

Teacher Resource

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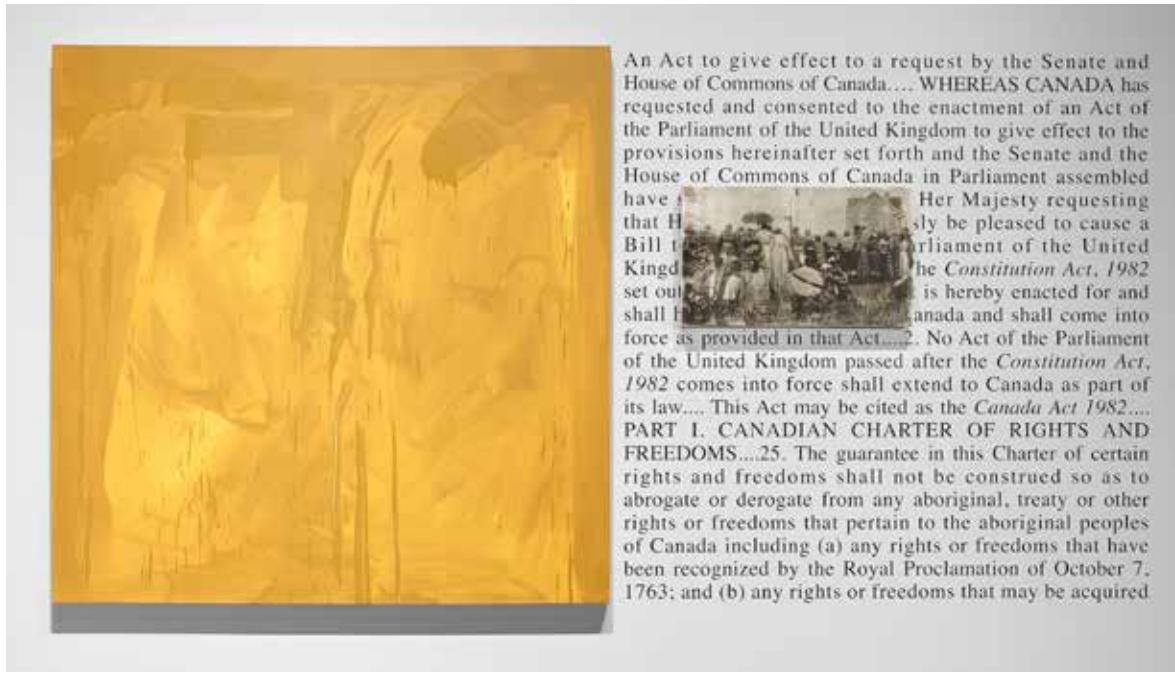
SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS: Grade 7 – Grade 12

CURRICULUM LINKS: Visual Arts, Science, Geography, Social Studies

ROBERT HOULE PREMISES FOR SELF-RULE: CONSTITUTION ACT

1982, 1994

"Art has the capacity to lift people's spirits. Culture is an essential ingredient to any improvement in social and economic conditions. For that reason the special status of native peoples must be acknowledged and protected not only in a constitutional but also in cultural context." —Robert Houle



Robert Houle, Premises for Self-Rule: Constitution Act, 1982, 1994. Oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, and laser cut vinyl. Painting: 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Photograph on canvas: 50 x 80 cm. Laser cut vinyl on acrylic sheet: 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Purchased with funds from the Estate of Mary Ellen Ash, 2014.

GUIDED OBSERVATION

- How would you describe this artwork to someone who has never seen it? What is your first impression of this work?
- What do the colours on the canvas remind you of? How would you describe the way paint is applied to the canvas? What feeling does it evoke?
- What is your impression of the text on the work? How do the images and text work together?



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CONTEXT

"Throughout his career Houle has created change in museums and public art galleries, initiating critical discussions about the history and representation of Indigenous peoples. His work has deepened the understanding of cultural appropriation in museums and art galleries...Cultural appropriation typically refers to a power dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed. For Houle, cultural appropriation is about Western culture's erasing and ignoring of Indigenous voices by misrepresenting its cultures." –Shirley Madill

Sovereignty, nationalism and decolonization are issues at the heart of Houle's *Premises for Self-Rule* series. *Premises for Self-Rule: Constitution Act, 1982* addresses the current state of (and arguments for) Indigenous self-determination and self-government. The work is underscored by a history of broken treaties, continued colonial oppression and the struggle for inherent rights.

