Activity: Iconography: Symbolism in Culture

Recommended Grade Level: 6th – High School
Subject(s): ELA, Fine Arts, Social Studies-World History
TEKS Requirements Supported: ELA: H.1, H.2, H.5
FA.A: MS1.1, MS1.3; MS2.1, MS2.3; MS3.1, MS3.3; HS.L1.1, HS.L1.3; HS.L2.1, HS.L2.3; HS.L3.1
SS: 6.18, 6.19; WH.29; Soc.3
Time Required: 20-30 mins. (longer if expanding the activity to include research)

Objectives: Students will gain an understanding of how even societies with no writing system can express meaning through pictures and symbols. Students will organize the content of art from another culture and grasp how that art reflects aspects of that culture’s world view.

Materials:
- Color pencils
- Scissors (optional)
- Mississippian period iconography coloring pages (provided below)
- Examples of iconography and the process of analysis (provided below)

Background: Iconography is the study of the content, meaning, and interpretation of art and symbols. All cultures present and past have symbols that have important meaning within that culture. For U.S. culture you can see this in street signs (see example below) or the golden arches of McDonalds. Many cultures archaeologists study do not have a writing system. In these cases, iconography becomes especially important. For these groups, pictures express many layers of meaning. Each individual part of an image (called motifs) may have a particular meaning and when you put all of those parts together, they stand for a whole new meaning or concept. Though it can be difficult to identify all the different motifs within a piece of art from another culture, it is an important reflection of their world view. Like any aspect of archaeology, iconographers use a specific methodology when analyzing art. The key is to deconstruct the image rather than trying to understand it all at once. The first step is to identify each individual motif. Often archaeologists do this by coloring each motif a different color or cutting them out (see example below). Then they try to describe just the general shape of these motifs. Next, iconographers try to identify what the motifs might be. Finally, they try to interpret what the symbols might all mean when they are all put together. This final step is accompanied by in-depth research into the culture and the archaeology of the region.

The iconographic coloring pages provided below are all examples of Mississippian period Native American art. The Mississippian period people lived in the
Southeastern United States around 1000-1400 A.D. They were known for building large geometric shaped mounds. They did not have a writing system but did have very elaborate pieces of art work that represented aspects of their belief system. These images were all found carved on shell cups and pendants.

**Procedure:** For this activity, students will attempt the first few steps of the iconographic process. First, give the students a brief lesson on the importance of iconography and the steps involved using the provided example of the Willoughby Disk (provided below). Next, allow the students to choose one of the iconographic coloring pages (provided below). The students should then color each motif a different color and/or cut them out. Have the students make a color coded key where they describe the shape of each motif and then identify what it might be. Finally, have the students write a few sentences about what they think the whole image means when all the parts are put together. You can then read the brief description of what archaeologists know of each image. To make this activity more challenging, you can assign students to research the culture and identify what aspects of life or belief systems the images correlate.

**Example of Iconography in the U.S.:**

![Image of a traffic sign with a pedestrian and child]
Example of Iconographic Process:

Step 1: Separate each motif
Step 2: Get more detailed by coloring in separate parts of each motif and describe them. Let’s try it with the last motif!

Curly Proboscis
Head with Eye
Round Body
Pineapple Shaped Backend
Decorative Wings

It’s a Moth!

Step 3: Try to interpret it all together

What Archaeologists think: This stone palette was found at the site of Moundville in Alabama. Mothra (on the right) shows up here a LOT. So archaeologists think it is sort of like their mascot. In the middle, is a wrapped up bundle with 2 skulls inside. These skulls were scalped, which we can see by the designs on the back of the skull. The bilobed arrow (top left) is a common symbol for a warrior or battle. The 2 hands (bottom left) are symbols called the hand and eye motif. Iconographers have discovered that these symbols are supposed to represent a portal through the Milky Way. Some Native
American groups believe that after you die the soul travels through the milky way to its final resting place.

From the Texas State University Website (about the iconographer archaeologists who deciphered the disk):

“This 700-year-old stone object, found at the archaeological site of Moundville, Ala., is an important piece of American art. Called the Willoughby disk, it is a portable altar whose engraved symbolism showed America’s ancient Mississippian peoples how to find their way into the afterlife. The engravings on the disk were interpreted by scholars who meet annually at Texas State to recover the lost meanings of Native American symbolism.”

“…the Willoughby disk’s association with afterlife ritual can be seen in each of the symbols engraved on the disk. Morning Star is represented by his bi-lobed and feathered arrow, which appears to the right of the central column. The column, adorned with skulls, is not a column but a sacred bundle that would be unrolled during a religious ceremony. Actual sacred bundles, often comprising a woven reed basket or a piece of cloth tied with braided buckskin, contained arrows and other sacred objects used in rituals.

The symbols of the hands with eyes in the palms — called hand-and-eye motifs — are thought to be portals to the realm of the dead. The motif may very well represent the constellation Orion, as well as the Milky Way. The Milky Way itself was viewed as a highway of light that functioned as a celestial road to the realm of the dead. Even today, among many Native Americans, the Milky Way is known as the Path of Souls. In the context of the Willoughby disk, the hand-and-eye motif tells its “readers” that, when Orion rises in the sky, the souls of the dead are to leap through the hand-and-eye portal to the Milky Way, to start the journey to the realm of the dead.”

**Coloring Pages:** Below are various coloring pages of images that appear carved on large conch shell cups and pendants at different Mississippian sites.

Page 1: Feathered Serpents- The Mississippian people viewed the milky way as a feathered serpent. After death, an individual would travel along the feathered serpent/milky way to the afterlife.

Page 2: Bird Man- For many groups during the Mississippian period, Bird Man was a prominent deity. Often rulers or religious practitioners would dress up like Bird Man and put on performances.

Page 3: Snake Men- This image represents two men with snake-like tails or snake capes. There is a good chance that because their tails are different, they represent 2 different types of snakes that were in the environment that the Mississippian people lived in. Even though they often created fantastical creature such as the feathered serpent, they were often based on real creatures. The two men are emerging from a hole in another snake’s back. This may mean that the snake represented the earth or that they were on the milk way. The men may also be dressed in costumes and are shown doing some performance. What do you think??