



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

"Home is where we harvest our fish. Home is where we knock the rice. Home is out there in the canoes. Home is when we are out there with our families and we're picking those berries, getting scratched up in the thorns, you know, that's home.

Home is also above the clouds where our ancestors go into the stars, into the northern lights. That's our other home—where we come from and where we go in the end.

Home is where we raise our children.

Home is where we make our life with our partner.

Home is all those things, you know. That means home is a huge range, you know, a huge range, and within it we can find all the things that will give us the good life."

– Biskakone Greg Johnson

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson students explore the theme of Home while learning about the life and work of Ojibwe artist Biskakone Greg Johnson. The artist lives with his partner, artist Anungo Kwe Alexandria Sulainis, and their children, in Lac Du Flambeau, Wisconsin, the land that was home to many generations of his ancestors. The students discover that the artist's idea of home relates to the places where he and his people live and continue the day-to-day traditions that have been passed down through the years. Johnson continues many of the craft traditions of his Ojibwe culture, including beading, weaving, moccasin making, and the techniques and process of birch bark etching. He creates and embellishes baskets and containers made from the local tree bark, repeating images that represent the natural world. After making connections with their own ideas about home, students list the places, special times, people, and ideas that help define home for them. They are asked to consider symbols or images that might represent their associations with the theme. Borrowing from the Ojibwe tradition of birch bark etching, students create India ink or crayon etchings, using imagery to suggest their own associations with the idea of Home.

Grade Level: 7–12

Estimated Time: seven 45-minute class periods

Craft In America Theme/Episode: HOME

Background Information

Biskakone Greg Johnson is a cultural practitioner and teacher in the Anishinaabe tradition. As a young man, he saw beautiful objects in museums that were attributed to his culture. He was determined to learn how to create them. He sought knowledge from members of his community or, when he could not find a teacher, he taught himself how to engage in many of the craft traditions of the Ojibwe people. He now teaches youth and others the craft making traditions of his culture. Working with traditional materials such as birch bark from the natural environment, the artist creates baskets and containers for





CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

functional use in everyday life. He has been making baskets for 15 years and has mastered the crafts of cedar bark mat weaving, beadwork, weaving winnowing baskets, moccasin sewing, and canoe building. He is an instructor at the North House Folk School, teaching the skills and knowledge of his culture. He is also an Ojibwe Language teacher. He states that he is inspired by the Ojibwe cultural traditions that were lost and believes it important to teach these traditions because that is "who we are."

Key Concepts

- Artists may choose to work within cultural traditions that have personal meaning to them.
- People have long created and embellished functional objects from materials and tools found in their local environment.
- Functional objects can be formed and embellished to reflect what is important to those who create and use them.

Critical Questions

- What does Home mean to you?
- How can the idea of Home be honored through the continuation of cultural traditions?
- Why might it be important for an artist to work with materials and techniques that represent long standing traditions within the artist's culture?

Objectives

Students will:

- Observe and discuss the work of Biskakone Greg Johnson and how it connects with the idea of Home.
- Compare and contrast cultural traditions of Ojibwe people and traditions associated with their own family and community.
- Create an India ink or crayon etching with personal meaning that communicates a message about Home.

Vocabulary

Birch Bark, Cultural Traditions, Ancestry, Etching, Functional Object, Cross Hatching, Scumbling, Stippling, India Ink, Positive/Negative Space, Value Scale

Interdisciplinary Connections

Environmental Science: This lesson explores materials and objects found in the natural world. The artist is inspired by place, cultural traditions, and the natural environment. Science classes can investigate Birch bark and other natural materials and how they can be used in daily life.

Science classes can also consider these materials in the environment that could be repurposed and used to make functional containers. Ask, How do these materials make us aware of sustainability? How can these materials be repurposed?

History/Social Studies: This lesson explores aspects of materials found in the natural world. The artist is inspired by place, geography, family, and the natural environment. Students may investigate the history of Birch Bark etching, materials and functions as related to cultural traditions and regions. What purpose did Birch bark and other types of tree bark serve in a particular culture or society?



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

Language Arts: The activity in which students are encouraged to explore the idea of Home both metaphorically and realistically, could be extended within a Language Arts context. Write a story about your Home and/or an explanation of its purpose and meaning to you.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Anchor Standard #1, CREATING: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #2, CREATING: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #4, PRESENTING: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- Anchor Standard #8, RESPONDING: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11, CONNECTING: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

Resources and Materials for Teaching Resources

- Craft in America HOME episode, craftinamerica.org/episode/home and Craft in America's website, craftinamerica.org
- <https://northhouse.org/instructors/greg-johnson>
- <https://www.mnhs.org/ojibwematerialculture>
- <https://www.mnhs.org/residencies/naair>

