

# Lesson Plan: Symbolic Tattoos 1

Inked History: Learning about symbolism and tattoos (part 1 of 3)

**Subjects:** Social Studies, History, Art

**Grade-level:** Elementary [4-5], Middle [6-8], High [9-12]

**Time required:** 45 minutes

**Related links:** [Guampedia: Contemporary Tattoo](#), [On The Question of Tattoo by Ancestral CHamorus](#), [Ancient CHamoru Body Modification](#), [People of Pacific Cultures](#)

## Description

Students will learn about the history of tattoos on nearby islands, and about the relative lack of tattoos on Guam.

## Objectives/Skills

- Students will discuss the practice of tattooing as an art form.
- Students will learn about symbolism and relate this information to tattoos.

## Questions or Assessment

- What significance have tattoos traditionally held among Pacific Islander communities?
- Why do you think it is not as prominent on Guam?
- Are tattoos art?
- How is symbolism used in tattooing?

## Procedure

*Teacher prep.* None

### ***History of Tattoos in the Region (10 minutes)***

1. Using available resources, provide students with a history of tattoos in Pacific Islander communities.
  - **Note:** Guampedia has some good entries on tattooing (and the relative lack thereof) on Guam. For information regarding other islands, see Guampedia's People of Pacific Cultures and seek out textbooks, other online resources, or the resources listed in the for further reading in the Guampedia entries.
2. Ask students to share their understanding of the importance of tattoos.
3. List these ideas on the board.

### ***Tattoos and Symbolism (15 minutes)***

1. Guide students through a discussion on symbolism and artwork.
  - **Note:** This need not be an in-depth discussion. Most students will have already touched upon issues dealing with symbolism in both Language Arts classes and Art class. Use this time to gauge the classroom's understanding of these concepts, and help re-enforce them.
2. Ask students what symbolism means to them.
  - Most likely this question is too broad; however, it is useful to initially frame a topic in such a manner.
3. Follow-up with another question: What examples of symbolism can you think of?
4. List responses on the board.
5. With elementary and middle school students, spend additional time explaining and re-enforcing an understanding of symbolism. Emphasize the representation of ideas through a symbol.
6. With high school and advanced middle school students, expand upon their understanding of symbolism by having them identifying and analyzing examples in their recent course readings.

### ***Tattoos, Symbolism and Guam (15 minutes)***

1. Prompt students to discuss traditional symbols on Guam. Feel free to use the relevant article on Guampedia that focuses on this topic.
2. If conversation lags, ask students to list places on island where they have seen symbols. List these examples on the board. Then, working through the list, ask the class to call out the meaning or history behind each symbol.
  - With high school and advanced middle school students: Discuss historical symbols with the class, and the segue into an expanded conversation about modern symbols, their significance and power, and their predominance in contemporary culture. Some questions to consider:
3. Are people more/less/equally valuing of symbols today as they were in the past?
- From where does the power of a symbol come? Society at large? Creators of the symbol? Individual interpreters? Are symbols useful? Dangerous?

**Note:** There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The exercise is simply seeking to prompt student into identifying and thinking critically about the symbols they encounter in daily life.

### **Recap (5 minutes)**

Recap what we've done and learned in the lesson:

“Today we learned about the rich history of tattoos throughout many Pacific Island communities. We also discussed the interesting, relative lack of tattoos among CHamoru culture. Lastly, we began considering traditional symbols in Guam culture and theorized tattoo designs which could be appropriate for this history.”

Ask students for their favorite parts of the lesson.

## Lesson Plan: Symbolic Tattoos 2

Inked History: Creating our own visual culture (Part 2 of 3)

**Time required:** 40-50 minutes

**Related links:** [Guampedia](#):

[Symbolism in CHamoru Culture](#)

**Materials required:** Henna (optional), non-permanent markers (optional), paper and colored pencils

### Description

In this lesson, students will practice designing their own symbolic tattoos.

### Objectives/Skills

- Students will practice the previous lesson on symbolism and tattoos by creating their own symbolic tattoos.
- Students will discuss and learn the process of creating their own symbols.

### Questions or Assessment

- What ideas and intentions go into designing your symbolic tattoo?
- What are you trying to convey to the world? Is it personal, perhaps secretive? Or designed for others to understand?
- How does the process of creating a symbolic tattoo provide insight into the history of tattooing in the Pacific region?

## Procedure

### **Teacher prep**

Familiarize yourself with the application (and dangers of staining carpet) of henna if planning to use it in this lesson (optional).

### **Recalling the Previous Lesson (15 minutes)**

1. Ask students to recall the information from the previous lesson:
  - Specifically, ask them to list:
    - The significance of symbolic tattoos
    - Examples they remember
    - Symbols that are important to CHamoru culture ([latte](#), [slingstones](#), [sea turtles](#), [carabao](#), etc.)
2. Tie these lists together in a brief overview of the significant of symbolic tattoos to cultural systems (e.g. a means of remembrance, sharing affiliation, private/public honoring, etc). Explain that there are many powerful purposes to tattoos, and that the class will now create their own examples.

