



## Towers of Power

Grades 6-8

Time: 1 hour

### Objectives

Students will identify and describe the elements of art and principles of design in a specific artwork and will use artistic terms to discuss how art reflects cultural values. Students will compare and contrast artworks from two different cultures. Students will develop a set of criteria to assess an art form and will apply the criteria to analyze a specific artwork.

### Instructional Materials

Images of bis poles  
Image of a Native American totem pole  
World map or globe  
Asmat Bis Poles worksheet

### Procedure

#### Introduction

On the board, draw a simple family tree diagram with space for you, your parents, and your grandparents. Explain that a family tree diagram is a way to represent a person's ancestors, defining the word if necessary. Tell the students that different cultures have different ways of remembering and honoring their ancestors, and that sometimes those ways involve works of art.

### Object-based Instruction

Bis poles are a striking form of Asmat art and are central to one of their most important cultural ceremonies, the bis feast, which is held to commemorate the dead and send their spirits off to the spirit world. Reaching heights of up to 20', bis poles are created by male carvers, who are important figures in the Asmat community. A bis pole is carefully and artfully carved, with especially intricate, lace-like designs in the projection, (called the cemen). While the bis pole is very much connected with death, it is also symbolic of life. Not only does the projection represent power and fertility, the ancestor figures serve to change the status of the deceased from a dead relative to an ancestor, a being that continues to exist.



Asmat Peoples, Papua, Province of Indonesia (Formerly Irian Jaya), *Bis Poles, Bis Pole with double Cemen, and Jo Sise*, late 20th century. Wood with red, black, and white pigments, and some fiber additions. Crocker Art Museum, gift of Loet Vanderveen Collection.



Display and discuss the bis pole image. Guide the discussion using the following questioning strategy, adapting it as desired. Point out on the map or globe where the artwork comes from.

**Describe:** What do you see? What is it made of? What recognizable objects are depicted? Is the artwork located indoors or outdoors? How would you describe the form of this artwork? (Is it flat like a painting?) Where do you see negative spaces (i.e. "holes", such as the spaces between limbs or individual figures)?

**Analyze:** What objects repeat? How would you describe the texture of this artwork? Describe the artwork's sense of balance. What are some features that provide unity (tie the piece together)? What are some features that provide variety? What are some things the artist needed to do to create this artwork?

**Interpret:** What kind of feeling do you get from this piece? What are some specific details that make you feel that way? How did the artist communicate that feeling? Do you think this was created by a modern artist or one from the past? Why?

**Judge:** What do you like most about this artwork? What don't you like about it? Where would be a good place to exhibit this piece? How does this artwork help you know more about Asmat culture?

**Connect:** Does this artwork remind you of anything else you've seen? How are Asmat bis poles similar to Native American totem poles? How are they different? (Display an image of a totem pole.)

## Procedure

Ask the students to list some characteristics of bis poles they've learned about during the discussion. As a group, make a list of criteria they would now use to critique other bis poles they observe, writing them on the board. The list might include items such as these:

- The characteristic top projection
- Artistic skill in the carving
- A mixture of human and animal figures
- Any unusual or unique elements
- A feeling of respect for the ancestors
- The inclusion of symbols
- Good use of the elements of art and principles of design (line, balance/proportion, texture, space, form, rhythm, etc.)

Divide the students into small groups, and give each group a small image of a bis pole (either printed or projected). Give them a few minutes to discuss the image, applying the criteria they've listed on the board. (You might wish to assign specific roles - recorder, presenter, etc.) Then provide time for each group to share their observations with the class.



## Assessment

Circulate among the students during the small group discussions to assess their use of the vocabulary of art and their ability to apply the criteria to the specific artworks.

For a formal assessment of students' abilities to compare and contrast bis poles and totem poles, use the graphic organizer included with this lesson, or something similar.

## Adapting and Extending

The following are some suggestions for adapting this lesson to other grade levels or extending it to other lessons.

- Poets sometimes create poems about specific artworks. Use the students' experience learning about bis poles as a springboard for a poetry writing lesson.
- Invite a woodcarver to class to demonstrate carving techniques and possibly lead the students in a simple project.
- Create a bulletin board display in the classroom that includes the bis pole images, related student work, and a map showing the location of the Asmat people.
- Remind the students that the Crocker Art Museum has actual bis poles on display, and encourage them to visit the Museum with their families.

