

GUUD SAN GLANS  
ROBERT DAVIDSON

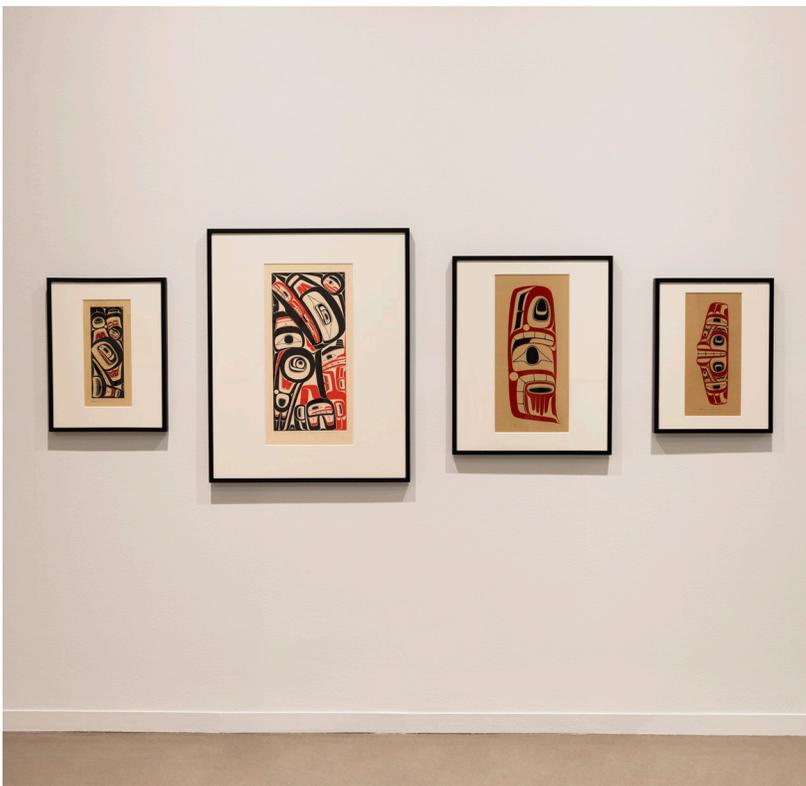
*A Line That Bends But Does Not Break*

**TEACHER STUDY GUIDE**  
FALL 2022

**Vancouver**  
Artgallery

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*"If we look back over the past two hundred years of Haida history, we can see a definite progression in the art form. Who knows where the art will go from here? The limitation is really up to the artist in the present moment."*

**– Guud san glans Robert Davidson**

# VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

## TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Since the 1960s, Guud san glans Robert Davidson has been instrumental in the revival of Haida art and culture and has long been appreciated as one of the most rigorous and inventive artists working in that tradition.

*Guud san glans Robert Davidson: A Line That Bends But Does Not Break* draws on the Vancouver Art Gallery's extensive collection of Davidson's graphic work, supplemented by paintings from local private collections, to show how Davidson's profound knowledge of Haida art has allowed him to innovate.

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### DEAR TEACHER,

This teaching guide will assist you in preparing your class tour of the exhibition *Guud san glans Robert Davidson: A Line That Bends But Does Not Break*. It provides activities to facilitate discussion before and after your school tour. Engaging in the suggested activities will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require very few materials and can be easily adapted to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Glossary section.

### LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*Guud san glans Robert Davidson: A Line That Bends But Does Not Break* takes place on the unceded territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

# ***GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON: A LINE THAT BENDS BUT DOES NOT BREAK***

## **THREE MAIN GOALS**

1

### **TO INTRODUCE**

STUDENTS TO THE EVOLUTION OF  
GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON'S WORK

2

### **TO CONSIDER**

KEY THEMES WITHIN THE EXHIBITION SUCH AS  
NORTHWEST COAST ART DESIGN

3

### **TO EXPLORE**

INDIVIDUAL ARTWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS, TECHNIQUES  
AND DAVIDSON'S PROCESS.



# GLOSSARY

**ABSTRACT(ION):** A style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

1. The artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
2. The artist creates purely abstract forms with lines, shapes or colours that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

**COLONIAL(ISM)/COLONIZATION:** A process that occurs when settlers arrive at a place in order to establish political control over it. "This is done by creating new governing systems and ways of living, being and doing that make the ways of those who were there before, inferior. This creates unequal relationships between the colonizer and the Indigenous people."<sup>1</sup>

**COMPOSITION:** The way an artwork is laid out and organized; it is the arrangement of all the elements within the work.

**CONTEMPORARY ART(IST):** Artwork that has been created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Challenging traditional boundaries, many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its rejection of historical definitions of what constitutes art.

**FIRST NATIONS:** A term used to describe Indigenous Peoples in Canada who are not Métis or Inuit. It is a general term that may also be used to describe a band, community or reserve.

**FORMLINE:** The connected pattern of painted, positive space that creates and defines Northwest Coast design images. Formlines alter in their thickness, usually as they bend around corners, which introduces tension and release in traditional designs.

**INDIGENOUS:** The first inhabitants of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

**MODERN(ISM)/ MODERNIST:** A historical period of art practice from 1850 to 1970, when approaches to art embraced new ideas in science, political thought and many other areas. The modernists rejected the restrictions of past art traditions and stressed innovation over all other values.

**MOIETY:** A society that is divided into two halves along matrilineal and patrilineal lines of descent, with each descent group coexisting with the other. Individuals belong to one of the moiety groups by birth, and all marriages take place between members of opposite moieties; for example, Robert Davidson is an Eagle and his wife, Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson, is a Raven.

**POTLATCH:** A potlatch is a gift-giving feast practiced by Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States. Potlatches are employed by leaders in the community as a central, social and cultural economic system to disperse wealth, knowledge, celebrate family intellectual properties; and reaffirm family stories and lineages.

1. (Monica Gray Smith, *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation*. Victoria: Orca Book Publishers, 2017, 144.)

# GLOSSARY CONTINUED

**POTLATCH BAN:** The ban made Indigenous ceremonies illegal and punishable by law. It lasted for sixty-seven years from 1884 to 1951. During that time, it was illegal for more than three people to congregate outside of the church, or make speeches, dance, give names away and gifts. Families who potlatched in secret not only risked having their masks and regalia seized but also could be sent to jail for two to six months. Yet the resiliency of Indigenous Peoples remained strong and they have now reclaimed and revitalised the Potlatch.

**PRINT:** A print is an impression made by any method involving transfer from one surface to another.

**RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL:** Canadian government-sponsored religious schools established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. Children were forced from their homes and forbidden to speak their languages or to practise any of their own cultural ways of life.

**RECONCILIATION:** In Canada, a multi-faceted process that restores lands, economic self-sufficiency and political jurisdiction to Indigenous Peoples, and nurtures respectful and just relationships between Indigenous Peoples, Canada, and non-Indigenous Canadians. It is an effort to renew the relationship between settlers and Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership.

**SCREENPRINT:** A variety of stencil printing, using a screen made from fabric (silk or synthetic) stretched tightly over a frame.

**SUPERNATURAL BEING:** Timeless energies and influences that come into the lives of the Haida People and shift and change the world around them.

**SYMMETRY:** When the elements of a painting or drawing balance each other out. This could be the objects themselves, but it can also relate to colours and other compositional techniques.

**TWO-DIMENSIONAL ART:** Any form of visual art that exists in two dimensions. 2D art forms can include drawings, painting, prints and photographs.

**UNCEDDED:** A term for a relationship between the government of Canada and Indigenous People when no treaties have been established. In general, "unceded" means the lands and waters of the Indigenous People were never surrendered and were taken without permission.

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

*"It has been the art that has brought us back to our roots. I am proud to be one of those people chosen to put the puzzle back together again and move on."*

## – Guud san glans Robert Davidson

Since the 1960s, Guud san glans Robert Davidson has been instrumental in the revival of Haida art and culture and has long been appreciated as one of the most rigorous and inventive artists creating Haida art today. *Guud san glans Robert Davidson: A Line That Bends But Does Not Break* draws on the Vancouver Art Gallery's extensive collection, along with works from local private collections, and presents Davidson's early traditional prints and abstract composition paintings from the 1960s to present to show how Davidson's profound knowledge of Haida art has allowed him to explore new innovative ways of creating.