Worksheets

- Worksheet 1: Exploring Traditions and Home
- Worksheet 2: Reflections on the Ideas of Home

Materials

- Scratchboard (options)
 - Commercially available scratchboard
 - India Ink over clayboard
 - Crayon cover over crayon base, on construction paper or cardstock
- Pencils for sketching
- Sketchbooks
- Tools for etching: scratch knife, sculpting tools, etching tools, scraper tool, popsicle sticks, paper clips
- Paper Towels or soft buffing cloths
- Pictures and/or objects from natural environment



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

(one 45 minute class period)

"You have a tie to the place of your ancestors, the place where your love is, where your family is, that's where home is." - Anungo Kwe Alexandria Sulainis

Students will watch the segment on Biskakone Greg Johnson in the HOME episode at craftinamerica.org/episode/home.

Before Viewing

Explain to students that they will view a video about Biskakone Greg Johnson, a contemporary Native American artist living in Wisconsin, in an area that was long inhabited by his ancestors. Share that the artist is committed to maintaining many of the traditions of his people. Invite students to keep a record of the traditions shown in the video that the artist or members of his family continue. Remind students that you will pause the video when asked if they need time to record the traditions they see.

After Viewing

Focus on Traditions and Home

Ask students to share their initial reactions to the video. What did they find interesting? What surprised them? What do they want to know more about?

Invite students to refer to their lists of traditions shown in the video segment (binding the rice, dancing on the rice, winnowing grain with handmade baskets, for example).

Encourage students to share cultural traditions followed in their families or communities that are like those featured in the video. Ask for volunteers to describe other cultural traditions followed by their families or communities. Remind them of traditions associated with holidays such as Thanksgiving, 4th of July, birthdays, graduations, and so on.



What traditional objects does the artist and/or members of his family create?

Hand out the Worksheet 1: Exploring Traditions and Home. Explain that the artist's way of thinking of home includes special places, times, and people. Using these ways of thinking, students will make lists of their own personal associations with the idea of home. In anticipation of creating an artwork that includes their own imagery and symbols related to their ideas of home, students should complete the worksheet, listing ideas and feelings, as well as creating imagery that can represent their ideas.



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

Focus on Birch Bark Etching

Share the following comment made by Greg Johnson: "Birch bark is the most utilized possession in our culture. A gift to us from Creation." Based on the artist's quote, what did students notice in the video? In what ways do the artist's people make use of birch bark?

Direct attention to the process of birch bark etching. Remind students that as he worked, the artist said, "Etching reveals the summer bark." What did he mean by this? Invite students to describe the process. What tools did the artists use? How did they use them?

Review the etching materials, tools and techniques observed during the video segments.

Where does the artist get ideas for the imagery on the birch bark baskets and containers? You may wish to return to the segment in which artist Anungo Kwe Alexandria Sulainis talks about finding ideas in old photographs and old journals.

Johnson explains that the images are from the natural world, including tobacco leaves, four and five-petal flowers, squash blossoms, insects such as dragonflies and butterflies, and even rabbits and birds.

Help students understand why the artist uses these materials and imagery in his work and that he purposefully chooses to represent the natural world which is so important to him and his people.





CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

Studio Experience

(two or more 45-minute class periods)

Students will create an etching that can be used to express their idea about Home. They may choose to do an India Ink or crayon etching.

Have students practice etching techniques using a variety of tools and if possible, on scratchboard or scratchboard paper (a less expensive version of scratchboard), scratchboard made from India ink on clayboard, or crayon scratchboard made from one layer of crayon over another. They may also choose to bring in sticks or other materials from the natural environment to practice their etching.

Share with students that they will be working “in reverse.” Scratching away the India Ink or crayon to reveal the surface below. Like in the Ojibwe tradition of etching, they will be scraping away the top layer to expose the surface underneath.

Provide students with the following prompts, reminding them of the choices they will make.

- What imagery will you include? Ask students to refer to their worksheet where they listed places, special times, and people that they associate with their idea of home. Have them refer to the imagery they sketched in relation to their ideas.
- Will you feature one image or a combination? Suggest that students review their images and focus on one or a combination of more than one, remembering that their goal is to create a design that can represent their idea of home. Explain that they may wish to create several sketches before deciding on one as their final choice.

Once they’ve settled on an idea, have students sketch their idea as it relates to Home with notes about how they will represent Home. Encourage students to help each other determine the best way to create their image.

Remind them to explore possible ways to create marks, patterns, and shapes and to see how the parts of the image will fit together. Students will be scratching away the India Ink or crayon to reveal the clay or paper surface below. Discuss positive and negative space with the students and how it affects their designs. Their image will be the negative space. Provide scratchboard, India Ink, crayons, and scratching tools.

As students work on their projects, ask:

- Do the elements of their design support the meaning?
- What elements will you repeat? How will you capture and hold the attention of your viewer?

