Part 1: Symbolism in Our Lives

Where, when, and how do we use symbols? Why is understanding symbolism important? Students discuss examples of symbols in their own lives and look at everyday examples of contemporary symbolism in the form of tattoos and graffiti.

Students are then introduced to the unit project: to create promotional art for a movie, TV show, or video game. Students each choose a media product to promote, and conduct preliminary research on promotional materials for this kind of product. As a class, students use a sample promotional illustration to examine how symbolism is used in marketing.

Length

3 50-minute sessions

Advance Preparation

- Prepare student packets (one packet for each team of three) that include a total of four tattoo and graffiti examples—one graffiti example of your choosing, and the following three examples (see *Media & Resources*):
  - Maori tattoo
  - Yin-yang tattoo
  - Flower graffiti by Banksy
- Choose a different example of a tattoo or graffiti piece to model in Activity 1A.3.
- Choose an image of a promotional piece and prepare it for projecting in class. Ideally, this image should use objects as symbols to convey a core idea of a movie, TV show, or video game (see *Media & Resources* for examples).
- Decide how to provide objects and materials for the still-life setups that the students create. You can bring in materials yourself or have students bring objects from home (or both). Suggestions for materials:
  - Fabric items such as towels, sweaters, sheets, or rags
  - Household items such as glass jars, mugs or bowls, vases, or old books
  - Science items such as skulls, skeletons, test tubes, globes, rocks and minerals, or models of life forms, anatomy, molecules, planets, or circuits
  - Toys and models such as dolls, puzzles, cars, airplanes, spacecraft, or blocks
  - Items to build shapes and structures, such as metal cans, wood, tools, or boxes

- For ideas for other materials, view examples of promotional materials for movies, TV shows, and video games to see objects that are commonly used in these works.
- Because you will need enough material for each student to create an individual still-life setup, plan a system for storing and organizing the objects in the classroom, for example:
    - Have each student bring in a shoebox or other container labeled with the student's name and class period.
    - Ask students to keep their objects in their lockers. Remind students that they will need to bring these objects when they work on their drawings.

Activity 1A: Introduction to Symbolism

Students are introduced to symbolism by looking at how everyday visual culture provides examples of how individuals use symbols to communicate—for example, to express ideas, passions, and identities. Students first consider symbols in their own lives, and then respond to symbols in the form of graffiti and tattoos. After learning more about the meaning behind these symbols, students use this new information to re-examine their initial impressions and to revise their ideas about these forms of expression.

Sequence

1A.1: ***Student Overview***	Students go over the activities and expectations of the unit, and the knowledge and skills they will learn.
1A.2: ***Symbols in Everyday Life***	Students discuss examples of symbols in everyday life, and participate in a timed drawing of symbols.
1A.3: ***Looking at Symbols*** ***Round 1: First Glance***	Student teams analyze examples of tattoos and graffiti, in two rounds. In Round 1, teams analyze the examples and interpret their meaning.
1A.4: ***Looking at Symbols*** ***Round 2: A Second Look***	Student teams participate in Round 2, in which they receive information about the symbols and use this new information to revise their interpretations.
1A.5: ***Defining Symbol***	Students apply their understanding of symbolism to come up with definitions of the word *symbol*.

Materials Needed

RESOURCES

- **Handout 1: Unit 2 Overview**
- Pencils and paper
- Packets containing four examples of tattoos and graffiti (see Advance Preparation)
- **Handout 2: Looking at Symbols**
- Different tattoo or graffiti example for Activity 1A.3 (see Advance Preparation)
- **Handout 3: Statements About Symbols**
- Optional: **Self-Assessment 1: Teamwork** from *Unit 1: Getting to Know You*
- Index cards (one card per team of three students)

1A.1: Student Overview

1. Introduce the unit.
Explain that students will explore the many ways that artists communicate through symbols. Students will then use symbols to create promotional art for a media product of their choosing: a movie, TV show, or video game.