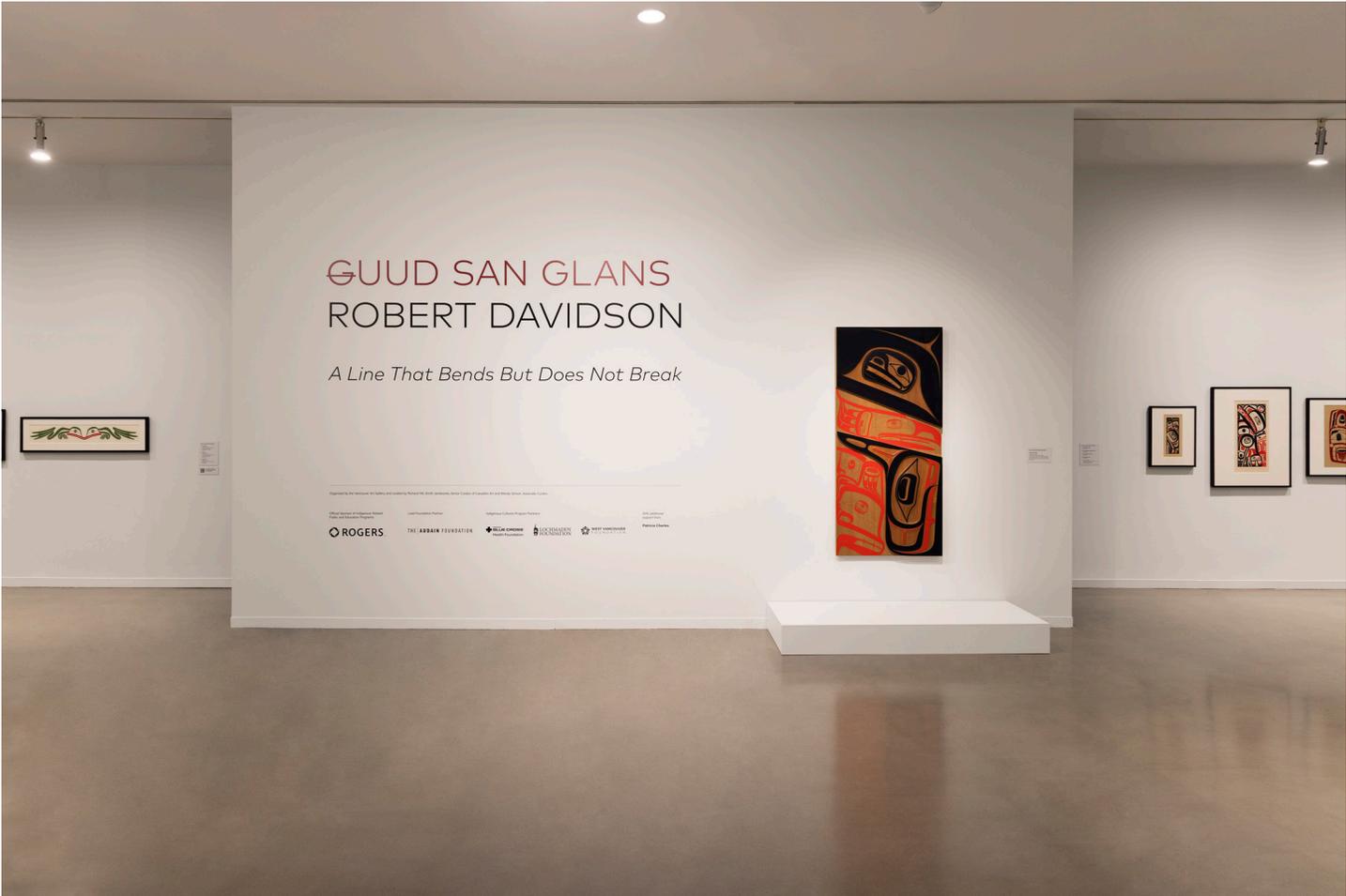
The title of the exhibition includes Davidson's Haida name, Guud san glans, which means Eagle of the Dawn. "A Line That Bends But Does Not Break" suggests two things. The first is that Davidson is able to innovate with, or "bend," Haida visual principles without breaking them. The second is that, although these traditions were placed under considerable stress during the height of the Potlatch Ban to eradicate Haida and other Indigenous cultures, these traditions have proven resilient and have been revived and made vital again through the work of artists like Davidson.

Traditional Haida art is well known for stylistic principles that provide a complex and distinctive visual structure to everything it represents.

Davidson is so at home within that tradition that he can move effortlessly from more familiar compositions to works in which he singles out and boldly abstracts traditional elements of shape, colour and line. This allows us to consider these elements carefully and see them in new ways. Each work can be considered a masterclass in Haida language of forms and acts as powerful evidence of the richness, resilience and vitality of Haida culture.

To highlight Davidson's expression of and experimentation with the language of Haida forms, the exhibition begins with a rich selection of prints and drawings, going back to the artist's earliest graphic works. This first section establishes the rules of Haida two-dimensional art and also begins to show the artist's willingness to extend these rules in thoughtful ways. From there, we encounter a room filled with prints and paintings using exclusively black and red, the traditional colours used in Haida art prior to European contact. The exhibition then opens up into galleries demonstrating the full range of Davidson's innovations with form in prints and paintings.

Throughout the exhibition, Davidson introduces himself and his practice; provides an introduction to Haida visual language and its significance to the wider Haida culture; and demonstrates his artistic process through video interviews.



# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

## HAIDA GWAI AND THE ART

*"The Haida Nation is the rightful heir to Haida Gwaii. Our culture is born out of respect and intimacy with the land and sea and the air around us. Like the forests, the roots of our people are intertwined such that the greatest troubles cannot overcome us. We owe our existence to Haida Gwaii. The living generation accepts the responsibility to ensure that our heritage is passed on to following generations. On these islands our ancestors lived and died and here too, we will make our homes until called away to join them in the great beyond."*

### – Haida Proclamation by the Council of the Haida Nation<sup>2</sup>

Xaayda gwaay Haida Gwaii, means "Island of the Haida people." Haida people have called Haida Gwaii home since time immemorial. Their traditional territory encompasses parts of southern Alaska, the archipelago of Haida Gwaii and its surrounding waters. The two main population centres are Gaw Tlagée/Old Massett on the north part of Graham Island and HIGaagilda/Skidegate on the south-east. Besides these two communities, there are many more Haida living throughout the world. All people of Haida ancestry are citizens of the Haida Nation. The Haida Nation collectively holds Hereditary and Aboriginal Title and Rights to Haida Territories as well as cultural and intellectual property rights.

One of the main laws of the Haida Nation is yahguudang, respect. Yahguudang teaches the Haida people to respect all things and to take only what they need from nature. This is embedded in the time, love and skill Haida artists have always invested in transforming natural materials into a visual language of animals, natural phenomena, and mythological creatures carved and painted on wood, stone and other materials.

Haida art is a celebration of human expression, spirit and survival. Ingenuity, skill and resilience are embedded in the art that represents who the Haida people are and where they come from, expressing and strengthening their connection to the spiritual and the supernatural, who nurture the Haida's artistic and innovative spirit.

Haida art embodies a way of life and a way of knowing unique to the Haida Nation, affirming and honouring the Haida's inseparable relationship to, and dependency upon, the lands and waters of Haida Gwaii. The art is the visual companion to their language—a language isolate, which means there is no other language like it in the world—and Haida oral histories find their expression in the work of Haida artists who tell their histories, convey family lineages and privileges, indicate social standings and remind them of their relationship with others. Haida art reminds the Haida of their place in this world.

*"When I was a kid...we had forest spirits who took the form of small humans. They were quite shy. We would try to catch glimpses of them and they would be gone"*

### – Guud san glans Robert Davidson

<sup>2</sup> Haida Nation, Constitution of the Haida Nation, 2014, <https://www.haidanation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Haida-Nation-Constitution.pdf>



# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

## NORTHWEST COAST DESIGN ELEMENTS

Northwest Coast art and artists are known for a bold style. Northwest Coast art tells stories, teaching history and passing wisdom from generation to generation. Artists use formline, ovoid and U-forms to create their designs, adhering to principles of composition that are passed down from generation to generation. The principles that guide formline design are consistent whether the subject is a human or an animal form, on a monumental totem pole or a goat-horn spoon handle.

**FORMLINE:** The connected pattern of painted, positive space that creates and defines Northwest Coast design images. Formlines alter in their thickness, usually as they bend around corners, which introduces tension and release in traditional designs.

