

THE  
BRITISH  
MUSEUM

# Art & Design: Symbols



**Painted wood model of the Bear or Goose House**  
From Kayang, British Columbia, North America  
AD 1890s

Guide for teachers 4

## Art & Design guides for teachers

The collection of the British Museum has inspired artists for hundreds of years and is a rich source of ideas and stimulation for teachers and students alike. This series of ten guides is intended to help primary and secondary teachers to use the objects in the British Museum collection for teaching art and design. This will support students' research skills, knowledge and understanding in order to make their practical work more meaningful and contextualised.

Each guide focuses on a topic. Each topic is analysed through four or five themes, each of which is illustrated with a museum object, which in turn represent different historical periods and world cultures. These topics, themes and objects have been specially chosen so that you and your students can use them as starting points to explore the collection further, either at the Museum or in the classroom. Each guide ends with points for classroom discussion and brief ideas for starting off activities and projects. The guides in the series are:

- 1 Containers
- 2 Sculpture
- 3 Textiles
- 4 Symbols
- 5 Celebration
- 6 The Natural World
- 7 Identity
- 8 Gods and spirits
- 9 Objects in motion
- 10 Death and the afterlife

Most of the objects have been taken from the Museum's online database, available through: [www.britishmuseum.org/explore/introduction.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/introduction.aspx). There you can find high quality images which can be copied into your own presentations for the classroom or for students to download. Fuller details of each object are given at the end of each guide.

## Contextual understanding

In order to develop their critical thinking, students should examine the following when considering any museum object:

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Origin:    | Who made it? Where and when was it made? |
| Materials: | What is it made from?                    |
| Process:   | How was it made?                         |
| Function:  | What was it used for?                    |
| Meaning:   | What does it mean?                       |

Once students have understood the context, they can analyse the form and decoration of the object which are usually determined or influenced by all these aspects.

## World cultures

The guides are not based around a particular cultural or geographical region. If you wish to focus your study on, for example, objects from Africa then use the list below, where the guides which contain objects from particular regions have been grouped.

### **Africa**

Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Identity, Sculpture, Symbols, Textiles.

### **The Americas**

Celebration, Containers, Gods and spirits, Symbols, Textiles, Natural World.

### **Asia**

Celebration, Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Objects in motion, Sculpture.

### **Europe**

Celebration, Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Identity, Objects in motion, Sculpture, Textiles, Natural World.

### **Middle East**

Gods and spirits, Sculpture, Natural World.

### **Oceania**

Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Sculpture, Symbols, Natural World.

## Cross-curricular links

### **Citizenship**

Many of these topics tap into citizenship themes such as local and national identity, globalisation and global issues, and the impact of the media.

### **History**

The objects are from a variety of historical contexts and periods. Research and discussions about the use of clothing for status and the importance of symbols, for example, are central to exploring images as evidence in history.

### **Geography**

Examining objects from specific cultures is an excellent way of understanding how humans interact and cope with living and surviving in different environments.

### **Religious Education**

Many of these objects have some spiritual significance. Those relating to the afterlife and deities are ideal starting points for considering similarities and differences in belief systems.

## Symbols

Symbols depicted on objects allow us to decode some of the meanings behind them and understand better the cultures that made and used them. On some occasions, the object itself, such as an item of clothing or a piece of regalia, becomes the symbol. The motivations behind the use of symbols are varied: to impose power, to assert position, to protect the wearer or as identification with a family or community. Where not all members of a society are literate, symbols are crucial in communicating ideas or affinities. They can be representational or abstract, individual or repeated.

## Relationships with the gods

Symbols can denote a relationship with a god or spirit or adherence to a particular belief system. These can be public or personal, and can take the form of clothing or jewellery.

The symbol of the scarab beetle was prevalent in Ancient Egypt in jewellery, as a hieroglyph, an amulet held within mummified bandages next to the heart or in massive form in stone sculptures. The scarab was closely



associated with the sun and the sun god Ra. The beetle lays its eggs in a ball of dung and then pushes it around; therefore it became a metaphor for the passage of the sun during the day. The scarab also represented rebirth and the concept of new life through the sun, since the young scarab beetles hatch out of the ball of dung, equivalent to the sun. The central part of this pendant also forms the name of King Senwosret II. The scarab holds the sun disk in its pincers. Pendants such as these would have been worn to protect the wearer through the power of Ra, the sun god. The craftsmanship of this piece is very delicate and the subtle colours of these precious stones have been very well-preserved.

