

Talking Rocks

Create a picture story
etched on a stone.

(art + social studies)

Rock art from ancient cultures appears on every continent, all over the world. Paintings and drawings are more rare, usually only found in protected areas, such as caves. Petroglyphs — images that are chiseled, scratched, or carved into a rock surface — are more likely to have survived intact today. These picture stories from ancient cultures still speak to us today.

Although our modern interpretation is limited, we know some of these "talking rocks" acted as road signs, giving directions, marking boundaries, and warning of dangers. Some captured events and important people and were intended to record history for future generations. Many had spiritual significance, and the act of creating them was itself a cultural ritual.

Imagine being a person in ancient times and not having a written language. What symbols and images would you imagine could be used to talk about life and culture in our current times?

This lesson can be linked with indigenous culture studies and the students can imitate the symbols used by those tribes or students can be challenged to come up with their own word pictures that communicate information or reveal something about themselves and their surroundings. As artists of the past created images by etching stones, students can make "scratch-art" into paint to create a similar effect.

GRADES K-8 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. View symbols created by ancient artists on stone surfaces in various world cultures.
2. Prepare "rocks" from clay either by forming small, round, oblong, or free-form shapes with a flat side or breaking a hardened block apart by dropping it or using a chisel. This is particularly appropriate if clay has dried out and is no longer useful for other purposes. Allow clay to dry thoroughly.

As another option, gather or purchase rocks.

Process

1. On paper using pencil, first plan symbols and pictures to apply to the rocks. Imagine items of significance to our culture or to the students themselves. Examples might be cell phones, popular characters, or sports



Materials (required)

[Amaco Stonex White Clay](#), 5 lb (33247-1005); share one box across class

[Scratch Art Sticks](#), pkg of 100 (14907-1045); one stick per student

[Sculpture House Duron Plastic Tools](#) (30322-1009); share 2-3 sets across class

[Blick Premium Grade Tempera](#), assorted earth-tone colors, recommend:

Brown, pint (00011-8005)

Black, pint (00011-2005)

Burnt Sienna, pint (00011-8046)

White, pint (00011-1006)

[Blick Economy White Bristle Stencil Brush](#), set of 3 (05167-0039); share eight across class

[Blick White Sulphite Drawing Paper](#), 50 lb, 9" x 12" pkg of 100 sheets (10209-1003); one sheet per student

[Blick Studio Drawing Pencils](#), HB (22220-2110); one per student

Optional Materials

[Creativity Street Craft Rocks](#), 2 lb bag (62193-1001)

[Mini Ribbon Tools](#), Set of 6 (30397-9339)



Step 1: Form rock-like shapes from air-dry clay or collect smooth rocks. Paint by stippling with contrasting colors.

Step 2: Etch a design into dry paint surface, revealing the color of the rock beneath.

Step 3: Place the petroglyph where a future archeologist will find it.

Process, continued

symbols. It could be very representational or something more abstract, such as a figure, a face, or animal. Ask the question "If someone were to find this rock 1000 years from now, what important thing would it tell them?" Remember to use pictures and symbols — not words.

2. Paint the surface of the hardened clay or rock, using a minimum of one color of contrasting value. For example, for lighter colored rocks, cover the surface with black, dark gray, or burnt umber — or layer together multiple colors, as a natural rock would not have just one tone. Darker rocks should be covered with white, tan, or light gray. Use a stiff brush to stipple the surface of the stone and create a natural-looking, rough texture. Paint all surfaces and allow to dry.
3. If desired, draw the symbol to be carved on the surface of the rock first using a pencil.
4. Use a scratch stick to scratch and carve through the paint so that the color of the rock shows through. Remember, the image is supposed to look primitive, so don't try to make it perfect. If mistakes are made that absolutely must be corrected, smooth the area over and repaint.
5. If desired, sign and date, then seal artwork by covering the rock with a clear coat of matte medium and place the petroglyph in a location where it might be found by a future archeologist or collector.

Options:

- Rocks can be painted unnatural colors. They don't have to be earth-tones.
- Older students can use a nail, push pin, or scratch tool to create more detail in their etched designs.

National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.