Teacher Resource

ROBERT HOULE:
RED IS BEAUTIFUL

DECEMBER 2021 – APRIL 2022

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CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

VISUAL ARTS, MEDIA ARTS, LITERACY, SOCIAL STUDIES AND HUMANITIES, FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT (FNMI) STUDIES, LANGUAGE
EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Robert Houle (b. 1947) is one of the most influential First Nations artists to break into the contemporary art world. From growing up in Sandy Bay First Nation (Kaa-wii-kwe-tawang-kak), attending residential school, to pursuing extensive academic studies and becoming an internationally recognized artist, Houle has played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between contemporary Indigenous art and the Canadian art scene.

His work blends abstraction, modernism and conceptualism with First Nations aesthetics and histories. As a contemporary artist, he has played a significant role in defining First Nations identity. He draws on Western art conventions to tackle aspects of colonization and its post-colonial aftermath.

Houle is known for his abstract style; he was influenced by Abstract Expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Jasper Johns, and the pure abstraction and geometry of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and Ukrainian artist and art theorist Kazimir Malevich. Houle brings an Indigenous abstract tradition to this history. In the meeting of these two artistic traditions, Houle gives new voice to modern abstraction that values the spiritual qualities of colour, Anishinaabe geometry and Indigenous sacred belongings.

As a residential school survivor, Houle also brought the residential school era into sharp relief. His work Sandy Bay (1998-99) dealt with his own experience of being torn from his home. Later, in 2009, he began to deal with his memories of abuse in the school through a series of visceral drawings and paintings.


Robert Houle’s work challenged audience expectations of what First Nations art looks like. Houle stayed independent from the trends and stereotypical cultural performances of the day. In addition to being a curator and artist, his roles as writer, educator and critic created change in museums and public art galleries, initiating critical discussions about the history and representation of Indigenous peoples.
SPOTLIGHT I

RED IS BEAUTIFUL, 1970

Robert Houle, Red is Beautiful, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 45.5 x 61 cm. An exhibition developed with objects on loan from the collection of the Canadian Museum of History. © Robert Houle.

GUIDED OBSERVATION

• Take 30 seconds to look closely at this painting. Write five words that come to mind that communicate a feeling or an emotion.

• What is your first impression of this work? What does this work remind you of?

• What words would you use to describe this artwork to someone who has never seen it?

• What emotions or feelings do you associate with the colour red? Are they different from your classmates?
CREATIVE RESPONSE - PART A

Using materials of your choice, create a visual response to the theme of “love”. Love can be anything you interpret it to be, a literal translation or conceptual one.

• Give your work a title and share your response with your classmates.

CONTEXT

Responding to an assignment to paint “love”, Houle’s abstraction, *Red is Beautiful*, consists of two geometric forms set on the north and south planes of the canvas, richly painted in saturations of reds and pinks. The geometric shapes are set against a flat red background, where the forms almost converge in the centre.

*Red is Beautiful*, also the title of the exhibition, was a work produced during a time when Houle was interested in the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns and Barnett Newman. The colour field painting of Abstract Expressionism – movement with gesture, line, shape and colour that evoke strong emotional and spiritual reactions – was a perfect vehicle of expression to inspire Houle’s art form with his own experiences in Indigenous spirituality.

Influences of modernist art and Houle's Saulteaux culture come together in his abstract paintings. Inspired by Carrie A. Lynford’s book, *Ojibwa Crafts* (1943), Houle is drawn to the spiritual relationships between patterns in Ojibwa designs and traditional ceremonial objects. By incorporating a new visual language into his artform – the sacred geometry of First Nations art – Houle explores the interconnectedness of shapes and colour to express the spiritual and emotional.

Rooted in an Indigenous abstract tradition, Houle’s work values the immediacy, gestural, spiritual qualities of colour, the Earth and the sacred in his work.

CREATIVE RESPONSE - PART B

Revisit your visual representation on the theme “love” from your Creative Response – Part A.

• How does your interpretation of love differ from Houle’s?
• How are your interpretations the same?
• What would you add?
• What would you change?
• How would a change in colour impact the emotion?
GUIDED OBSERVATION

• Create a narrative of the scene depicted in this painting. Who is the main character in this story? How does the artist draw your attention to the main character?

• What do you think the blue and red colour fields on each end of the work represent?

• Where have you heard the term “Kanata”? What might it reference?

Here is a close-up of the panel in the middle.

• Can you spot the two Indigenous figures in a canoe? Are they arriving at the scene or leaving?

• Why do you think Houle added this detail?
The Death of General Wolfe (1770) is a painting by the British-American artist, Benjamin West.

The event depicted in the painting is a pivotal moment in the Seven Years’ War. Called the Battle of Quebec, or the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the death of General Wolfe, in 1759, saw the British prevail over French colonies in North America. The First Nations man (Delaware) at the foot of the painting is seen as a silent witness to the formation of the Dominion of Canada, something that Robert Houle noticed when he first saw the painting in 1991 on display at the National Gallery of Canada.

In his work, Kanata, Robert Houle interprets West’s subject matter and challenges the historical inaccuracy of the idea that the founding nations of Canada were just England and France. Kanata is made up of four canvases, which at first glance resembles a flag. The reproduction of West’s painting is centrally located in Kanata and flanked by a monochrome blue panel on the left and a red panel on the right.

Houle contrasts the First Nations (Delaware) warrior, who is in colour, to the otherwise sepia-toned surroundings. By creating a visual invitation to focus on the warrior, Houle draws attention to the misrepresentation of Indigenous people as passive observers of history or voyeurs merely observing their surroundings. In doing so, Houle reverses the power relations in order to reframe North American history from an Indigenous perspective. While centring a First Nations perspective, he reframes the role of the Delaware warrior and First Nations people as the central to the formations of Canada since time immemorial.