**FINELINE:** These lines are thin and remain at or near to their original thinness. They add a level of detail and a sense of depth in the painted design

**NEGATIVE SPACE:** The unpainted, "background" aspect of formline designs.

**POSITIVE SPACE:** The painted, formline aspect of the design.

**OVOID:** The mother of designs, ovoids are the building blocks that form visual centres, or sources, from which design patterns or movements flow or emanate. Ovoid formlines are thickest on the top, thinner on each side (each side is the same width), and thinnest on the bottom. Proportions can vary with artists' styles and they can change orientation (right-side-up, upside-down, sideways), but their shape characteristics remain constant. They are used to represent joints, eye sockets, or non-specific anatomical parts that help create the flow of the overall design.

**INNER OVOID:** The smaller, same-shaped version of the ovoid that floats slightly above the centre of negative space and is almost always surrounded by a fineline.

**U-SHAPE:** Working co-operatively with the ovoid, U-shapes direct design flow or movements and form various parts of design images. They are thickest on top, thinner on each side (sides can differ in thickness and form) and taper down to a fine tip where they join other formlines. U-shapes (and ovoids) traditionally do not stand free on their own, but always connect with other design elements.

**TRI-NEG:** A negative (unpainted) triangle with concave sides that helps to define the edges of formlines. One of three transitional devices including the crescent and circle.

**CRESCENT:** A negative (unpainted) transitional device in the form of a quarter moon that helps define the edges of formlines. Can be interchangeable with trigons.

**CIRCLE:** The last of the three transitional devices, the circle, as a negative (unpainted) design element, relieves positive space where formlines connect without defining their edges. Circles, crescents and tri-negs are the core elements of the ancient design tradition that first created the interplay between positive and negative space.

**SALMON-TROUT HEAD:** It does not represent a fish head. It is an elaborated inner ovoid, which is the analytical term for the design form. Usually used for the joints and eyes of beings.

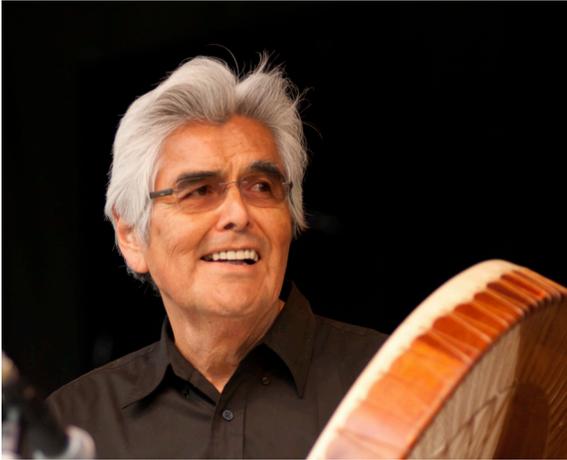
Today, master artists continue to train apprentices in the style and methods of Northwest Coast traditions, ensuring that the legacy continues.

*References used to create these definitions were sourced through Sealaska Heritage*



# PRE AND POST-TOUR ACTIVITIES

## GRADE 2 – GRADE 12



### 1. ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

Pre-Tour Activity



### 2. ALL AGES / THE ABSTRACT ALPHABET

Inspired by Northwest Coast Art  
design elements



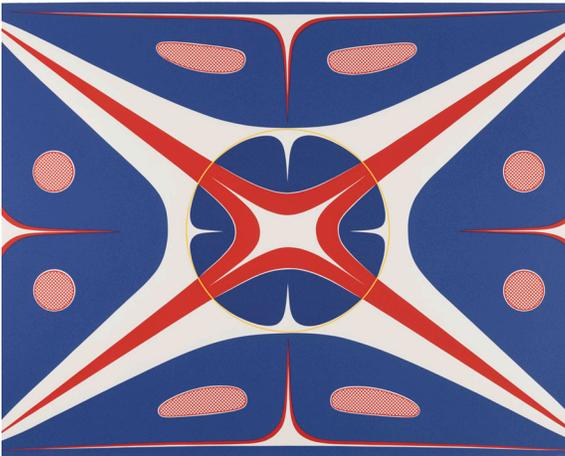
### 3. ALL AGES / STYLIZED ANIMAL CREATIONS

Inspired by Davidson's print *Chest-end Design*  
(1970)



**4. INTERMEDIATE AND SECONDARY /  
COLONIALISM DEFINED**

Inspired by Davidson's print *Occupied* (2007)



**5. ALL AGES /  
ART FROM NATURE**

Inspired by Davidson's print *The World is as  
Sharp as the Edge of a Knife* (1992)

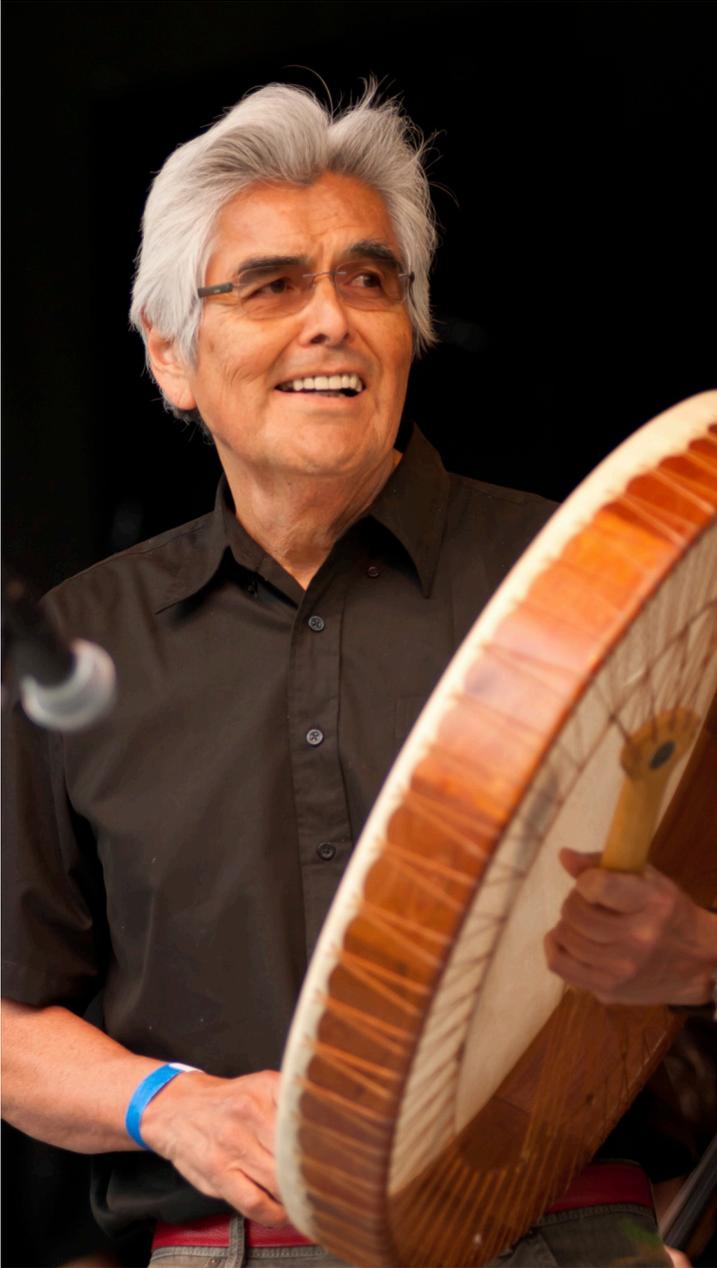


**6. ALL AGES /  
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE**

Inspired by Davidson's print *T-Silli-AA-Lis,  
Raven Finned Killer Whale* (1993)

# ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



### OBJECTIVE

Students are introduced to the life, artistic process and works of Haida contemporary artist Robert Davidson.

### MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Access to the internet
- Artist Information sheet (p.20) and the Student Worksheet (p.21)

### PROCESS

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Give each group one of the categories from the Artist Information Sheet (p. 20).
- Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 21) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section.
- Have them conduct research using the internet, either at home or at school.
- Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it into the space provided on the worksheet.
- Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

### CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What were some of the most interesting things that students learned or discovered?
- Which works are students curious to see in the exhibition?
- Does the artist's works connect to, or resonate with, the student's lives? Why or why not?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Image: Courtesy of the Artist

# ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

### ARTIST BACKGROUND

*"I feel that, for Haida people, it's the art that has helped us to reclaim our place—to reclaim our beliefs, mythology and spirituality."*

–**Guud san glans Robert Davidson**

Contemporary Indigenous artist Guud san glans Robert Davidson's art is closely connected to his cultural, ceremonial and environmental initiatives. His work has brought both national and international attention to Haida art. He has uplifted Haida art and culture throughout his remarkable career as a master carver of poles and masks, printmaker, painter, jeweller, composer and singer.

