

Symbolism

Symbol: something that stands for or represents something else, for instance a skull and crossbones representing poison or pirates, an "X" representing a crosswalk in traffic, a pumpkin for Halloween, or a longhorn steer standing for the University of Texas football team. This lesson provides students an opportunity to explore the world of symbols through developing symbols that will represent them. As we look around us, we see numerous symbols telling us about things, whether it is about a person in relation to something (a sorority, a school, a gang), or an instruction about how to do something (as in traffic signs). What symbols mean and how they work can be very powerful.

Artists have been using symbols in their artwork since the beginning of time. Think about cavemen symbols such as spears and blood which could symbolize hunting. Symbols are widely used in art because artists don't usually paint words or include stories to explain their artwork - the images do that themselves. Some symbolism is obvious but other times it is subtle or even secretly hidden in the artwork.

Personal Symbolism Exercise

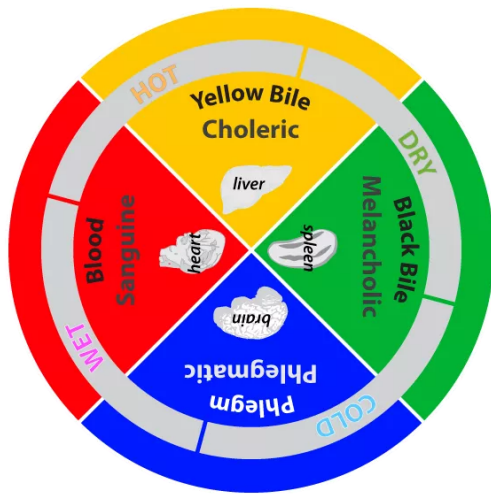
Part One: Creating Personal Symbols. Draw simple thumbnail sketches (as big as your thumb:) for each box. Invent your own symbols and stay away from obvious or regularly used ones. For example if you like gardening you could draw your favorite plants instead of a typical flower shape or shovel. For symbols representing your hometown in column 3 think of your favorite places, things to do or buildings - not just the regular images you would find on a postcard.

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|--|--|--|--|
| Hobbies | | | |
| Favorite Foods | | | |
| Things that symbolize my home town to me | | | |
| Things that symbolize school to me | | | |
| My favorite ways to relax | | | |
| Cultural Symbols (ex; If you are German and you like gardening look up traditional German flower symbols) | | | |
| Symbols for things you don't like | | | |
| Things you like about yourself or your important life events | | | |

Warm Up: Symbols Hidden in Masterpieces

Art is full of symbols and we can learn a lot about what the artist was trying to say by recognizing the symbolism they used. Let's look at an old masterpiece, Albrecht Durer's 1514 engraving called 'Melancholy', and see what we can find. Context is always important when looking at art because different times and cultures have their own symbols so let's take a quick trip back in time...

Quick History



Many ancient civilizations noted a connection between bodily fluids and illness. You probably have, too. For example, if someone has snot running from their nose, are they sick or are they well? If someone has a very red face because the blood has rushed there, are they angry or sad?

The first record of someone creating a comprehensive system of bodily fluids was by a Greek physician by the name of Hippocrates. You may have heard doctors refer to him in the form of the Hippocratic Oath.

Later on, a Roman named Galen would add to Hippocrates' work. While Hippocrates focused on health and disease connections to the humors, Galen would add to it by connecting a person's temperament and personality to imbalances in their humors. During the 1500 people generally believed that there were four main humor - not haha humor, think of it more like meaning 'personality'. The four humors were Sanguine (optimistic or positive), choleric (crabby, ill-tempered), melancholic (depressed, sad), and phlegmatic (calm, tranquil).

Find and circle the symbols hidden in Albrecht Durer's engraving from 1514

Figure of Melancholy: "Melancholic" is one of the four humors (personalities). It was the least desirable humor because it was responsible for depression, apathy, and even insanity. The advantage of being melancholic, however, was that this humor tended to be associated with the most creative and intelligent individuals. It was believed that carpenters, mathematicians, artists, and grammarians all tended to be melancholic.

Hammer: Carpenter

Compass: Mathematician

Putto with notebook: Grammarian

Keys: Power

Purse: Wealth

Bell: Eternity

Bat: Darkness. Boiled bats were recommended by the ancients as a remedy for melancholy

Wreath: Made from a plant which was believed to be a cure for excessive melancholy

Comet: Sign of Saturn, the god affiliated with melancholy

Magic square: Orderliness of numbers, each line (horizontal, vertical, diagonal) adds up to 34. Thought to be a talisman to attract Jupiter (The god who could heal the effects of Saturn)

1514: The year of the death of Dürer's mother. Also the date of this print

