrolls contain very detailed paintings depicting different gods and deities. They were first created around the fifteenth century, and the tradition of creating a thangka was handed down through families. Back then, many Tibetans were nomadic, meaning they travelled from place to place, between villages that were a long way from the monasteries. Tibetan monks and lamas (spiritual leaders) rolled up the thangkas and carried them to the villages to share Buddhist stories and teachings. Thangkas are an important teaching tool depicting images of the Buddha along with other Buddhist symbols, deities, spiritual masters, enlightened beings and role models. There are many gods and deities in Tibetan Buddhism, so thangkas illustrate many different stories. Each thangka holds its own message.

You can recognize thangkas by their key characteristics: they are two-dimensional; they are painted and mounted entirely on fabric, usually silk, so that they can be rolled; and they depict Buddhist symbols, stories, deities and teachers. When painting the figures in a thangka, the eyes are the last element to be painted. Once the painted deity or teacher receives its eyes, it is believed that the painting is brought to life—it changes from being an inanimate object to becoming the living presence of the deity. It is therefore treated with utmost respect.

make: CREATE FELTED SCROLLS

THE IDEA

This activity is inspired by the traditional art of thangka paintings and Tenzing Rigdol's contemporary interpretation of them. Rigdol is influenced by age-old Tibetan traditions and philosophies and uses them to paint about current events, human conflict and other issues important to him.

“Personally, I don’t see a difference between political and spiritual. I think somebody who steps into any opinion field, justice field, or law field is part of a spiritual practice, no? Because they’re talking about change in a positive way. If one looks at Nelson Mandela or Dalai Lama, those individuals are very politically opinionated. There’s no spiritual and political. It’s the person who’s using the tool.”

As an artist, he wants to be seen as having some kind of cause. In fact, he thinks everyone should have a cause, especially students. He has said, “I think one should have a cause, especially being students, being young, being an artist, or being anybody, actually.” For Rigdol, art is about honesty, creating questions and empathy in viewers as they see and appreciate an issue from another person’s perspective through the art.

In this project, you are invited to pick an issue that is important to you, a cause, story or current event that you want to share as a teaching moment through your interpretation of a thangka.



Tenzing Rigdol (b. 1982, Nepal)

Hide and Seek (2015)

Acrylic and collage on paper; 65.3 x 53 cm

Private collection

Courtesy the artist and Rossi & Rossi

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

-  Felt sheets
-  Scissors
-  White glue
-  Popsicle sticks or small glue spatulas
-  Thick black or white background paper or large piece of felt
-  Optional: newsprint, drawing tools, other scrap papers
-  Dowel or stick and yarn for hanging

THE PROCESS

- ▶ **Step 1:** Look at *Afloat* (page 20) and *Hide and Seek* (page 22). What do you see? What materials is Rigdol using in these artworks? How is using paper and fabric different from traditional painting?
- ▶ **Step 2:** Pick an issue, story or cause that is important to you. Think about how you will share this story with others using only pictures.
- ▶ **Step 3:** Begin with a thick background paper or a large piece of felt.
- ▶ **Step 4:** Plan your composition using cut pieces of felt, felt shapes, and other fabric scraps and paper if available.
- ▶ **Step 5:** Once you have planned your felt “painting,” glue your final work onto the thick paper or background piece of felt.
- ▶ **Step 6:** At the top of your finished piece, put the wooden dowel behind the paper, and fold just enough paper over the dowel so that you can glue it down and hold the dowel in place. The dowel should stick out a bit so you can tie yarn to either side to hang the thangka.
- ▶ **Step 7:** Display your work with the rest of the class. Share the stories of your contemporary interpretations of a thangka as a group.

REFLECTIONS

When you look at all the works together, how are they similar? How are they different? How is using felt different from using paint or cut paper? How is creating awareness about something important to you different when you do it through art? Would you create awareness for something important to you through art in the future? Why or why not?

PROJECT MODIFICATIONS FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

For younger students, felt can be pre-cut. Another option is to provide coloured papers instead of felt for the project. Stencils can also be used for help drawing shapes.

CONNECTIONS

How are artists Pauline Oliveros and Tenzing Rigdol similar?

discover:

WHO IS DYLAN THOMAS?