Houle combines an abstract swath of ochre paint on the left with an excerpt of the Canadian government's 1982 Constitution Act. Over the text, Houle places an image of a group of Kainai (Blackfoot) women, reproduced from a 1907 postcard from Fort Macleod, Alberta, given to Houle by fellow artist Faye HeavyShield (born 1953). Together, the image and text emphasize how Indigenous women's power was taken away under colonialism but could return under self-government (and is potentially protected under the current charter). The full text of this section reads:

The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedom that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada including: any rights or freedoms that have been recognized by the Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763; and any rights or freedoms that now exist by way of land claim agreements or may be so acquired.

Constitution Act is last in a series of five works in which Houle addresses historic and contemporary issues of Indigenous self-determination and self-government. The other four tableaux address: The Royal Proclamation, 1763; the British North American Act, 1867; Treaty I, 1871; and the Indian Act, 1876.

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 from stealing land from Indigenous Peoples, instead they could only purchase land from the Crown, and only the Crown was allowed to buy land from Indigenous Peoples.

The Proclamation also states the following:

- That Indigenous (Aboriginal) title has existed and continues to exist;
- That all land is Indigenous until transferred by treaty.

Ultimately, the Proclamation set the groundwork for treaties in Canada and asserts the importance of Nation-to-Nation agreements. The proclamation was reaffirmed in the British North American Act, 1867 and again in 1982's Constitution Act. Treaty I, 1871 is how Houle's ancestors formed an international agreement with the Crown, one consistently broken by Canada. Self-government became a rallying point for negotiations with Canada.

The Indian Act, 1876 stands out in the series for breaking treaty law and forcing First Nations into a wardship relationship with their former allies.



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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A NATION-TO-NATION AGREEMENT?

Unfortunately, the history of these proclamations and acts represent a long history of broken treaties. Wampum treaties were Indigenous legal agreements, which 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) did not and have not honoured the spirit and intent of these treaties.

Section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act:

Houle's series does not address Section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act. This is a significant section because then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau omitted it in his original proposal. Indigenous Peoples across Canada were concerned that existing agreements around Indigenous rights would no longer apply when Britain transferred constitutional power to Canada. Demonstrations across Canada finally resulted in the addition of Section 35, which states:

- (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.

A NOTE ABOUT ABSTRACTION

Although abstract painting caused a stir when it emerged in the Canadian art scene in the 1900s as a new style, there is an extensive history of abstraction within First Nations traditions. Indigenous artists have long been experimenting with perspective, colour, line, geometry and surfaces. Maps, stories and histories, for example, were painted on hide, bone, stone and wood in patterns rich with meaning that could be read by the Nations that created them. Their work influenced ground-breaking American abstract painters, who subsequently inspired an entire generation of abstract painters across Canada.

As Robert Houle describes:

"As an artist, I never capitulated to the notion that modernity somehow excluded me racially, because abstraction has always been a spiritual and narrative part of my Saulteaux visual culture. I recall, as a young man in my First Nation community, young girls being asked to go into the bush during their first moon and to start collecting leaves from the trees, folding them and biting them to make abstract patterns for their personal quillwork and beadwork designs. This was abstraction using your body. There are many other examples used by boys, and later in life by shamans."

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Robert Houle (Saulteaux, born 1947) is a curator, educator and artist. He was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba to parents Gladys and Solomon Houle. The eldest of fifteen children, Houle was raised Roman Catholic and Saulteaux. As a child, the Canadian government sent Houle to The Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Hyacinth School Residential Schools in Sandy Bay (Kaa-wii-kwe-tawang-kak). He survived 12 years in the residential school system.

From 1977 to 1981, Houle was the first Indigenous Curator of Contemporary Indigenous Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) in Ottawa. He resigned in protest after the contemporary Indigenous works he had been collecting were categorized as 'anthropology' by the museum.



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EXTENDED EXPLORATION

- How does the text, the image and the yellow abstraction function together to convey a message or a feeling? How does it change your experience of the work?
- How does learning about the Wampum belt treaties and Nation-to-Nation agreement change how you think about Canadian history?
- Read about Section 35 here: https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/constitution_act_1982_section_35/). What are the main areas of contention discussed?

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