Canada comes from a word in the Mohawk language, “kanata”, meaning village. It was misspelt by Cartier in 1535, was never corrected, and thus misspelt in the constitution of 1867. Houle’s title, Kanata, is a reminder that Canada’s legitimacy as a nation is due to displacement of its original inhabitants and the dispossession of land, language and culture.
EXTENDED EXPLORATION

Research the terms below.

Colonize:

Decolonize:

By drawing focus to the Delaware warrior in Kanata, how does Houle decolonize this painting?
COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Robert Houle created several other works that incorporate Benjamin West’s figure of the Delaware warrior, including *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, 2017.

Compare the warrior figures in each of the images above.

- How are they similar? How are they different?
- How does the setting and environment impact how you view the figure?
SPOTLIGHT 3
ABORIGINAL TITLE, 1989–90

Robert Houle, Aboriginal Title, 1989-90. Oil on canvas, 228 x 167.6 cm. Acquired with the assistance of the Alfred Wavell Peene and Susan Nottle Peene Memorial, 1992. © Robert Houle. Photo Robert McNair.
GUIDED OBSERVATION

Look closely at the title of this work and the dates listed on them.

• Why has the artist selected these specific dates?
• What role do you think colour and text play in communicating meaning? Is it effective?
• How many different meanings around the colour red can you find? In your opinion, why does Houle pair the colour red with an artwork he names Aboriginal Title? How many different meanings around the colour red can you find?

CONTEXT

In Aboriginal Title, Houle addresses ongoing themes of history and contemporary issues that centre Indigenous self-determination and self-government. The term ‘Aboriginal Title’ refers to the inherent rights of Indigenous nations to land and territories. The dates on the painting reference:

• The Royal Proclamation, 1763;
• The British North American Act, 1867;
• The Indian Act, 1876; and the Constitution Act, 1982.

The Royal Proclamation, 1763, set out the terms of European settlement on Indigenous lands across North America. The Proclamation claimed the land for King George III. Settlers were forbidden to purchase land from Indigenous Peoples; they could only purchase land from the Crown, and only the Crown was allowed to buy land from Indigenous Peoples. The proclamation was reaffirmed in the British North American Act, 1867 and again in the Constitution Act, 1982.

The Indian Act, 1876 is the legal document used by the Canadian government to control most elements of First Nations life in Canada, including who receives federally recognized status, management of land, reserve administration and education. The Act does not cover Inuit or Metis peoples.

The government introduced the Act in 1876 as a way of replacing earlier legislation that aimed to destroy Indigenous peoples’ cultures and assimilate them into Euro-Canadian society. The government has made amendments over the years, including:

Changes in 1894 and 1920 decreed that all First Nations children had to attend residential or industrial schools;

In 1884, the government made it illegal for First Nations to practice ceremonies (example – Potlach Ban);

By 1927, it was illegal for First Nations to hire lawyers and pursue land claims against the government, without the government’s consent.

Many aspects of the Act have been reformed, but it has been a slow process. It was only in 2017 that the Canadian government agreed to end sex discrimination in the Act, ensuring that First Nations women could get their status back, and pass it on to their children (in previous amendments, First Nations women lost their status if they married someone of non-status; any children they had would not inherit status).
The Constitution Act of 1982, specifically Section 35, was a significant addition to the Constitution as it recognizes and affirms the rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. When the Act was being redrafted in the early 1980s, this recognition was not on the initial plan. Demonstrations across Canada finally resulted in the addition of Section 35, which states:

1) The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.

2) In this Act, “aboriginal peoples of Canada” includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

3) For greater certainty, in subsection (1) “treaty rights” includes rights that now exist by way of land claims agreements or may be so acquired.

4) Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the aboriginal and treaty rights referred to in subsection (1) are guaranteed equally to male and female persons.

Unfortunately, the history of these proclamations and acts represent a long pattern of broken treaties. Wampum treaties were Indigenous legal agreements that set out the relationship between First Nations and Europeans. Both sides referred to them as peace and friendship treaties, establishing terms for sharing the land. Beginning in the 1700s, the British Crown established a paper treaty process between First Nations and settlers that acknowledged Nation-to-Nation relationships. The governments that came after these treaties (both British and Canadian) have not honoured the spirit and intent of these treaties.

**CREATIVE RESPONSE**

In this creative response, reflect on the importance and significance of dates that are meaningful to you and/or your family.

Choose four important dates (a date, a month or a year) and reflect on the following:

- What is significant about your selection? How do they connect to your history and/or your family?
- What colour will you choose to set your selected dates against? Why will this be meaningful?
- What would you title your piece?
ACTIVITY GUIDE

In this section, create a presentation for your class based on this mixed media work by Robert Houle.

Take an inventory of the visual elements in this artwork. What clues does this work offer the viewer about its subject? What are things you might not understand about it?

If given the opportunity, what are three questions you would ask Robert Houle about this work?

1.
2.
3.
EXPLORE

Research the Oka Crisis or the Kanehsatake Resistance that documents the protests of the development of a golf course on the traditional territory which included a burial ground of the Mohawk or Kanien’kehá:ka – People of the Flint.

Share five key findings from your research:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

CREATE

Create a visual interpretation of the Oka Crisis or the Kanehsatake Resistance from your perspective.

Using a variety of artmaking materials, such as magazines, markers or paints – think about your creative response. Be sure to include a variety of texts, colours and images as you think through your composition. Here are a few things to keep in mind as you plan:

• What is your main message?
• How will you draw focus to the main subject in your work?
• How will the materials and colours you have chosen reflect your message?

Your final piece can be digital or mixed media.

Share your creations at #AGOSchools