2. Distribute Handout 1: Unit 2 Overview.
Review the handout with students:

- Provide context by explaining that most artists create art for others as well as for themselves. Therefore, in this unit students will work on two important areas: (1) their own development as artists (improving their art skills and techniques) and (2) their professional skills (using sketches for planning, designing a logo and stationery, and making art to promote a product).
- Conclude with the idea that all the activities in the unit build step by step to finished portfolio pieces, as students develop artistic knowledge and skills. Students will have plenty of time to experiment with symbols and techniques as they work to complete their unit projects.

Teacher's Notes: Building to a Finished Work of Art

Some students may be a little fearful about their capacity to do the work listed in the student handout—creating a portfolio-worthy illustration. You may want to emphasize that they will gradually learn each step as they go along, with opportunities to try out different ideas or techniques and to revise their thinking and work in the process.

3. Draw attention to the vocabulary list on the handout.
Tell students they should refer to this list when they encounter unfamiliar terms in the unit.

Handout 1:
Unit 2 Overview

It's the chance you've been waiting for—a TV, movie, or game company wants to hire an intern to help with promotional art. But you need to create some artwork to interest the company. How can you showcase your art and your capabilities?

In this unit you'll create an original illustration. Choosing symbols that you think convey an important idea for a movie, TV show, or video game, you'll design a still life and then use it as the basis for your illustration. To complete the piece, you'll employ different art techniques as you refine your design and artwork.

Your work in this unit will revolve around the following questions:

- *Is a picture worth a thousand words?*
- *How are visual symbols used in works of media and visual art?*
- *Why are visual symbols so powerful?*

Unit Project

Your starting point is the scenario described above: imagine that the marketing division of a game development company or a TV or movie studio is accepting applications for interns, and you need an original illustration to use for your application. With this in mind, for your unit project you will create a promotional illustration for a media product (a video game, movie, or TV show). To create your illustration you will first choose a product that interests you, then select and arrange objects that you think symbolize an important aspect of the product, and finally, draw a still life using the objects. You will also design a logo for stationery that you could use in your internship application.

What You Will Do in This Unit

Explore symbols in everyday life. Explore symbols in artwork, advertisements, traffic signals, buildings, movies—even graffiti and tattooing. What do these symbols convey? How are they used in different times and cultures? How do symbols communicate social values and ideas in the context of marketing?

Set up a still life. Choose objects—anything from lamps to sneakers, rocks to food—as symbols to convey an idea in a movie, TV show, or video game of your choice. Thumbnail sketches will serve as memory and planning tools as you experiment with framing, space, and texture to create a final still-life design.

Create an illustration for your portfolio. Using your still-life setup, you will create a drawing to promote a media product (a movie, game, or TV show). You'll choose the media product, come up with initial ideas, do research, and experiment with artistic techniques to create your original art.

Design a logo and stationery. You'll design your own personal logo and stationery, which you could use to apply for your fictitious internship. Think about the image you want to project and how to symbolize it.

Use the Feldman method of art criticism to analyze symbolism in works of art and media. Practice your art analysis skills by discussing and writing about symbolic still lifes.

Keep a journal. Keep a journal with your assignments, notes, and sketches on the development of your ideas, research, and reflections.

Portfolio Requirements

You will create the following items to keep in your working portfolio:

- An illustration that could be part of a promotional piece for marketing a media product (a film, game, or TV show).
- Your own personal logo
- Reflections on the unit

You will also use your working portfolio to keep all your other course work—sketches, journals, class work, assignments, and writing.

Vocabulary Used in This Unit

Composition: The organization of elements in a work of art.

Form: A three-dimensional object (such as a sphere or cube) or the illusion of three dimensions.

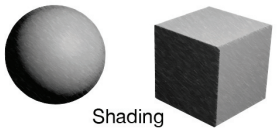
Internship: A temporary, supervised position, usually in a professional setting, in which a student or graduate is exposed to a workplace environment and receives on-the-job training. An internship may be a paid or an unpaid position.

Logo: A symbol used to identify an organization. Logos are designed to be easily recognized, and are used on such materials as letterhead, advertisements, and products.

Negative space: Area that is unoccupied by objects (in 3-D work) or that represents an area unoccupied by objects (in 2-D work).