(b. 1986)



Dylan Thomas (Qwul'thilum) was born in Victoria, BC (traditional Lekwungen lands). He is a Coast Salish artist and member of the Lyackson First Nation of Valdes Island. Thomas's early exposure to First Nations art prints ignited a lifelong passion for Northwest Coast art and eventually led him to aspire to a career in Coast Salish art. Thomas received training in jewellery-making from the late Seletze (Delmar Johnnie) and studied under Kwakwaka'wakw artist Rande Cook in all mediums of Northwest Coast art. Three other artists whose work had an impact on Thomas are Nuu-chah-nulth artist Art Thompson, Haida artist Robert Davidson and Coast Salish artist Susan Point, who is perhaps the most important influence on Dylan Thomas's style. Point is known for her role in inspiring a renewed interest in Coast Salish art. Thomas also spent time studying Salish artworks, such as whorls, rattles and bowls, in galleries and local museums.

In high school, Thomas became interested in mathematical art after his Grade 11 teacher introduced him to the work of M.C. Escher, a graphic artist who made mathematically inspired prints. Thomas began to combine Escher's tessellation style with Coast Salish design. He enjoyed this so much that he began learning more about the role geometry has played in Coast Salish art. Coast Salish art often uses mirror symmetry. Thomas took this technique and added his own twist, mirroring not only vertical (up and down) designs, but also horizontal (side to side) ones.

Dylan Thomas (b. 1986, Canada) | The Moon and the Pond (2010)

Serigraph; 56 x 56 cm

Courtesy of the Artist

Thomas is a practising Buddhist and sees many connections between Buddhist sacred geometry and Coast Salish design and culture. In his artwork, Thomas often makes explicit these connections between the ideas and geometries of Coast Salish spindle whorl designs and Buddhist mandalas. Mandalas, like spindle whorl designs, are geometric forms enclosed within a circle. The form of the spindle whorl can also be compared to the form of the Buddhist prayer wheel. These cross-cultural relationships are important to Thomas, in part because so much of Coast Salish culture and spirituality has been lost. Thomas has stated, “I enjoy doing cross-cultural art because art itself is one of the only practices that can be found in all cultures. Art is one of the things that makes us human, and bridging different cultural art forms helps me to feel the unity of humankind.”

explore: WHAT ARE COAST SALISH AND BUDDHIST DESIGN ELEMENTS?

Coast Salish designs are made of positive and negative elements, unlike the artwork of Haida and other First Nations communities that use formlines, ovoids and U-forms to create their designs. In his artwork, Dylan Thomas uses a combination of both Coast Salish design elements and Buddhist geometries. In Buddhism, as in Coast Salish design, shapes and symbols directly relate to nature. Basic elements of earth, water, air and fire are represented by a square, circle, half-circle and triangle. Here are a few examples of elements to look for in his work:

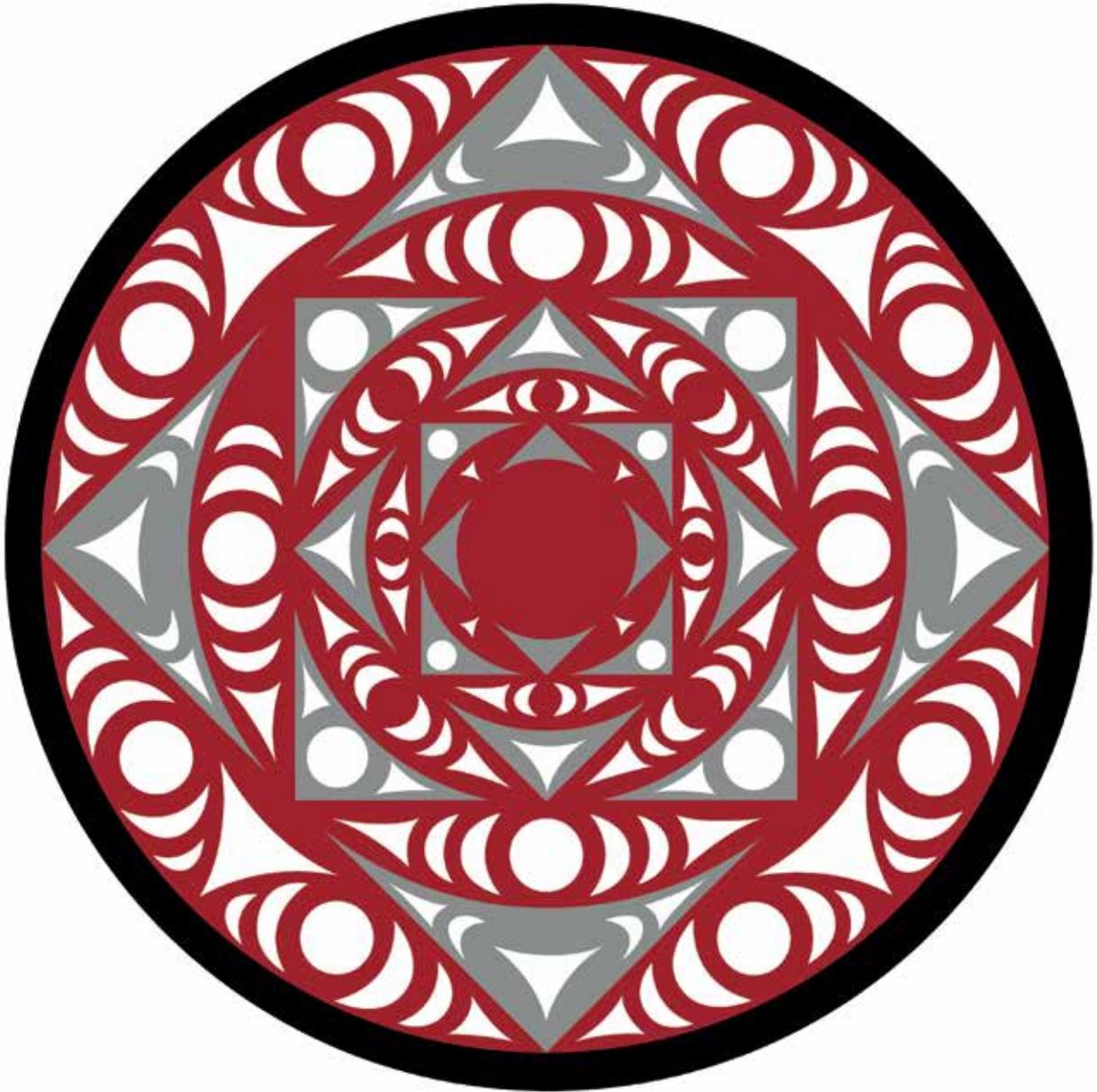
The circle (or the wheel) is one of the oldest symbols in Buddhism and refers to both the natural or universal order, and to the teachings of the Buddha. The circle is seen throughout nature—for example, in the sun and moon—and represents the cycles of nature and human life. It conveys ideas of action, energy and movement, but is also used to define a ritual or ceremonial space. The circle reminds us that it is important to consider how our actions affect ourselves, each other and the generations to come.

The crescent can be understood as the phases of life or phases of the moon, as well as marking the passage of time in seasons rather than in weeks, months or years. The crescent reminds us that the evening hours are the most productive time to teach and counsel, and that the nighttime fire is a tool for visualization as the flames grow bigger. The crescent also mimics the shape of the flames, as the repeated crescent shapes help us focus our mind’s eye on the information being visually conveyed.

The trigon reflects light and has four points, three surface points and a fourth inner point. The trigon reminds us that this quadripartite aspect was central to Coast Salish teachings: four is a ritual number, there are four major directions and they are offered four times. The trigon also reminds us that the medicine wheel is divided into four parts, representing the four aspects of human nature—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

Check out [this helpful video](#) to learn more about Coast Salish design elements:

Qwalsius (Shaun Peterson) | Coast Salish Design Elements 2.0, 2015



Dylan Thomas (b. 1986, Canada) | Mandala (2010)
Serigraph on paper; 55 x 55 cm | Courtesy of the Artist

make: CREATE A CROSS-CULTURAL MANDALA

WHAT ARE MANDALAS?

The mandala is an important theme in Thomas's work, and in the work of numerous artists working in Canada and the United States. Thomas explains that "'Mandala' is a Sanskrit word that means 'circle.' In the Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions, their sacred art often takes a mandala form. These are geometric works of art that often show concentric circles that represent the cosmos from a human perspective. They can be used as a meditation tool, focusing the viewer's attention to help achieve deeper states of meditation."

In the artworks shown here, Thomas interconnects Coast Salish and Buddhist geometries to produce designs that communicate Buddhist ideals of nature, beauty, order, equanimity and community.



Dylan Thomas (b. 1986, Canada) | The Union of Night and Day (2018)

Ink on paper; 56 x 56 cm | Courtesy of the Artist

THE IDEA

This activity is inspired by the cross-cultural artwork created by artist Dylan Thomas. Compare and contrast Dylan Thomas's pieces in this guide. What is similar? What is different?

Take a closer look at how Thomas has used Coast Salish design elements to create his mandalas. How has he used the circle? The crescent? The trigon? Can you find the negative and positive space? (Hint, the negative space is white.)

