

Artistic Cartography

Miranda Nelken

One part of American history has been a quest for *placelessness*, a quest to make one place like another. There is a global push to make all places as similar as possible, to make one global market.

It's time to fall in love with the unique place where you live, if you have not already. You are surrounded by a place that has many great stories that could be told from the perspective of a human, plant, or animal. This lesson encourages students to see their region as a primary source of learning, and to use art as a way to connect to the landscape and learn ecological concepts. The activity combines observational animal drawings of your region with an introduction to maps, both of which are exemplified through the work of contemporary artist Stuart Arnett.



Preparation

Begin by finding a geographical feature or natural area near you that will become the focus of the lesson. Initial research online and at your library will provide you with native animal photographs, topographical maps, and introductory information on the human history and stories of your region. Also, look for regional artists and poets who have drawn, painted, and written about your area that will provide motivation for your lesson.

If you live in a city, you may want to focus on animals that have adapted to human habitation. Some schools have rivers, forests, and natural corridors that are an easy walk for students and offer a great opportunity to expand this lesson. Invite people from your community to tell stories of benchmark moments such as local heroes, floods, businesses that have

shaped your town, Native American history, unique events, and lifestyles.

Introducing Our Artist

Mount Monadnock looms tall on our horizon. A half-hour drive from our school, it is home to an array of natural plant and animal communities, and 13,000 years of human history. It became the focus of my lesson with an incoming class of sixth graders.

We began by talking about what students already knew and experienced about the animals of our area, and viewing the work of Stuart Arnett, a contemporary Canadian wildlife artist who draws animals with graphite and marker on topographical maps.

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Choosing and Drawing an Animal

After discussing Arnett's work, students picked a reference photograph of a native species and began sketching the lines of the animal onto white paper. Meanwhile, we brainstormed ways young people can make their voices heard on conservation, whether it's by drawing animals, becoming informed of local

decision-making, discussing issues with family and friends, or volunteering at the local nature center.

Incorporating Topographical Maps

Once the drawings were done, students traced a frame onto the photocopied topographical maps using frame stencils. The completed animal



drawings were transferred onto the maps by taping them to the window and using natural light. Transferring can also be done using a light box or transfer paper.

While the maps serve as backgrounds for the animal sketches, they also offer lots of connections to mapping. During class, briefly explain to students what topographical maps are used for and how to read them. Try to find your school area on the map, and where the highest and lowest elevations points are located.

Once the sketches were transferred, I demonstrated how to use colored pencils, emphasizing the importance of layering the colors to match the rich hues of nature. Optional grey values can be added to the sketches using drawing pencils and blending stumps.

I also introduced regional artist Abbott Thayer, who painted Mount Monadnock throughout his life. We focused on Abbott's title as the "father of camouflage," also known as counter shading. Students could choose to use camouflage patterning, parts of the animal's habitat, or a repeating motif from the animal on the sur-

rounding frame of their animal drawings.

I encouraged students to change their frames to match their animals. If they drew fish, the frame could mimic the bumps of rocks; if they drew a



bird, the frame could include tree branches. Final touches included writing each student's name and the scientific name of the animal on the bottom of the frame.

Reflections

Observing how animals quickly gain students' attention, I found it interesting to hear why students chose the particular animal they drew—was it because of an animal experience, the natural beauty, or unique attributes of the animal?

The care students brought to their animal drawings was rewarding to see. Implementing lessons that focus on our region's unique plant and animal communities provides a perfect opportunity for students to gain appreciation for the exquisite places where we live and the desire to protect them.

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.

WEB LINK

www.stuartarnett.com