Positive space: Area that is occupied by solid objects (in 3-D work) or area that represents solid objects (in 2-D work).

Shading: The practice of using lighter and darker values to suggest three dimensions, shadow, or degrees of light and dark in a picture or drawing.



Shading

Space: The emptiness or open area between, around, above, below, or within objects. Shapes and forms are defined by the space around and within them. Conversely, spaces are defined by the shapes and forms around and within them.

Photo © Cody Orrell.

The softness of the negative space in this photo contrasts with the sharp lines of the rock and the squirrel's fur.

Still life: An arrangement, in a work of art, of a collection of inanimate objects.

Symbol: An object, picture, or other concrete representation of an idea, concept, or other abstraction.

Synopsis: A condensed summary or outline.

Texture: The surface quality of materials, either actual (felt or tactile) or implied (visual).

Value: The lightness or darkness of a hue or neutral color (such as gray).

1A.2: Symbols in Everyday Life

In this introductory activity, students become more aware of symbols in everyday life and begin to see their richness, variety, and ubiquity.

1. Discuss symbols in everyday life.
Conduct a class discussion, using the following questions:

- Where do you see symbols in your everyday life?

  Possible answers: *Flags, peace sign, AIDS ribbon, breast cancer ribbon*

- Have you seen symbolism in the work of other artists? In advertising? Can you give some specific examples?

- Have you ever used symbols in your own work?

2. Draw symbols.
Tell students that they are going to "dive in" and do some quick drawing. Give them pencils and paper and ask them to draw as many symbols as they can in 10 minutes—both symbols they see around them right now and ones they must draw from memory.

Emphasize that they are not producing polished pieces—the idea is to sharpen their awareness and begin stimulating their creativity.

> **Note:** This activity increases students' awareness of symbols and fosters creative connections—linking students' eyes, imagination, and hands as they practice drawing.

3. Discuss the drawing activity.
Ask the class to share some of the symbols they drew during the 10 minutes. If there's time, you may also want to ask the following:

- Do you have ideas for symbols that you would like to create?
- Are there ideas or events that you think would be fun to convey through some sort of symbol?

1A.3: Looking at Symbols Round 1: First Glance

This activity helps students recognize the rich symbolism in their everyday lives by looking at examples of tattoos and graffiti—symbols that are sometimes controversial. Students study the examples, interpret their meanings, and then reinterpret them after receiving more information.

> **Note:** This activity and Activity 1A.4 provide a good opportunity for formative assessment.

1. Introduce the activity and divide the class into teams.
Explain to students that they will now look at some symbols in tattoos and graffiti, and interpret their meanings—what the creator or wearer wants to convey. Divide the group into teams of three.

2. Distribute packets and Handout 2: Looking at Symbols.
Have students decide who will be the *recorder*, *facilitator*, and *presenter* for their teams. (Descriptions of these roles are included on the handout.)

3. Demonstrate the activity and discuss good teamwork.
Ask for three volunteers to demonstrate the activity. With them, model how to answer the questions posed in Round 1, using the sample tattoo or graffiti that you brought in, and how to carry out the roles of *recorder*, *facilitator*, and *presenter*.

Ask the class to reflect on how the volunteers modeled good teamwork. You may want to ask students what other ideas they have for good teamwork, or what they would do in challenging scenarios such as a team disagreement or nonparticipation by one or more team members. (For more information on how to teach teamwork skills, refer to the teamwork activities in Units 1, 3, and 4.)

4. Complete Round 1: First Glance.
Instruct teams to look at the examples of tattoos and graffiti in their packets and complete the column labeled "Round 1" on Handout 2.

Give teams 10–15 minutes to complete Round 1. Circulate among the teams, and encourage students to examine the images closely and to really think about what the symbols mean.

Teacher's Notes: Discussing Tattoos and Graffiti

During this activity, students may offer common generalizations about tattoos and graffiti, for example, that graffiti symbolizes gang affiliation or tattoos symbolize a rebellious attitude. If this happens, reiterate the goal of the exercise, which is to find visual symbols that communicate specific information to the viewer, and ask students to point to the visual evidence that has led them to this conclusion.