Remind students that they need to be constantly aware of how the viewer will experience their artwork.

Remind students to think about the meaning/significance of Home.



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection

Provide students with Worksheet 2: Reflections on the Ideas of Home. Engage students in a discussion or have them write in their sketchbooks about their results. Are they pleased with how their image/representation turned out? What surprised them? Do they believe that the image contributes to its meaning?

You may wish to have students write an artist's statement to accompany the display of their scratchboard art. Suggest they include the theme and their inspiration for their design. Ask them how they might display their own artwork and those made by their classmates.

You may also invite students to work in pairs to discuss each other's scratchboard art/image/message. Pairs should discuss what it is like to create a scratchboard etching and the techniques and tools. What were you hoping for that did not happen? How might you address this in future artworks?

Assessment

By the end of this lesson students should be able to:

- Identify characteristics of and discuss the work of Biskakone Greg Johnson and how it connects with the idea of Home.
- Compare and contrast cultural traditions of the Ojibwe people and traditions associated with their own family and community.
- Create a scratchboard etching with personal meaning that communicates a message about their idea of Home.

Extensions

An additional lesson could feature looking at the work of other Native American artists, investigating traditions and materials used in the artworks they create. Suggest that they note the cultural significance of the forms, materials, and designs.

Authors

The Educators Guide for HOME was developed under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Stewart, Professor Emerita of Art Education, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA. Worksheet 1: Exploring Traditions and Home was developed by Dr. Anne G. Wolcott, retired Fine Arts Coordinator, Virginia Beach City Public Schools, and Dr. Marilyn Stewart. October 2022.



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

Worksheet #1: Exploring Traditions and Home

Artists often choose to be inspired by cultural traditions and materials because of their personal connections and associations with those traditions and materials. Use the following prompts to explore your own personal connections with materials and the idea of Home.

1. Exploring Family/Cultural Traditions

Greg Johnson has strong connections to his Ojibwe culture and the tradition of making functional objects such as woven mats, baskets, canoes, beaded moccasins, and other objects. Many of the images from the natural world go back to his ancestors. Think about some traditions of making things in your own family or community.

- Who makes something in your family or local community?
- Has someone taught you or others how to make it?
- Is this a family or community tradition?
- What family or community “making” traditions can you think of?

2. What can Home mean?

“Home is where we harvest our fish. Home is where we knock the rice. Home is out there in the canoes. Home is when we are out there with our families and we’re picking those berries, getting scratched up in the thorns, you know, that’s home.

Home is also above the clouds where our ancestors go into the stars, into the northern lights. That’s our other home—where we come from and where we go in the end.

Home is where we raise our children.

Home is where we make our life with our partner.

Home is all those things, you know. That means home is a huge range, you know, a huge range, and within it we can find all the things that will give us the good life.”

– Biskakone Greg Johnson

The artist Greg Biskakone Johnson thinks of “home” in terms of certain places (“...where we harvest fish”), special times (when “...we’re picking those berries...”), and significant people (families, ancestors, children, partner). What places, times, and people connect with your idea of “home”? Complete the sentences below with the places, special times, and people who are important to your idea of HOME.

PLACES - Home is where:

SPECIAL TIMES - Home is when:

PEOPLE - Home is with:



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

3. Exploring Associations and Images

Choose at least one from each of your lists of places, special times, and people that represent the idea of home to you. List feelings and ideas that come to mind with each. In addition, sketch an image or symbol to represent your associations. You may later wish to return to these sketches for ideas in your art making.

Places, Special Times, and People:	Ideas, Feelings, and Images:

4. Planning Your Scratchboard Etching

You will use a process similar to birch bark etching to create an artwork with images or symbols that in some way connect with your ideas about Home.

- Review the ideas, feelings, and images that you recorded above.
- Choose one or combine more of those to create a design that represents your ideas about Home.
- Sketch some ideas here or in your sketchbook. Work out details as you imagine creating your artwork.



CRAFT IN AMERICA

BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

Worksheet 2: Reflections on Ideas of Home

Working with a partner or on your own, consider these questions about your completed etching. Be ready to share your responses.

1. What image(s) did you select to represent your ideas of "home"?
2. What connections do these images have with traditions in your family or community?
3. What would you like viewers to notice about your completed artwork?
4. How did you use positive and negative space in your etching process?
5. List all the techniques and tools you used in your Scratchboard etching.
6. Which of etching tools/techniques were the most essential to you?
7. What did you enjoy most about creating this artwork?
8. Are you pleased with your results? What would you change if you could?
9. If you were to create another scratchboard project, what might you do differently?
10. How is your completed etching similar to and different from the birch bark etchings completed by Biskakone Greg Johnson and his partner, Anungo Kwe Alexandria Sulainis?