Davidson, whose Haida name is Guud san glans, which means Eagle of the Dawn, was born in Alaska in 1946 and moved with his family to Masset on Haida Gwaii in 1947. He comes from a family of artists, grandparents, parents, uncles, siblings, children and grandchildren who are a great source of inspiration to him.

It was important to his parents for him to graduate from high school, yet Grade 11 and 12 were not available to students in Masset at that time. So, in 1965, he went to live with a family in Vancouver in order to finish school. This move allowed him to learn more about

the arts of the Haida Nation, through visits to the Museum of Vancouver to see stunning artworks collected from Haida Gwaii. Although he had been carving alongside his father and grandfather since the age of thirteen, it wasn't until he moved to Vancouver that he realized Haida art had virtually disappeared from view in Masset while he was growing up—one of the painful legacies of the residential school system and Potlatch Ban, as well as strict government and religious policies that saw the removal of totem poles, masks, carvings and other expressions of Indigenous culture. "When I moved away from Masset to Vancouver, we were all carving in a vacuum because there was no evidence of the incredible art that the old masters created, and once I saw the standard I was really thirsty to relearn it," remembers Davidson. "When I went to the city, people knew more about us than I did because we were muted about our history."

While living in Vancouver, Davidson began an 18-month apprenticeship with renowned Haida artist Bill Reid in Haida sculpture and design. He also studied old master Haida artists at the Museum of Anthropology. He was inspired by the quality of art. Looking at the masters, he wanted to learn from them how they filled space, and one day he wanted to be as good as they were. In 1967, he went to Vancouver College of Art, now known as Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Although there were no Indigenous arts in the curriculum at that time,

# ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

he found himself immersed in a highly creative environment where curators and artists were looking at Northwest Coast Art through the eyes of abstraction and modernism, and he credits the school for developing his drawing skills, which he has used throughout his career. During this time, Davidson became an instructor at the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Native Art in 'Ksan, Hazelton, British Columbia.

During these early years of his life in Vancouver, while studying historical examples of the Haida art form and working with other Indigenous artists, Robert Davidson realized that traditional Haida art needed to find its way back into his culture. So, at twenty-two years of age, he proposed to carve a totem pole in Masset. Davidson has said the first time he saw the power of art in the Haida community was when he and his family raised the first totem in Masset since the 1880s. "When I erected the totem pole in 1969, it opened the door for the elders to pass the incredible knowledge that was muted. Before the totem pole was raised, we had no idea of their knowledge. I had no idea that the art was so important. But it was the catalyst." Roughly 1,000 people from Masset, Skidegate, Hydaburg and other communities came to witness the pole being raised, and in the process, marked a ground-breaking cultural

shift. "I didn't realize the celebration was really uncorking the bottle. How the old people carried themselves, how they talked, how they danced, how they sang songs. It spoke volumes of the knowledge that was still with them. Knowledge that survived," recounts Davidson. "It was like the culture was never gone. It was awoken. I had no idea how important it was. How this would be affecting many people outside of the Haida Nation. It took me a long time to realize the totem pole was actually a catalyst to make a statement that, 'Hey, we're alive, and we want to be part of this world.'" He describes this moment as the major turning point in his career as an artist.

Davidson expanded his skills to become a printmaker. While remaining true to precise technical traditions of Haida art and to the legacy of Haida stories, Davidson has also established a distinct personal style, pushing and changing the classic Haida formline in innovative ways. "I started to think of it as a vocabulary, like the alphabet. Once I learned the principles, once I learned the standard, I started to think how we are just recycling the old masters. Then I started to experiment within the principles of the art, and I started to think about the art never reaching a peak, but artists reaching a level of excellence. I started to create within and expand my work, but not thinking that I am expanding Haida art."

# ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



A significant part of his life's work has been to pass on Haida traditional knowledge, and he devotes himself to reclaiming and teaching Haida songs, stories and visual art forms. He and his brother, artist Reg Davidson, are the founding members of the Rainbow Creek Dancers and the Haida Gwaii Singers Society. They work with Davidson's wife, Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson, in revitalising Haida music.

He is one of the most celebrated artists of his generation. He has received multiple recognitions for his achievements and has

inspired generations of artists. His life and work have been the subject of numerous books, films and major solo exhibitions. He holds numerous honorary degrees and international acknowledgements. He lives and works between White Rock on Semiahmoo First Nation land, near Vancouver and Masset on Haida Gwaii. Now in his seventies, Davidson continues to push boundaries, never satisfied to rest on the same artistic ground.

# ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

### ARTIST INFORMATION SHEET

#### GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON

##### PERSONAL INFORMATION

- Born in Alaska, grew up in Haida Gwaii and moved to Vancouver to finish high school.
- His Haida name is Guud san glans, which means Eagle of the Dawn.
- He comes from a family of artists, who are a great source of inspiration to him.
- He lives and works between White Rock on Semiahmoo First Nation land and Masset on Haida Gwaii.

##### EDUCATION

- He did an eighteen-month apprenticeship with renowned Haida artist Bill Reid in Haida sculpture and design.
- He studied old master Haida artists at museums and galleries to learn about Haida art forms.
- He credits his time at Emily Carr University of Art + Design for developing his drawing skills.
- While studying historical examples of the Haida art form and working with other Indigenous artists, he realized traditional Haida art needed to find its way back into his culture.

##### ART PROCESSES AND INFLUENCES

- In 1969, carving and erecting the first totem pole in Masset since the 1880s was a major turning point in his career as an artist.
- He has a distinct personal style, pushing and changing the classic Haida formline in innovative ways.
- He thinks of formlines as a vocabulary, like the alphabet.
- A significant part of his life's work has been to pass on Haida traditional knowledge by reclaiming and teaching Haida songs, stories and visual art forms.

##### ACHIEVEMENTS

- He is a master carver of totem poles and masks, printmaker, painter and jeweller.
- He co-founded the Rainbow Creek Dancers and Haida Gwaii Singers Society.
- He is one of the most celebrated artists of his generation.
- His life and work have been the subject of numerous books, films, and major solo exhibitions; he has received numerous awards and has inspired generations of artists.

# ALL AGES / WHO IS GUUD SAN GLANS ROBERT DAVIDSON?

## PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

STUDENT WORKSHEET (FILL IN THE CHART WITH THE FOLLOWING)

<b>PERSONAL INFORMATION</b>	
<b>EDUCATION</b>	
<b>ART PROCESSES AND INFLUENCES</b>	
<b>ACHIEVEMENTS</b>	
<b>AN ARTWORK</b>	

# ALL AGES / THE ABSTRACT ALPHABET

## INSPIRED BY NORTHWEST COAST ART DESIGN ELEMENTS

*"Art was our only written language. It documented our progress as a people, it documented the histories of the families. Throughout our history, it has been the art that has kept our spirit alive."*

-Guud san glans Robert Davidson

### OBJECTIVE

Discover and explore the principles of formline design.

### BACKGROUND

Formline is a visual language. Robert Davidson speaks of formline as the "skeleton of the being." Formlines are the connected pattern of painted, positive space that create and outline animals, supernatural beings and figures from oral histories. Formlines vary in width, changing thickness as they flow around corners. Artists using formline stick to principles of composition that are passed down from generation to generation. Early in his career, Davidson studied how the old masters handled forms: "The challenge of the student learning the art is to explore what has been established and expand on it." Studying these master artworks allowed Davidson to create an image bank inside his head to draw upon while creating artwork in his studio. "The secret to good design in Haida and Northwest Coast art is to learn how to look at the shapes, how positive balances with negative spaces, and through studying the old masters' creations. Once you learn how the shapes work, you can interpret them into your own creations.

Looking at a good design without knowing what to look for is not going to help you. Intuitive creativity happens after 10,000 hours of practice."