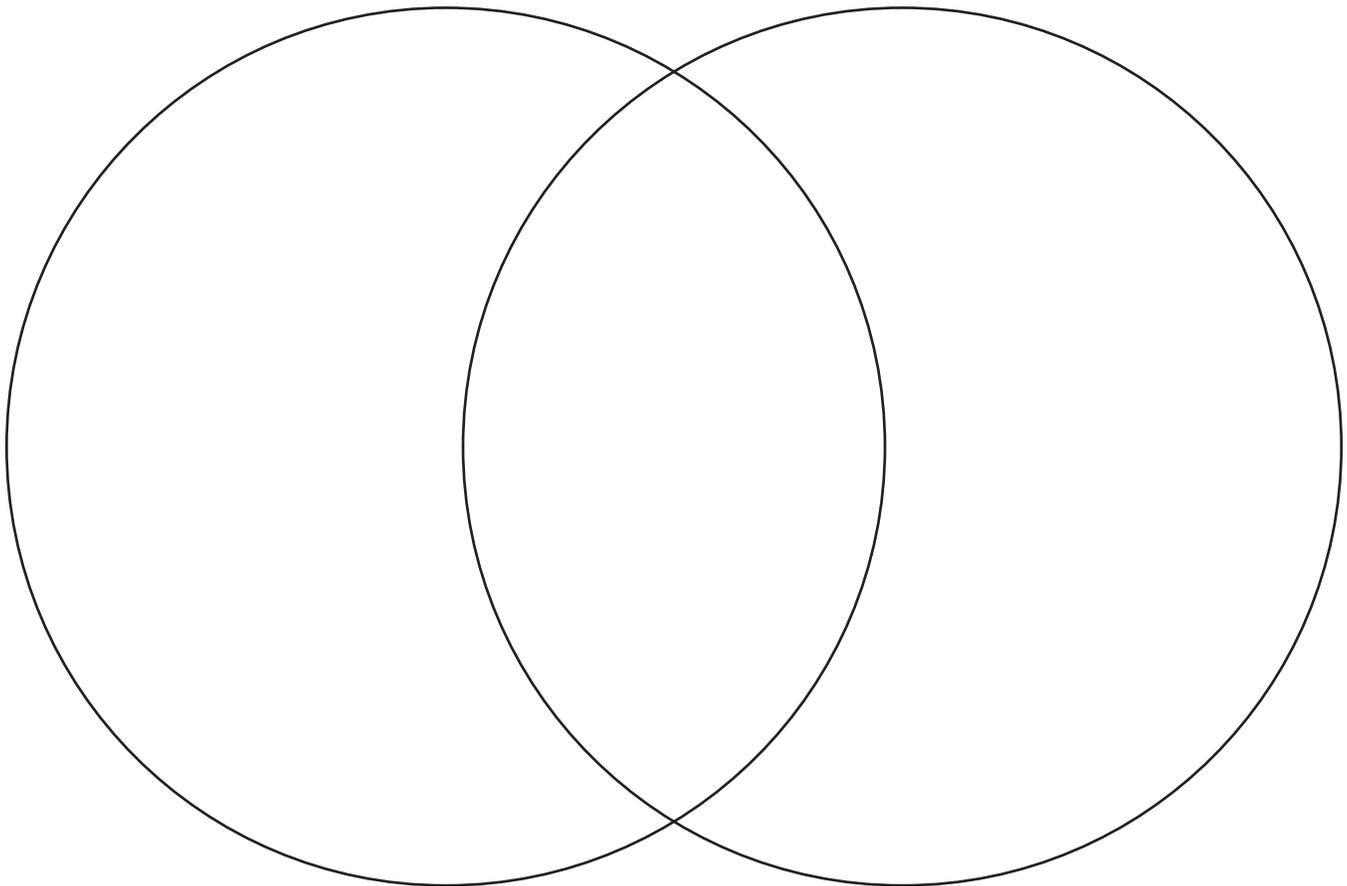


## Asmat Bis Poles

The Asmat people developed the bis pole to represent and honor their ancestors. Other cultures also have traditions and art forms that serve the same purpose. Using the diagram below, compare and contrast Asmat bis poles and Native American totem poles.

**Bis Pole**

**Totem Pole**



On the back, draw a bis pole that includes some of your ancestors, or design a new art form that could be used that way. Write a paragraph about your drawing.