These works are created using symmetrical radial design. "Symmetrical" simply means that what you do to one side, you do on the other. Our faces are (relatively) symmetrical. If you were to draw a line down the centre of your face, you would discover that each side is very similar. In radial symmetrical design there is a clear centre point and the individual sections of the design radiate outward equally from it. Can you find the centre point in *The Union of Night and Day*? What do you think this work is about? What Buddhist ideas might Thomas have been thinking of when he created this?

Now think of the artwork divided up into four equal sections, like slices of pie. Can you find the repeating patterns and how each section is the same? What do you notice? This is radial symmetry.

You are invited to create your own cross-cultural mandala. You can draw inspiration by researching several styles, like Thomas did. You can also simply choose three geometric shapes to use to create your mandala. This activity will give you the opportunity to explore design, proportion, symmetry and working with abstraction.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED



Paper



Black marker



Pencil



Pencil crayons, markers or paint



Eraser



Black or white heavy paper for mounting (optional)



Scissors



Glue stick for mounting (optional)



Paper plate or other round object to trace for size

THE PROCESS

- ▶ **Step 1:** Using the paper plate, trace a big circle on a piece of paper.
- ▶ **Step 2:** Carefully cut out your circle.
- ▶ **Step 3:** Fold the cut-out circle in half. Make a sharp crease at the fold.
- ▶ **Step 4:** Fold the paper in half again. Make another sharp crease. (Older students can fold the paper one more time if desired.)
- ▶ **Step 5:** Unfold your paper. You will see that your paper is divided into equal parts, “pie pieces,” to help you create a radial symmetrical design.
- ▶ **Step 6:** On a scrap piece of paper, draw your geometric shapes inspired by either Coast Salish design, another cultural design you have researched or geometrical shapes of your choosing.
- ▶ **Step 7:** Create a design in the centre point of the circle. You can decide the proportion of the design, whether it is large or small. If you want to begin your sketch in pencil, draw lightly so that any lines you want to erase disappear. You can begin your design using the black marker if you are feeling brave.
- ▶ **Step 8:** Begin drawing out from the centre design. You may decide to have some of your design touch the edges of each “pie piece,” or you may decide to have a geometric shape that covers several “pie pieces.” If you do decide to create a design proportion that covers several “pie pieces,” you will need to divide the pieces evenly so you can create a radial symmetrical design. What happens if some of your geometrical shapes float within a “pie piece”? Just remember that whatever you do to one, you do to all the others.
- ▶ **Step 9:** If you did your design in pencil, trace over the pencil lines with black marker. Erase any pencil marks that are still showing.
- ▶ **Step 10:** Colour in your mandala with pencil crayons, markers or paint. Think about the positive and negative spaces for balance.
- ▶ **Step 11:** If desired, glue your mandala onto a heavy piece of paper to mount it. Display in the class.

REFLECTIONS

As a class, look at all the finished work and discuss similarities and differences in colours, shapes and compositions. Discuss the process. How easy or hard was it to create the work? What was the most interesting aspect of designing in a circle? What inspired your design? Did you find the process relaxing? Or did the design require a lot of concentration? Why or why not?

PROJECT EXTENSION

Create collaborative mandala trading cards using 3 x 5 unlined index cards. When each of you has a card, divide into four or five groups.

Put your name on the back of your card. Using a ruler for measurement, find the centre of the index card. Mark with a dot and draw a design in the centre of the card. Give the card to the person next to you. This student will draw the next radial symmetrical design on the card, using one of the chosen geometrical shapes. You will do the same thing on the card from the person next to you. Trade again until each student in the group has had an opportunity to add a design element to each person's card, and the cards are all back with their original owners. Colour if desired.

Compare and contrast the cards in your group. Did they turn out the same with everyone working on them? Are you surprised by how similar or different your cards turned out?

CONNECTIONS

What similarities can you discover between the art of Tenzing Rigdol and Dylan Thomas? Would it make sense to look at Dylan Thomas's work while listening to one of Pauline Oliveros's compositions?



VOCABULARY

Abstract—A style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

- The artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it.
- The artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

Abstract Expressionism—The term applied to new forms of abstract art developed by American painters in the 1940s and 1950s. It is often characterized by gestural brush strokes or mark making, and the impression of spontaneity.

Action painting/painters—A term for the works produced by dribbling, splashing or otherwise unconventional techniques of applying paint to a canvas. Action painters worked from the 1940s until the early 1960s. Their approach to painting emphasized the physical act of painting as an essential part of the finished work.

Aesthetic—The branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of beauty and taste.

Avant-garde—Art that is innovative, introducing or exploring new forms or subject matter.

Background—The part furthest back in the picture; for example, the area of scenery behind the main object.