Davidson explains that formline is like learning to do the alphabet: "If you don't understand the alphabet, you can't make new words." He started using the ovoid and U-shape, the core building-block shapes of formline design, as the alphabet. "The classical ovoid has a concave on the bottom, and the corners [on the bottom] are sharper than the top corners, and the arc on the top of the ovoid is greater than the bottom. The line of the U-shape is continued with the bottom line of the ovoid and that is the very beginning of creating the face, the head, the wings, the arms and so on. And the second line is the inner ovoid, and it's thinner on the bottom and thicker on top." Ovoids and U-shapes are usually symmetrical and work together to create symmetry and harmony in design flow and movement. "So for every line that is created, you are actually creating two spaces." When Davidson is creating, he is working within that idea of one line creating two spaces. These are the building blocks to creating any image in any given space.

Within formline design, you find opposite relations. One example of opposite relations in formline design is positive and negative spaces. Formlines are the positive element, usually painted either black or red. Background—or non-formline—unpainted areas are referred to as negative spaces. "For every positive there is a negative

# ALL AGES / THE ABSTRACT ALPHABET

## INSPIRED BY NORTHWEST COAST ART DESIGN ELEMENTS

and for every negative there is a positive," says Davidson. "The real challenge is balancing." Finelines are another example of opposite relations in formline design. These lines are thin and remain at or near their original thinness. They add a level of detail and a sense of depth in painted design.

Other elements of formline design include inner ovoids: the smaller, same-shaped version of the ovoid that floats slightly above the centre of negative space and is almost always surrounded by a fineline. The tri-neg, also known as a trigon, is a three-pronged shape. You will see the tri-neg in many places: "It is such a popular shape that it has two names," jokes Davidson. Trigons, circles and crescents are the three transitional devices that relieve positive space where formlines connect without defining their edges.

### MATERIALS

- Two pieces of construction paper in different colours
- Pencil
- Template sheets on (pages)
- Scissors
- Glue

### WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT APPROPRIATION?

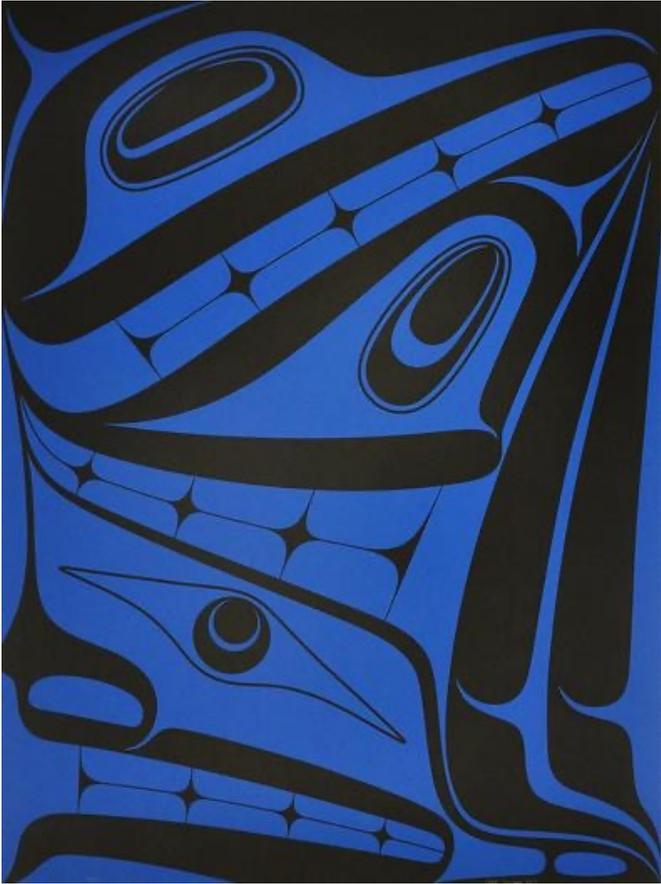
Have you heard the term "cultural appropriation"? It is the taking of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission, especially when

the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways. For this project, you will create your own abstract designs inspired by Guud san glans Robert Davidson's artwork. You will use the formline shapes discussed to create your work. Davidson has given us permission to copy and study the designs as a learning opportunity.

Do you think there are right or wrong ways to incorporate formline shapes from Davidson's artwork and Haida formline design into your own artwork? How can you respectfully incorporate elements into your creative works from Guud san glans Robert Davidson and a culture that is not your own? In displaying your finished artwork, how might you acknowledge Davidson and the elements that have been borrowed from Haida formline design?

# ALL AGES / THE ABSTRACT ALPHABET

## INSPIRED BY NORTHWEST COAST ART DESIGN ELEMENTS



*"Rather than specific creatures, this composition depicts the beings, animal or supernatural, that emerge in the imagination of those walking through a forest at twilight. 'You can hear them speak but you can't see them.'"*

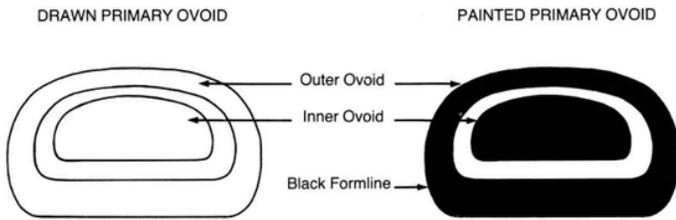
**–Guud san glans Robert Davidson**

### PROCESS

- Look at *Shadows* (2010) (left). What do you see? What more do you see? Why do you think this work is titled *Shadows*? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Using the [Formline](#) Design template sheet on (p. 25), find the formline shapes used within the artwork. How many ovoids can you find? How many U-shapes? How many tri-negs? Can you find any of the other elements such as circles, crescents, inner ovoids and finelines? Can you find shapes using the negative space? How did Davidson create those shapes?
- Using copies of *Guud san glans Robert Davidson Formline Design Templates* on (p. 25), study these shapes carefully and draw them in different scales on the back side of one of the coloured pieces of paper (from large to small).
- Cut the shapes out and place them on the second sheet of coloured paper.
- Move the shapes around and place them into different compositions until you create a balance in the negative and positive space.
- Once you have decided on your composition, glue down the formline shapes.
- Title your finished artwork.

# ALL AGES / THE ABSTRACT ALPHABET

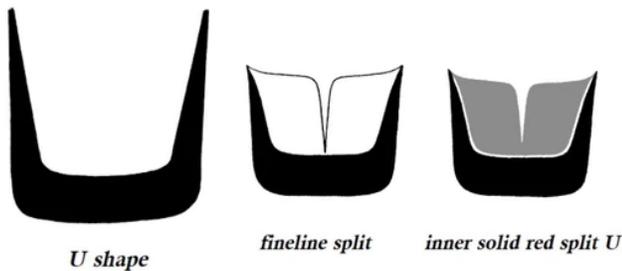
## INSPIRED BY NORTHWEST COAST ART DESIGN ELEMENTS



## Ovoid

in  
Pacific Northwest Coast Art Style

© Raven Publishing Inc. www.ravenpublishing.com



## U Shape

in  
Pacific Northwest Coast Art Style

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### CONCLUSION

- Display the artworks in your classroom.
- As a class, compose a short text to be shown with your finished works acknowledging the source material and inspiration for your designs.
- Discuss the following:
- What formline shapes did you use in your work?
- Why do you think Guud san glans Robert Davidson refers to these shapes as an alphabet?
- How did you decide on your arrangement of these shapes?
- How are the artworks similar? Different?
- What have you learned through the process of studying Guud san glans Robert Davidson's artwork *Shadows* (2010) and creating your own artwork in response?
- If you could ask Guud san glans Robert Davidson about his creative process, what would you ask him?

# ALL AGES / STYLIZED ANIMAL CREATIONS

INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *CHEST-END DESIGN* (1970)



*"This chest design is a blending of many boxes and designs that I have seen over the years. I don't know what drove me to do all this, other than I was addicted to formline and seeking the skill and knowledge of the old masters. I needed to keep working. It had a lot to do with my grandfather, Tsinii, and he would tell me, 'Even if you don't have orders [commissions], keep working.' In prints, I was still not selling much but I was so intrigued by designs and the process of printing. I kept giving away more than I sold."*

*In this print, I introduced cross-hatching, which is considered a very high standard in Haida art, particularly in jewellery and box design. The fine lines are difficult to perfect in both mediums but printing adds the fine cutting of the stencil as a new dimension. Kugann Jaad (Mouse Woman) appears between the ears and the design is human with outstretched hands. My great-grandfather, Charles Edenshaw, would say that cross-hatching came to Haida design from the patterned designs on the bottom of skunk cabbage leaves, which grow in abundance and to great scale in Haida Gwaii."*

**–Guud san glans Robert Davidson**

# ALL AGES / STYLIZED ANIMAL CREATIONS

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *CHEST-END DESIGN* (1970)

### DISCUSSION

Animals play an integral role in Northwest Coast First Nations art. Each animal and supernatural being represents and symbolises different stories, traits, personalities and values. The close relationships with animals, spirits and supernatural beings are well represented by stories that are passed down through generations and highlight the close relationship that Haida people have with the natural and Supernatural worlds. Many families have their own distinct stories that they present at potlatches on very special occasions.