The questions in this activity are designed not only to get students thinking about their own responses to symbols, but also to think about what idea, belief, etc. the person who got the tattoo or created the graffiti was intending to express.

5. Discuss Round 1: First Glance.
Reconvene the class and ask each group's presenter to share the group's interpretations of the graffiti and tattoos, based on the group's answers in Round 1.

As presenters are sharing, ask them to describe the visual evidence that shaped their interpretations. Write their responses on the board. When each group has presented, discuss the similarities and differences in the students' interpretations.

1A.4: Looking at Symbols Round 2: A Second Look

In this activity, students may find that their interpretations change as they understand more about what the symbols mean to the people who created or chose the art.

1. Introduce Round 2 and distribute Handout 3.
Explain that in Round 2 teams will be given some information about the examples of tattoos and graffiti they looked at in Round 1. Give students **Handout 3: Statements About Symbols**.

Ask teams to use the information in the handout to reinterpret the tattoos and graffiti that they analyzed in Round 1. If their interpretations change, students can note the changes in the *Round 2* column on Handout 2.

> **Note:** The quotes in Handout 3 provide divergent viewpoints. Some quotes are specific to the examples, and some are general statements about tattoos and graffiti.

2. Complete Round 2 of the activity and discuss tattoos and graffiti.
Give students 10 minutes to complete Round 2.

Reconvene the class, and discuss the following questions:

- Why do people choose to put artwork on their bodies or on buildings?

  Possible answers: *To convey affiliation to a social group, for cultural or personal expression, to mark an important rite of passage or event, to rebel against social norms, to communicate a message, or to decorate a space or a body part.*

- When might graffiti or tattoos be harmful?

  Possible answers: *When artists employ unsafe practices such as using unsterilized needles; when individuals put themselves or others at personal risk; when individuals do not consider how their actions affect others; or when individuals do not think about future consequences—e.g., tattoo removal surgery, public funds used for graffiti removal instead of needed social services, or racist or sexist tattoos that demean and stereotype people.*

- Did some of the opinions expressed in class about the symbols challenge your ideas about graffiti and tattoos? Why or why not?

- What are other ways that people use symbols to express themselves?

  Possible answers: *Individuals participate in religious and cultural rituals that are filled with symbolism; choreographers regularly use movement to symbolize various ideas or emotions; writers use metaphors to convey feelings and ideas.*

- How can such simplified images convey complex ideas?

  Possible answers: *Simplified images are more recognizable and memorable; symbols, once their meaning is known, can quickly communicate big ideas such as national identity, gender, or danger—e.g., flags, bathroom signs, or hazardous waste warnings.*

- Why are visual symbols powerful?

  Possible answers: *They can be rapidly "read" and understood without conscious thought by the viewer; many symbols are understood across different cultures and language groups; they can be associated with social or political causes or institutions (for example, the breast cancer pink ribbon, the AIDS ribbon, the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey, the white surrender flag, the United Nations flag); they can have religious meanings (for example, a cross, a crescent moon, a Star of David).*

3. Optional: Assess teamwork skills.
You can have students assess their teamwork skills by using **Self-Assessment 1: Teamwork** from *Unit 1: Getting to Know You*.

Handout 2:
Looking at Symbols

How do individuals use symbols to express their beliefs, ideas, and personal histories? In this activity you're going to examine examples of graffiti and tattoos.

Round 1: First Glance

1. Decide who will be the recorder, the facilitator, and the presenter for your team.
   - *Recorder:* Writes down the important points brought up in the discussion.
   - *Facilitator:* Makes sure that everyone understands the directions, gets a chance to speak, and stays on topic.
   - *Presenter:* Summarizes important points of the group's discussion for the class.

2. Discuss the symbols in your packet. Make sure that each team member plays his or her assigned role. Record your team's ideas in the table on the following page.
   - In the left-hand column, list the name or label of each example you were given.
   - In the middle column, write down all the possible meanings of the symbols you see in each example.