## Connections with ancestors and the past

Lineage, clan, family and ancestral history are significant personal identifiers and these are frequently coded in symbols that are passed down from one generation to another. Age and longevity of a family or community can legitimise its position and empower its members. From coats of arms to heirlooms, these references to the past link the individual with their family history and can define group characteristics. On the Pacific northwest coast of North America, crest poles are a powerful public symbol binding a family to its history and ancestors whilst also denoting status and rights. The carvings remind the family of stories in their past, including the rights and property bestowed on them by their animal ancestors, carved in a column. Each animal has recognisable features such as teeth for a beaver, beaks for raven, eagle and hawk, dorsal fin for a killer whale and are depicted in quite abstract forms. This model is of a Haida house and crestpole. In the middle section, it recounts the story of a hunter who brought in a whale, after his mother-in-law questioned his abilities. The pole itself now stands in the Great Court at the British Museum. It is over ten metres high and is an imposing presence both physically and symbolically.



## Symbols evolve into patterns

A repeated symbol or motif becomes a pattern, which can have both aesthetic and symbolic qualities. Adinkra are symbols from Ghana which represent concepts and proverbs. For centuries they have been used to decorate and give meanings to fabrics, pottery, walls and furniture. On fabric, hand-printed adinkra cloths are printed using carved calabash stamps with ink made from iron oxide (known as Adinkera aduru – the origin of the word adinkra). The modern example overleaf is machine-produced and



has a background repeating pattern of two alternating rows of dark blue adinkra stamps. Each of these four symbols has its own meaning, for example the twisted line with teeth at the bottom "nkyinkyim" represents initiative, dynamism and versatility. The other symbols signify security and safety, steadfastness and hope. The main repeating pattern is a golden tulip – an international hotel chain of which one is in Accra. The traditional symbols have clearly been chosen carefully to associate the hotel with safety and reliability. It also demonstrates how traditional symbols are used in tandem with a modern logo.



## Symbols of power



Objects that symbolise power take a wide variety of forms – they can be in the form of insignia, regalia, architecture and clothing. In general, the rarity and value of the materials, the quality of the craftsmanship and the form or design upon the object combine to imbue the object with its sense of power. In many cultures, the older an object is, the greater

its power, particularly when associated with celebrated ancestors. Cloaks and capes such as this one were worn by Hawaiian nobles in the early 19th century for ceremonies and in battle. It is made up of bundles of feathers attached in rows to fibre netting. Feathers were a highly prized material and these colours came from particular birds. Only certain species of the now-extinct 'o'o bird had tufts of yellow feathers so thousands had to be killed to make a cloak. Only the very wealthy would have been able to afford such cloaks and they thus symbolised power and status.

## General discussion

- Discuss other examples of protective emblems. Where does the protection come from?
- Collect examples of clothing as symbols of status – how do these vary across history and across cultures?
- Examine how colours are symbolic in our daily lives.
- Almost everything is symbolic – choose a mundane object (bus/pencil) and ask students what it means to them.

## Projects and activities

### Primary

#### Grouping symbols

Ask pupils to bring in magazines and cut out all the logos and symbols. Find different ways to organise them – by colour, by brand type, global and local, etc. Create collages of logos – they can be arranged in different ways, for example by colour or pupils could sketch larger one of the boldest shapes and collage the others within it.

#### Personal Logos

Design personal logos on the computer – starting with initials, then develop this into a shape. Or design a new school logo – thinking about what the school stands for. These logos could be made into prints (block print, or even potato prints) and printed on fabric.

#### Everyday symbols

Some symbols are very common and easy to understand such as signs for men's and ladies' toilets, no-entry signs and smiley faces. Ask pupils to research as many examples of these that they can and make a dictionary of them for a foreign visitor.

## Secondary

### Crest pole project

Investigate in depth the meanings behind the different animals. Make a class crestpole – each student contributes a layer – it can be animal or can move beyond these symbols. Decide on the same circumference then use chicken wire to create a basic shape and use modroc for the crests themselves. This can then be painted.

### Transforming symbols

Some contemporary artists use well-known symbols or logos to convey a strong message by subverting them. Explore examples of this type of design and research art movements and artists who have used traditional and modern symbols in this way. Consider why this is a powerful statement and how the intended audience might react. Think also how associations change a symbol – for example the swastika in its original orientation was an auspicious Hindu symbol.

## Illustrations

### **Scarab pendant**

Winged scarab of electrum inlaid with carnelian, green feldspar, and lapis lazuli  
Egypt, Reign of Senwosret II  
12th Dynasty, around 1890 BC  
length: 3.5 cm (wing span)

### **Painted wood model of the Bear or Goose House**

Haida  
from Kayang, British Columbia, North America  
AD 1890s  
height: 85 cm

### **Printed cloth**

from Accra, Ghana  
2000's  
length 60 x height 113.5 cm

### **Feather Cape**

from Hawaii, Polynesia  
before AD 1850  
width: 70 cm

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MUSEUM**

Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG  
📍 Tottenham Court Road, Holborn, Russell Square  
Telephone +44 (0)20 7323 8510  
[learning@britishmuseum.org](mailto:learning@britishmuseum.org)  
[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)