The animals are not supposed to look realistic, but as in real life, each animal has distinctive features that tell us what it is. Through simplification and abstraction, historical and contemporary Haida artists, like Davidson, explore, describe and create images using visual elements of line, shape and colour, and principles of symmetrical balance.

Kugaan Jaad, which means "Mouse Woman" in Haida language, is the grandmother of Raven in Haida mythology, and surfaces from time to time in stories. She is considered to be the advisor of those who have crossed, or are about to cross, the surface of the world, or travel into unknown terrain. For example, it was Mouse Woman who taught Bear Mother how to protect herself with copper when she went to the village of bears. As so little is known about her, she is sometimes represented in the art of Robert Davidson in a very abstracted manner, like in the screenprint *Chest-End Design* (1970).

Davidson has made screenprints throughout his career. His prints have been the subject of many solo and group exhibitions locally and internationally, and as a series, capture the evolutionary process of an artist dedicated to both tradition and innovation.

### MATERIALS

- Old magazines, or access to the internet and a printer
- Printer paper
- Pencils, markers, oil pastel

### PROCESS

- Look at *Chest-end Design* on (p. 26). How has Guud san glans Robert Davidson stylized and abstracted the figures through simple forms, shapes and colours?
- In this screenprint, Davidson describes a human with outstretched hands and the supernatural being, Mouse Woman. Where do you see these beings? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Find an image of an animal you like, taken from an old magazine or printed from the internet.
- Look at the image as if it were a combination of simple shapes. What shapes do you see?
- With a pencil, draw the simple shapes directly on the image that you want to use to design your stylized animal.
- When you are finished drawing all the shapes onto the image that you want to use to create your stylized animal, flip the picture over so that you are looking at the backside of the paper.

placeholder for image credit where needed.

# ALL AGES / STYLIZED ANIMAL CREATIONS

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *CHEST-END DESIGN* (1970)

- Cover the back of the paper with an oil pastel colour of your choice. It is easier, if you peel off the paper and rub the oil pastel on its side across the paper.
- When you have finished putting the oil pastel on the back side of your image, gather the materials you will need to create your prints: blank paper, pencil and markers.
- Place a blank piece of paper on your desk.
- Place your animal image on top of the blank sheet of paper with the oil pastel against the blank paper.
- With a pencil, trace over all the simple shapes you found. If you want to peek to make sure you have traced everything, place one hand on the image so it doesn't move and gently lift your paper up to peek. Put the paper back down and continue tracing the shapes if needed.
- When you are finished, lift the image, and you have a print!
- Colour in the print with markers.
- Make more prints. Change the marker colours you use for fun.
- Display the finish work in the classroom

### CONCLUSION

- Look at all the finished work and discuss similarities and differences in colours, shapes and compositions.
- What elements did you use or consider from Davidson's *Chest-End Design* print?
- Discuss the process. How easy or hard was it to create the work?
- What are some of the techniques you discovered?
- If you did more than one print, do they look different? Why?
- Do you perceive animals differently now? How so?
- If you were to do this project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

# INTERMEDIATE/SECONDARY / COLONIALISM DEFINED

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *OCCUPIED* (2007)

*"Occupied was first a doodle for a thank-you card. I also couldn't pronounce the plural 'octopi.' When you look at the map of Haida Gwaii there are red parts to indicate reserve land that we can occupy and it adds up to less than 0.1 percent. We have been corralled onto this tiny piece of land. There was a time when we needed to sign in and sign out to leave the reserve. And we had no rights to natural resources. When it was all taken away from us, ninety percent of the population died and the survivors' children were kidnapped and taken to residential schools. Then we became wards of the state and we were labelled as lazy. We look at the photographs—fortunately they photographed all the villages before all this devastation—and they are lined with many totem poles. The totem poles were not created by lazy people."*

**-Guud san glans Robert Davidson**



Robert Davidson, *Occupied*, 2007, screenprint on paper, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of the Artist

# INTERMEDIATE/SECONDARY / COLONIALISM DEFINED

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *OCCUPIED* (2007)

### DISCUSSION

Robert Davidson's print *Occupied* (2007) asks us to think about the ramifications of settler colonialism in Canada. Settler colonialism is a specific form of colonization that seeks to displace the Indigenous populations of a place with a new society of settlers.

Davidson's print *Occupied* (2007) addresses the ramifications of settler colonialism on the Haida People. Prior to settler contact, the Haida population was in the tens of thousands, but their population dropped to about six hundred after contact due to introduced diseases including measles, typhoid and smallpox. They found themselves forced onto smaller parcels of land as settlers increasingly encroached on their territories. The Canadian government sent Haida children to residential schools, where they and other Indigenous children were forbidden from speaking their languages and practising their cultures. For Indigenous People, some of the consequences of settler colonialism include disconnection from land, history, identity and cultural forms.

For Davidson, his Haida culture was so oppressed while he was growing up, he had no idea he was Indigenous. When he was a child, he used to root for the cowboys while watching old Westerns, cheering with his friends when the "bad guys"—the Indians—were killed. Then his uncle took him aside and explained that he and his family were "Indians" themselves, "When he told me, I cried." recalls Davidson.

His exploration of Haida art and culture came at a time when the art had nearly disappeared from his hometown of Masset. He was first introduced to old master Haida artists when he moved to Vancouver to finish high school. Curious where the art had gone in Masset, Davidson returned to his village to look for examples. "I knocked on every door to ask if there was any art left. I found one box."

"Art was our only written language. It documented our progress as a people, it documented the histories of the families. Throughout our history, it has been the art that has kept our spirit alive," says Davidson. "I strongly believe if every museum in the world would return just one piece, Haida Gwaii would have one of the great art collections of the world."

This inspired him to carve and raise the first totem pole in Masset in nearly a century. "The Elders in 1969, they're all in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, and they are the last to know the ancient ways. They spoke Haida, but they were muted. But even though they were muted, removed from ceremonies, they had it in them. And they came together. I had no idea how much was involved. I thought we would just raise the pole and I didn't realize that it meant so much to those people. They demonstrated their knowledge and it had more meaning. On the days leading up to it, the Elders got together and they laughed and they talked, they shared stories, and in the end, the drums came out and the songs came out."

# INTERMEDIATE/SECONDARY / COLONIALISM DEFINED

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT OCCUPIED (2007)

Listening to the Elders speak Haida, Davidson understood the importance of learning and revitalizing the Haida language. Following the raising, Davidson began organizing what would be his first full-scale, major traditional potlatch with an extensive cultural agenda. He has since hosted or co-hosted twelve more major feasts or potlatches. In 1980, Davidson and his brother formed tuul gundlaas Xyaal xaadee, The Rainbow Creek Dancers, whose mandate is to learn and perform traditional Haida songs and dances.

A significant part of his life's work has been to pass on Haida traditional knowledge, and he devotes himself to reclaiming and teaching Haida songs, stories and visual art forms.

### MATERIALS

- Access to the library and the internet
- Student Worksheet (p. 32)
- Pencils

### PROCESS

- Discuss the concept of settler colonialism using the discussion above.
  - What does settler colonialism mean?
  - Take a moment to think about Davidson's quote about his print *Occupied* (2007). What is he asking you to consider?
  - Why do you think it is important to Davidson to reclaim and revitalize Haida art and culture?
- In order to understand Davidson's contributions to reclaiming and revitalizing Haida art and culture due to settler colonialism, break into three small groups and use the library and internet sources to research and fill in the Student Worksheet on (p. 32).
  - Present your research in class.

### CONCLUSION

- What did you discover about Davidson's life's work to reclaim and revitalize Haida art and culture?
- What were some of the most interesting things that you learned or discovered?
- What would you like to know more about?