Name/Label of Example	Round 1 Why do you think this person chose to tattoo him- or herself or create this piece of graffiti?	Round 2 Did any of the statements affect your understanding of this example? If so, how?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Round 2: A Second Look

1. Read **Handout 3: Statements About Symbols**, which contains opinions about tattoos and graffiti. Some of these statements are general, while some are specific to the examples you looked at.
2. Discuss whether or how these statements changed your interpretation of the examples. Write your team's observations in the right-hand column.

Handout 3

Statements About Symbols

Maori Moko

The Maori, a Polynesian people who are the first known inhabitants of the country that is now New Zealand, used Maori *moko* tattooing to mark different social classes within their society. A person's *moko* marked his or her tribal or regional affiliation. It gave the person wearing the *moko* great prestige, because it showed others that this person had endured and survived the grueling tattooing process (*mokos* were done with chisels!). In the 1850s, European missionaries attacked the practice of the *moko*, and its prevalence eventually faded. Recently, however, the practice has re-emerged among the Maori to symbolize their connection to their past in the face of the dominance of European culture in New Zealand.

> "The design of my particular *moko kaiwai* is significant to my genealogy, my *whaka papa*. And incorporated in that *whaka papa* is a shark that's swimming from the Pacific to Aotearoa, which symbolizes my mother coming to New Zealand, meeting my father, and then I'm the result. And the rest of it talks about where I was born, which means two rivers. And so it's significant that there's a lot of water flowing. The particular *hapu* or sub-tribe that I belong to is *Teorewai*, which means 'to gently swivel the water so that it ripples and splashes just a little.' And then of course, I live on the edge of a lake . . . And so water figures a whole lot in this particular design. And it's a design that links me with my roots of origin and it keeps me in line."
>
> —Manu Neho, Aotearoa (from *Skin Stories*, 2003)

Western Tattoo

> "[People] ask, 'Well, why did you get a tattoo'" and then we'll give reasons. I think reasons tend to be the more superficial explanation, after the fact. There's something deeper going on. There's something far more profound and primal, and deeper to the motivation, to have one's skin, one's body [become] an artistic canvas, so to speak. And I think that that's very present, even for the young Navy personnel who might be getting that rite of passage tattoo of the little anchor, or the Marine who gets the little bulldog."
>
> —Mary Lynn Price (from *Skin Stories*, 2003)

Yin-Yang Symbol

The yin-yang symbol, a very popular image in tattooing, comes from Chinese philosophy. It represents the opposing yet complementary aspects of the world we live in. For example, opposites such as ignorance and knowledge complement one another: One cannot become knowledgeable without first being ignorant.

Graffiti

Interview with Graffiti Artist Banksy

Banksy is a graffiti artist from England, who has shown internationally and has been termed one of the most famous graffiti artists in the world.

How long are you going to remain anonymous, working through the medium itself and through your agent as a voice for you?

B: I have no interest in ever coming out. . . . I'm just trying to make the pictures look good; I'm not into trying to make myself look good. I'm not into fashion. The pictures generally look better than I do when we're out on the street together. Plus, I obviously have issues with the cops.

What's your definition of the word graffiti?

B: I love graffiti. I love the word. Some people get hung up over it, but I think they're fighting a losing battle. Graffiti equals amazing to me. Every other type of art compared to graffiti is a step down—no two ways about it. If you operate outside of graffiti, you operate at a lower level. Other art has less to offer people, it means less, and it's weaker. I make normal paintings if I have ideas that are too complex or offensive to go out on the street, but if I ever stopped being a graffiti writer I would be gutted.

From a 2008 interview with Bansky by Shepard Fairey in *Swindle Magazine*

Interview with Graffiti Artist Barry McGee

Barry McGee is a California artist who does conventional art (drawings, paintings, and mixed-media installations inspired by contemporary urban culture). Since the 1980s McGee has also created graffiti on city streets, where he is known by the tag name "Twist."

What is the difference for you in working at a gallery, in a museum, or on the street?