### **Creating our Own Symbolic Tattoos (20 minutes)**

1. Have students sketch ideas of their tattoos onto pieces of paper.
2. Walk around the class and encourage students to be creative.
3. If students are stumped, suggest they think about symbols that they are drawn to (favorite sports team, movie, brand, etc.) and encourage them to meld these symbols together or use them as a jumping-off point for their own unique symbol.
4. Once they have gotten a few ideas down (roughly 5-7 minutes), have students apply their tattoos onto themselves.
5. Have students draw their tattoos onto their skin in one of the following means:

- If you (as a teacher) are brave enough, have them use henna. But be warned that it can stain clothes and floors permanently, and as such, should probably be done with smaller groups of older students.
  - Have students use non-permanent markers to draw (small) tattoos onto themselves. Or, if you do not wish to have students draw onto themselves, have them draw and color-in a tattoo onto a piece of construction paper, and apply it to their skin with tape.
6. **Note:** If using henna or markers to draw on students, you should check with your school’s administration regarding this activity. You may need to have parental/guardian consent forms.
  7. **Note:** During this part of the lesson, it is likely that students will become excited and loud. Remind them that this is an art activity and that they should focus on creating something memorable.
  8. **Note:** At this point, if you are not planning to continue onto the third lesson, lead a sharing session where students volunteer to present their tattoos to the class, as such:
    - Have a student display their tattoo, then have the class guess it’s meaning. After some brief guesses, have the student explain the symbolic meaning behind their example of visual culture.

### **Recap (5 minutes)**

Recap what we’ve done and learned in the lesson:

“Today we’ve practiced creating our own examples of visual culture by creating symbolic tattoos. Using the information we learned yesterday about symbols and the practice of tattooing among our neighboring Pacific islands (that tattoos can have significant meaning to individuals and among people, and that they may serve numerous important purposes), we have participated in this same long cultural tradition by creating our own symbols of meaning. We’ve applied these symbols to our own skins in a form of (temporary) tattoo, and in the process, come to better understand the thinking and design that goes into the creation of every tattoo.”

Ask students for their favorite parts of the lesson.

## Lesson Plan: Symbolic Tattoos 3

Inked History: Interpreting another’s symbolic tattoo (Part 3 of 3)

**Time required:** 40-55 minutes

**Related links:** [Guampedia: Contemporary Tattoo](#), [On The Question of Tattoo by Ancestral CHamorus](#)

**Note:** This lesson series may be completed with the previous exercise, or can be continued to include this section (which focuses on inter-cultural interpretations of symbols).

### Objectives/Skills

- Students will, in groups or individually, compare their examples of symbolic tattoos and try to determine meaning without aid from the tattoo creator.
- Students will learn that interpretation without engagement is difficult, and that seemingly confusing symbols can have deep, significant meaning.

### Questions or Assessment

- Was it difficult guessing what the tattoos meant?
- What information did you need to determine the meaning? Would you have been able to obtain this information without talking to the individual or group who created the symbolic tattoo?

## Procedure

**Teacher prep.** None

### **Creating a Symbolic Tattoo (5 – 15 minutes)**

1. In groups of 2-5, have students derive a symbolic tattoo that they would all agree to wear.
  - Ask them to do so quietly, because the symbolism of their design must remain a secret from other groups.
2. Alternatively, if time is an issue, skip part 1 and have student individual recall the tattoos they created in the previous lesson.
  - If they still have the tattoo (e.g. if it were done with Henna), then they can show their artwork as such.
  - Or, if the tattoo is gone, they should recreate it on a piece of paper.
3. Emphasize to students that they will be sharing their symbols, and as such, they should design something that they are willing to explain to their peers.

***Sharing our Symbols (20 minutes)***

1. Have students, in groups or individuals, partner up with two other groups/individuals.
2. Each group has 4 minutes to present their symbol to their two partnering groups/peers.
3. The partnering groups/peers must guess the meaning of these symbols during this time. As the instructor, you may decide to restrict the guessing to simple yes or no responses, or allow the tattoo-creating group to answer with more detail (e.g. “warmer”, or “colder”).
4. At the end of 4 minutes, the group/individual who created the tattoo has a two minutes to explain the meaning of their tattoo and address any questions their partnering groups/individuals may have.

***Analyzing the Interpretation Exercise (10 minutes)***

1. Ask students how the exercise went. Was it easy or hard?
  - List their descriptions on the board
2. Ask students why it was so hard to guess the symbolism of the object. Was it because they were unable to communicate with the person/people who created the tattoo?
3. Lead a brief discussion about the difficulty of understanding intentions and meaning without communicating with the creating entity.
  - Explain to students that it is difficult to understand the meaning of a symbolic tattoo without engaging with the community/individual that creates it.

***Recap (5 minutes)***

Recap what we've done and learned in the lesson:

“Today we've practiced creating and sharing our symbolic tattoos. We tried to guess the meaning behind these symbols without the aid of speaking with their creators, and we've learned in the process that it's immensely difficult to do such. And, as we've learned from previous lessons, tattoos can have very significant meanings; so, it's important to understand the skin art of other communities and cultures through open communication.”

Ask students for their favorite parts of the lesson.