Buddha—Literally “one who is Awakened”; an honorific for one who has achieved perfect knowledge.

Buddhism—The fourth-largest religion in the world, which began in India about 2,500 years ago. Buddhist practices can be traced back to the teachings of the historical Buddha, an Indian prince who lived sometime between the sixth and fourth century BCE.

Calligraphy—A script, usually cursive, although sometimes angular, produced chiefly by brush; especially Chinese, Japanese or Arabic writing of high aesthetic value.

Coast Salish design—The design typical of Coast Salish art, comprising ovals (or circles), trigons, crescents and extended crescents (which resemble, but are not, u-forms). The design is not made up of outlines, but rather positive and negative elements, framed with silhouettes. The Coast Salish are Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, living in British Columbia, Canada, and the U.S. states of Washington and Oregon.

Collaborative—Working with someone to produce or create an artwork.

Collage—A term that describes both the technique and the resulting work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other ephemera are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface.

Composition

- The arrangement of elements within a work of art.
- A piece of music someone has written.
- The process or skill of writing music.

Contemporary art(ist)—Art created in the last thirty years, and the artists who produce it. Most contemporary artists are living artists.

Deep Listening—A process of listening to learn. It requires the temporary suspension of judgment and a willingness to receive new information, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Deity—A supernatural being, like a goddess or god, that is worshipped by people who believe it controls or exerts force over some aspect of the world.

Enso—A symbol and one of the most famous motifs of Japanese Zen calligraphy. The symbol relates to emptiness, unity and infinity. It is also closely linked to the act of meditation, which is an important aspect of Zen practice.

Electronic music—Music that employs electronic musical instruments, digital instruments and circuitry-based music technology.

First Nations—A widely accepted term used to refer to the collective nations of the first people of Canada. The term came into use in the 1970s to replace the word “Indian,” which many people found offensive. The term “First Nations Peoples” refers to the Indigenous people of Canada, both status and non-status. Many Indigenous peoples have also adopted the term “First Nation” to replace the word “Band” in the name of their community.

Focal point—The area in a composition to which the viewer’s eye is naturally drawn. Focal points may be of any shape, size or colour.

Improvisation—The technique of making up a performance as you go along, composing music, uttering a speech, executing an action or arranging objects without previous preparation.

Mandala—A circle or geometric diagram used as an aid to meditation.

Meditation—Techniques of mental development and training to achieve qualities of calmness, clarity and presence of mind.

Medium—This can refer to the type of art (for example, painting, sculpture, printmaking), as well as the materials an artwork is made of.

Mindfulness—The basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we are doing.

Mirror symmetry—The term describing an image or shape that is the same on both sides of a central dividing line; one side is like a mirror image of the other side.

Monochromatic—Consisting of one colour or hue.

Performance art—Artworks that are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted.

Process (artistic)—The method by which an artist actually does art or creates artworks.

Samurai—A Japanese warrior who was a member of the feudal military aristocracy.

Sanskrit—An ancient Indian language that belongs to the Indo-Aryan group and is the root of many, but not all, languages of India. Its origins can be traced back approximately 3,500 years.

Sculpture—Three-dimensional art made by one of four basic processes: carving, modelling, casting, constructing.

Site-specific—Refers to a work of art designed specifically for a particular location and that has a relationship with the location.

Spindle whorl—A traditional tool for spinning wool. The disc on the spindle whorl was often carved or decorated.

Sumi-e—The Japanese art of monochromatic ink painting.

Symmetry—A technique in which the elements of a painting or drawing balance each other out. Symmetry can be produced by the objects themselves, but it can also relate to colours and compositional techniques.

Tessellations—Patterns made with polygons that completely fill a space with no gaps, spaces or overlaps.

Thangka—A Tibetan hanging scroll, traditionally made to travel with Buddhist monks from town to town, used to teach people about Buddhism.

Wabi-sabi—A way of living that focuses on finding beauty within the imperfections of life and accepting peacefully the natural cycle of growth and decay.

Zen—The Japanese school of Buddhism that grew out of the Chan (meditation) tradition of China. According to Zen doctrine, enlightenment can be attained through direct intuitive insight.

Zen master—A term that arose in the first half of the twentieth century which is sometimes used to refer to individuals who teach Zen meditation and practices, usually implying that these individuals have undergone longtime study and received subsequent authorization to teach and share the tradition themselves.

Thank you!

It takes many creative, generous people to create a Teacher Resource Guide. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this project, and to YOU, the reader/maker, for making these ideas come alive.

We are grateful to the Lkwungen-speaking communities, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, on whose traditional lands the AGGV stands and is able to do this work.



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