# INTERMEDIATE/SECONDARY / COLONIALISM DEFINED

INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *OCCUPIED* (2007)

STUDENT WORKSHEET (FILL IN THE CHART WITH THE FOLLOWING)

	DESCRIPTION	INTERESTING FACTS	IMPORTANCE IN RECLAIMING CULTURE
TOTEM POLE CARVING AND RAISING			
HOSTING OF POTLATCHES			
RAINBOW CREEK DANCERS			

# ALL AGES / ART FROM NATURE

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *THE WORLD IS AS SHARP AS THE EDGE OF A KNIFE* (1992)

### OBJECTIVE

Through close observation of natural objects, students will discover patterns and shapes to develop visual ideas, creating a connection between art and nature.

*"The world is as sharp as the edge of a knife' is a Haida proverb and one that has survived from ancient times. Nanii Florence would say that 'life is like walking on the edge of a knife and if you are not careful you might fall off.'"*

– Guud san glans Robert Davidson

### DISCUSSION

The land and sea of Haida Gwaii have given life to the rich culture of the Haida People.

Davidson likes to think that Haida art also comes from nature, whether you are walking on a beach, cutting into a salmon or looking at the skeleton of a bear or sea lion head, the shapes are all there.

By making connections to nature through art, we can begin to think about what ecosystems we are a part of and how we are connected to the natural cycles around us. How are we interconnected to all living things on the land and sea? What responsibility do we have to take care of them and what can happen to the balance in our ecosystems if we don't? Like in the story Davidson heard as a child from his grandmother, Nanii Florence, life is like walking

on the sharp thin edge of a knife where, if we are not careful, we might fall off. Through art we can all remember our collective responsibility to respect the natural world around us.

### MATERIALS

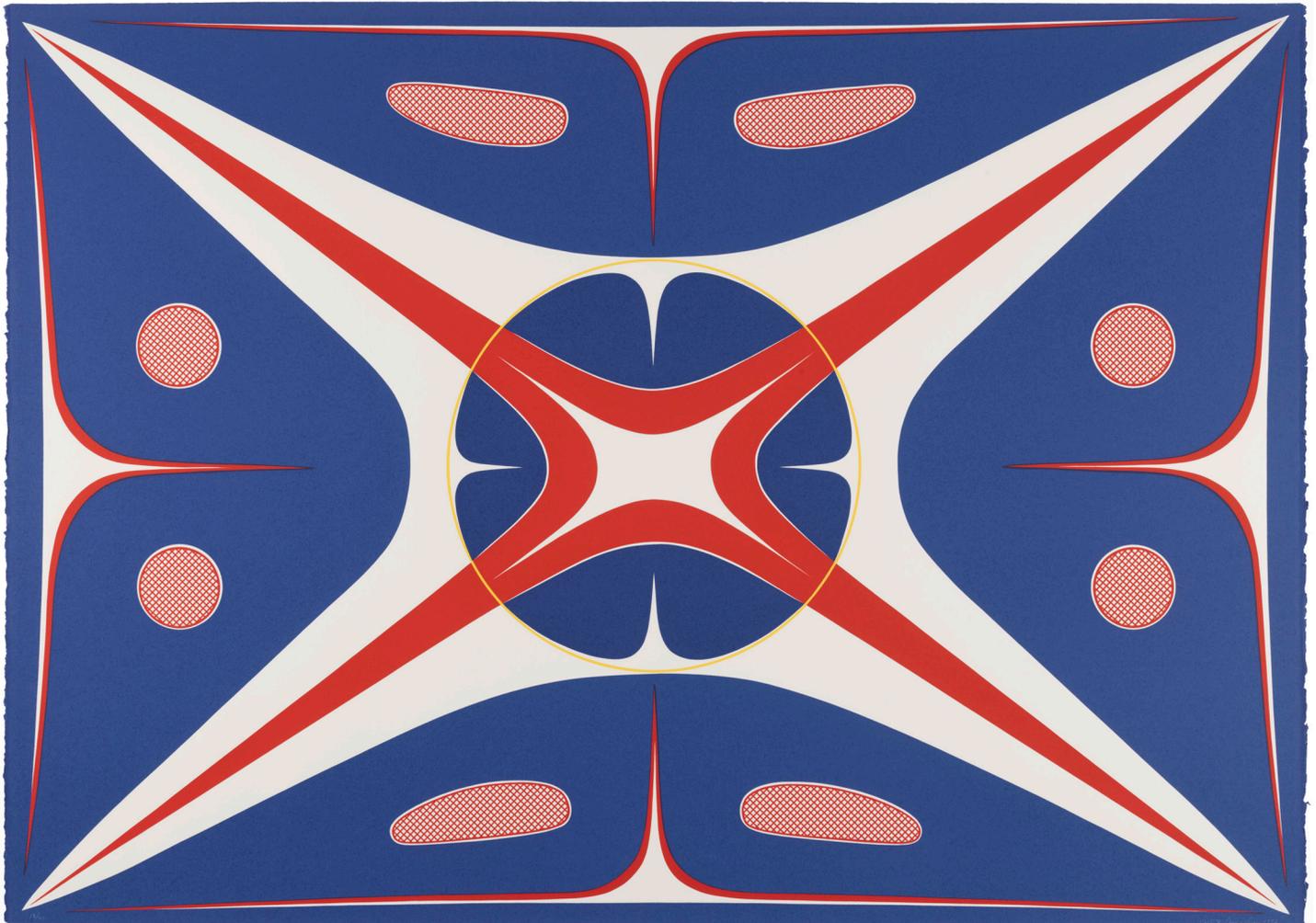
- Two pieces of paper, one for sketching and one for final artwork
- Pencil
- Markers

### PROCESS

- Look at Davidson's print, *The World is as Sharp as the Edge of a Knife* (1992). What do you think the title means? What shapes has Davidson used? What shape is in the centre of the print? If you divided the print into fourths, are the shapes symmetrical (meaning, does what is happening in one section repeat in the other sections)? Are the colours symmetrical too? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Davidson likes to think that Haida art comes from nature. Walk around your school to find an object from nature, like a rock, pinecone, stick or leaf, or bring a natural object you have from home, maybe a shell, feather or flower, to look at closely for your artwork.
- Look closely at your natural object. Turn it in different directions. How many different shapes and patterns can you find?

# ALL AGES / ART FROM NATURE

INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *THE WORLD IS AS SHARP  
AS THE EDGE OF A KNIFE* (1992)



- On a piece of paper, draw all the different shapes you found with your pencil.
- Now fold the second piece of paper in half and then half again. You should have a small rectangle or square.
- Unfold the paper.
- Look at all the different shapes you found and sketched. Decide which shapes you want to use in your artwork.
- Starting in the centre, draw a shape. Draw it any size you want.
- Now, thinking about symmetry and the shapes you found in your natural object, begin to create a design using the shapes you sketched on your piece of paper. Remember, what you draw in one section of your paper you should repeat in the other sections. Draw some shapes large and some small to add interest. You can use all the shapes or just pick two or three you find interesting.

# ALL AGES / ART FROM NATURE

## INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *THE WORLD IS AS SHARP AS THE EDGE OF A KNIFE* (1992)

- Use your markers to add colour. Maybe you will be inspired to use colours from the environment your natural object was found in. How can you create symmetry using colour? As you colour, you may decide to add more shapes. You may want to just outline some shapes in colour instead of colouring the entire shape. You may want to create patterns inside your shapes using colour. You may decide to outline your shapes in more than one colour.
- When you are finished, title your artwork. Can you make a connection back to nature in your title?
- Display your artwork in the classroom.
- How are the artworks you and your classmates created the same? How are they different?
- When you read the titles, do you think about your responsibilities to the natural world? Why or why not?
- Did you feel connected to the natural world using a natural object for inspiration? Why or why not?
- Thinking about your artwork and the object you found from nature that inspired it, how are you interconnected?
- What can you do to take care of the ecosystem where your found natural object is from?

### DISCUSSION

- Can you relate to Davidson's idea of art coming from nature? Why or why not?
- Were you surprised by how many different shapes you could find in your natural object to inspire your artwork? Why or why not?
- Were you inspired by Davidson's use of symmetry through shape and colour in his print *The World is as Sharp as the Edge of a Knife* (1992)? Why or why not?



Image: Student example

# ALL AGES / POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *T-SILLI-AA-LIS, RAVEN FINNED KILLER WHALE* (1983)



## OBJECTIVE

Students explore the relationship between positive and negative space as an element of art.