BM: I think the method is the most interesting thing to me. I think in traditional art making, you come up with a good idea and you hide it and it's like, "Oh, this is a good idea, I got to really work on this." Really push this and you're like, "Oh, this is going to be good," and you prepare carefully for a gallery space, which is a pretty neutral setting. But with a lot of people that do street work, if you have a good idea, you're just like, "Oh, this is a great idea, I'm putting it out on the street tonight!" And you try to get out there as fast as you can and you know immediately the next day if it was a good idea or not.

From Barry McGee interview and videos,
Art:21—Art in the Twenty-First Century. (n.d.) Art21, Inc.

Comment from Graffiti Artist Lee Quiñones

LQ: Subways are corporate America's way of getting its people to work. And the trains were clones themselves, they were all supposed to be silver and blue, a form of imperialism and control. And we took that and completely changed it.

From Books: American Graffiti, by Jeff Chang in *The Village Voice*, September 2002.

Perspectives from New York City Mayors

"Look, there is a fine line here between freedom of expression and going out and encouraging people to hurt this city . . . Defacing subway cars is hardly a joke; encouraging people, kids in particular, to do that after all the money we've spent, all the time we've spent removing graffiti."

—Mayor Michael Bloomberg in response to a block party where graffiti artists were invited to tag a model of a subway street car

From Graffiti vs. the City (again) by Corina Zappia in *The Village Voice*, August 2005.

"Even those who once possessed mild amusement about graffiti are becoming increasingly indignant at the damage being done . . . I know the problem is complex, but we have to roll up our sleeves and solve it. The assault on our senses and on our pocketbooks as we pay the clean-up costs must be stopped."

—Mayor John Lindsay

From *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (1st ed.) by Mark A. Neal and Murray Forman. New York: Routledge

Art vs. Eyesore

"Joey Monsoon, former graffiti writer turned illustrator and graphic artist . . . said graffiti writers should not paint on someone's home or business without permission, but sees nothing wrong with displaying street art on public property or signs. 'We live in an environment that is saturated with commercial advertisements on signs, billboards and buildings . . . [If] corporations and other commercial interests have the right to invade my visual space, then so do graffiti artists.'

" . . . Ian MacConnell, community and public relations committee chair of [Ohio State University's] University Area Commission, said that in a capitalistic society, businesses are allowed to advertise because they pay to do so. . . . MacConnell said graffiti . . . deters other businesses from setting up shop in heavily hit areas and it invites criminals by giving them the idea that residents do not care about their neighborhood.

"MacConnell works with the University Area Enrichment Association to do three graffiti clean-ups in the summer. Each tag cost $500 in labor and supplies to remove and would not be possible without the association's sponsorship."

From Graffiti: A Beautiful Crime by Ishmael Ali Elias in *The Lantern*, March 2006

1A.5: Defining *Symbol*

1. Introduce the activity.
Tell students that they are going to try to figure out the exact meaning of the word *symbol*—what does it really mean? Divide the class into teams of three (or keep the teams from the previous activity).

2. Discuss the meaning of *symbol*.
Give each team an index card. Ask teams to draw from the class discussion of tattoos and graffiti to create a definition of the word *symbol*. Encourage teams to list all the ideas they come up with on a piece of paper.

3. Have each team create a single definition.
After teams have spent a few minutes brainstorming, ask them to narrow down their ideas and to come up with a single definition of the word *symbol*. Have each team write its definition on an index card.

4. Teams read and discuss one another's definitions.
Collect the index card definitions and then randomly redistribute them. Ask one person from each team to read the card to the rest of the team. (If a team accidentally gets its own definition, have the team trade with another team.)

Have teams discuss their responses to the definition and identify anything they might want to add or modify.

Ask for a volunteer from each team to present the definition the team was given and a summary of the team's discussion.

Teacher's Notes: Definition of *Symbol*

The words *symbol* and *symbolism* are used in a variety of contexts and have many definitions. This unit uses the following definition of *symbol*:

> *Symbol:* Object, picture, or other concrete representation of an idea, concept, or other abstraction.
>
> From *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies* (p. 367) by Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, Martin Montgomery, and John Fiske. New York: Routledge