## BACKGROUND

Space, in a two-dimensional artwork, includes a background, foreground and middle ground. It also refers to the areas around, between and within the forms, shapes, colours and lines that compose the work. There are two kinds of space: positive and negative. Positive spaces are those occupied by the main subjects of the work.

Negative spaces are the area around and behind the positive space. Negative space can also be referred to as the background. Northwest Coast art uses various shapes, including ovoids, tri-negs, U-forms and formlines to create their intended subjects. As these positive shapes are assembled in close proximity to each other, the spaces between them create negative shapes which also play an important role in the overall design. Haida artists know that any changes made to the positive shapes will also affect the negative shapes as well. Guud san glans Robert Davidson emphasises the balance of positive and negative space in the process of creating his designs.

Image: Robert Davidson, *T-Silli-AA-Lis, Raven Finned Killer Whale*, 1983, screenprint on paper, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Young

# ALL AGES / POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *T-SILLI-AA-LIS, RAVEN FINNED KILLER WHALE (1983)*

## DISCUSSION

- Pencils
- Black construction paper
- White or coloured construction paper
- Scissors
- Glue

## PROCESS

- Discuss positive and negative space in art. Refer to the paragraph above and at Davidson's print, *T-Sillii-AA-Lis, Raven Finned Killer Whale (1983)*. Find the positive space in the artwork: the shapes in colour. Find the negative space in the artwork: the areas around and in-between the shapes in colour.
- Gather two papers, one smaller black square and one large white or coloured paper.
- Use a pencil to draw shapes from the edge of your black paper toward the centre. These shapes can be purely abstract, or more representational, such as an animal or silhouette. (See examples of student work on p. 38.)
- Cut out your shapes. You can flip your shapes to create a design. (See examples on page XX.)
- When you are satisfied with your design, glue the black shapes onto the larger piece of background paper.
- Display the finished work in the classroom.

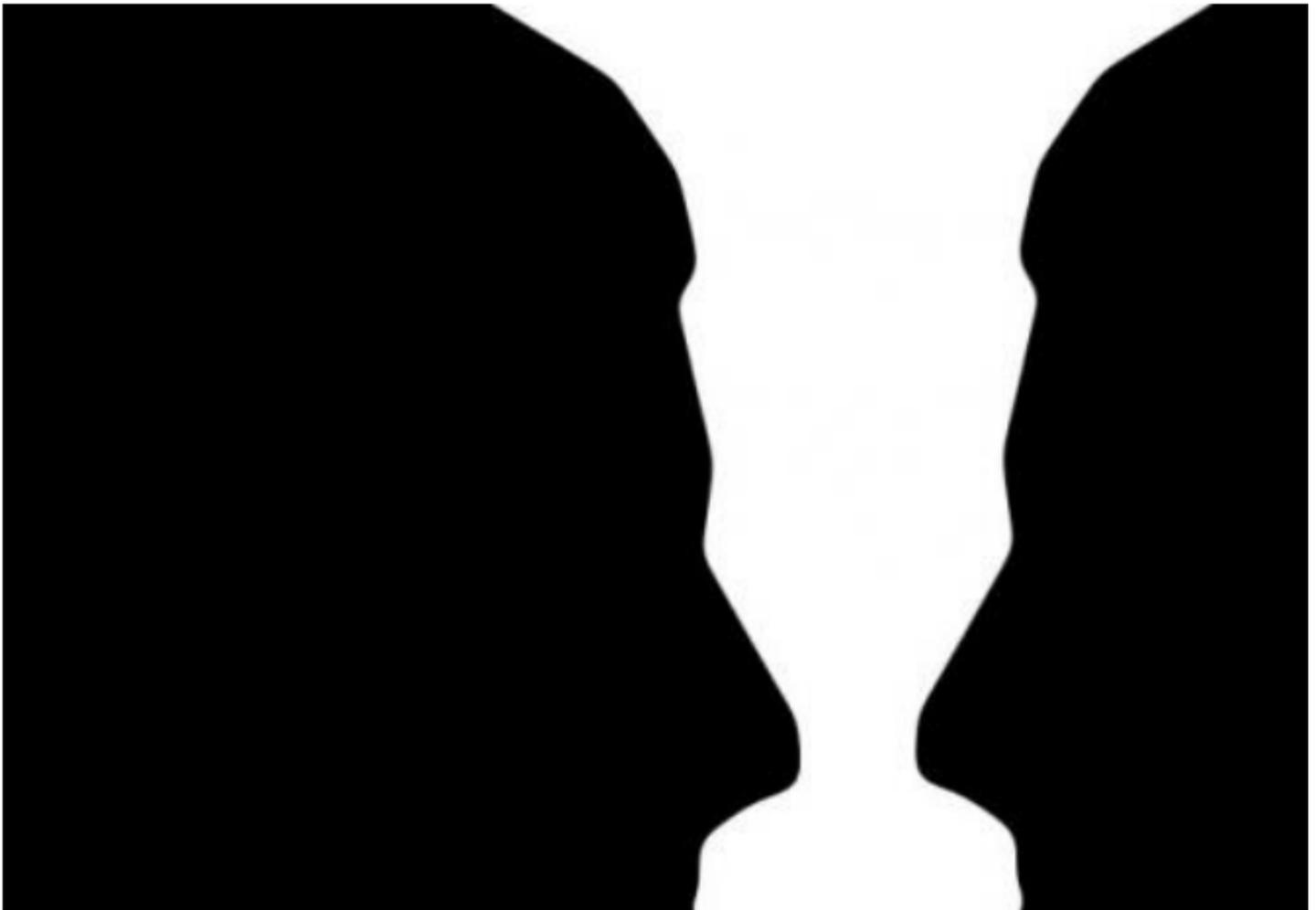
## CONCLUSION

- Look at all the artworks your class has created. How are they similar and different?
- Were you inspired by Davidson's print *T-Silli-AA-Lis, Raven Finned Killer Whale*? Why or why not?
- Did you choose to work in a purely abstract style, or did you refer to recognizable forms? Why or why not?
- How might learning about positive and negative space influence the way you see things? Explain.

When looking at art, it's easy to concentrate on the main objects of our work. We can easily forget about an equally important part of our work: the negative space. Try to find the negative space in images you see for the rest of the day.

# ALL AGES / POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

INSPIRED BY DAVIDSON'S PRINT *T-SILLI-AA-LIS*, *RAVEN FINNED KILLER WHALE* (1983)



Do you see the profiles of two people facing each other? If yes, then the black spaces are the positive images and the white area is the negative background. Conversely, if you see a white vase in the centre of the picture, the black around it is the negative space.



Image: The Helpful Art Teacher, [thehelpfulteacher.blogspot.ca](http://thehelpfulteacher.blogspot.ca); Below: Student examples

# FURTHER LEARNING

## TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES



### BOOK

- Gary Wyatt with Robert Davidson, *Echoes of the Supernatural: The Graphic Art of Robert Davidson*. (Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing and the Vancouver Art Gallery, 2022).
- Clint Leung, *An Overview of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art*, 1st edition. (Free Spirit Gallery, 2006), Retrieved from <https://www.meadowbrookfarmpreserve.org/downloads/ebook-nwcoast.pdf>

### WEBSITES

- <https://www.haidanation.ca/haida-nation/>
- <https://www.sealaskaheritage.org/>
- <https://michaelbellis.com/symbolism/>
- <https://haidamarineplanning.com/issues/culture/>

### VIDEO

- [Discovering Haida Art: A Personal Journey with Master Artist Robert Davidson](#)
- [On Collecting with Robert Davidson Art from the Archives | Robert Davidson Artist Talk](#)
- [Artist Talk: Expanding the Circle: Robert Davidson and the Ancient Language of Haida Art](#)
- [Now Is the Time](#)

### FILM

- [Haida Modern, directed by Charles Wilkinson \(Knowledge Network, 2019\) 1 hr., 25 min.](#)

### ARTICLES

- [Mark Follman, "Robert Davidson's Creative Spirit," Mother Jones, November 14, 2013, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2013/11/robert-davidson-haida-gwaii-art/media/2013/11/robert-davidson-haida-gwaii-art/>](#)

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All installation views: *Guud san glans Robert Davidson: A Line That Bends But Does Not Break*, exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, November 26, 2022 to April 16, 2023