

THE LEGACY OF BOB BOYER



A Teacher's Guide

© 2009 MacKenzie Art Gallery

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Introduction and Acknowledgments

What is a legacy? According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, it can be defined as a “gift by will,” or “something received from an ancestor or from the past. For example: the legacy of the ancient philosophers.” How appropriate to this Legacy Project, for certainly part of Bob Boyer’s “gift” was his recognition of the value of passing on “something received from an ancestor, or from the past.”

As an artist and as a human being, Bob Boyer truly appreciated “gifts” from the past, and possessed a rare ability to make these gifts current and relevant. He was also a person who followed a path, whether by choice, circumstance, or through a “calling.” In following his path, working diligently and achieving many major accomplishments, he truly led the way for others.

Bob Boyer’s many friends, colleagues and acquaintances have all been touched in some way by his ideas, humour, idealism, and compassion. The 2008 retrospective exhibition, *Bob Boyer: His Life’s Work*, organized by the MacKenzie Art Gallery in collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Civilization, was a tremendous achievement. This resource package is intended to further the exhibition’s objectives by providing information and activities of benefit to students, teachers, artists and other communities.

If Bob Boyer’s legacy was his ability to receive from the past, to learn in the present, and to inspire future generations, then *The Legacy of Bob Boyer: A Teacher’s Guide* is one of the ways in which the MacKenzie Art Gallery hopes to ensure that current and future generations of students in Saskatchewan, and beyond, discover and appreciate the valuable contributions made to our world by this important artist.

Acknowledgments

This project was informed by, and includes, many quotes from curator Lee-Ann Martin. Insight was also gained from Ted Godwin, Carmen Robertson and Alfred Young Man: guest contributors to the exhibition catalogue, *Bob Boyer: His Life’s Work*. Initial research was conducted by artist and educator Susan Bear, cultural significance was further researched by Education Assistant Holly Martin and production assistance was contributed by Curatorial Research Assistant Nicole Brabant. To gain a greater understanding of an Indigenous worldview and educational practices, it was useful to consult the supplemental resources of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and the web resource *Four Directions Teacher Resource Kit: Introduction and Overview*.

Wendy Winter

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Bob Boyer during the powwow held in conjunction with the opening of the MacKenzie Art Gallery exhibition, *The Powwow: An Art History*, 2000. Photo: MacKenzie Art Gallery

BOB BOYER: BIOGRAPHY

Bob Boyer graduated from the Regina Campus of the University of Saskatchewan with a Bachelor of Education (Art) in 1971. He then worked for several years throughout the province in various capacities as an educator, including a position as Community Program Officer for the MacKenzie Art Gallery from 1973 to 1975. In 1978, Boyer joined the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now the First Nations University of Canada) in Regina, where he worked until his untimely death in 2004. He actively participated in the development of the Indian Fine Arts Program at the College, where he became Head of the Department of Indian Fine Arts (1980-1998 and 2001-2004). He was appointed a full Professor of Indian Art History in 2004. Within this academic environment, as well as various community arts initiatives throughout the country, Boyer's influence on countless artists and students is far-reaching.

In his myriad roles, Boyer continually championed the need for heightened recognition of Aboriginal art and artists in Canada. He was a member of the national advocacy organization, the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) from its founding in 1983, and served as co-chair with Alfred Young Man from 1990 to 1992. SCANA is recognized as an important organization that effectively lobbied during the late 1980s and early 1990s for the inclusion of contemporary Aboriginal art at institutions throughout Canada.

Boyer began painting highly representational portraits and landscapes in the early 1970s, with a gradual transition to large-scale oil paintings. By the late 1970s, he had begun producing works featuring abstract symbolism and vibrant colours. Throughout his extensive

career, Boyer consistently championed the important role of the traditions and values of Northern Plains Aboriginal people. Although Boyer worked in a variety of media, he is perhaps best known for the acclaimed series of blanket paintings that he began in 1983 following a trip to Japan and China. Using flannel blankets as the painting surface, Boyer combined elements of historical Northern Plains design with personal symbology and contemporary references. For the most part, these “blanket statements” are politically-charged depictions of the devastating impact of colonial imperatives upon Aboriginal philosophies, land, religions and cultures.

During the last decade of his life, Boyer's art celebrated Indigenous experience, cosmology and spirituality throughout the world. Boyer's exhibition history parallels the recent history of Aboriginal art in Canada, with work featured in most major group exhibitions throughout the country over the past twenty-five years.

Lee-Ann Martin, Curator

THE PATH: EARLY INFLUENCES

In this section we explore Boyer's formal education at school, and the informal education he gained through personal and professional experiences. We look at the path he travelled, the choices he made, and some of the guidance he received along the way.

How does the son of a barber get to be an icon of Native Canadian painting?¹

Bob Boyer was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan on July 20, 1948. He grew up in St. Louis and later attended high school in Prince Albert. It is interesting to note that Boyers are listed among the first settlers of the tiny village of St. Louis, which is located approximately halfway between Prince Albert and Batoche. Ancestors on both sides of Boyer's family fought and died at Batoche during the Metis² resistance of the North-West Rebellion. The City of Prince Albert is known as Saskatchewan's gateway to the North and, per capita, is home to the highest concentration of Aboriginal people in Canada.³

If you believe that a person is set on their path at birth, Boyer was born halfway between Batoche, a historic site commemorating the turbulent history of the Metis people, and Prince Albert, a vital community faced with the challenges of healing and building bridges for the future. It was perhaps the perfect place for Boyer's journey to begin.

In high school Boyer started dating Ann McGuinness (they would eventually marry and have two sons) and, when Boyer graduated in 1967, he signed on as a surveyor in Northern Saskatchewan:

Then a strange thing happened. I planned to stay on as a surveyor and didn't intend to go to university. A friend, Guy Palmer, was after me to go to university to take art. One weekend I was home in Prince Albert and received a form in the mail from the university. My application had been accepted. Included was a lot of classes I was supposed to be taking. He had registered me, so I thought I might as well go.⁴



A Seven Arrow Storm, 1984



On the Way to Melfort, 1970 -1971

Boyer attended the University of Saskatchewan's Regina Campus from 1968 to 1971. At school, he encountered teachers who were members of a group of modernist painters known as the Regina Five. There was also an influx of new ideas and new artists who had been influenced by California Funk. These were important influences in the history of art in Regina, and likely had an impact on Boyer's development as a painter. Boyer, however, is quoted as saying:

Maybe they affected my art, they must have. The influence was probably more personal. They were just very good to me, that's all.⁵

Ted Godwin (a member of the Regina Five) was one of Boyer's first art professors and he would also become a lifelong friend.

Following university, Boyer had various jobs that took him into many remote Northern communities, frequently by floatplane. He encountered many people whose lifestyles remained closely connected to First Nations historical traditions and, although Bob was travelling as a teacher, administrator and personnel officer, he also had an interest in learning more about the communities themselves. His art was now beginning to reflect the culture of the Northern Plains, as well as his growing understanding of traditions such as shamanic spirit drawings. Boyer's interest in — and developing knowledge of — the design traditions of First Nations art inspired him to approach the MacKenzie Art Gallery with an exhibition proposal:

Boyer's interest in design became the premise for the groundbreaking exhibition 100 Years of Saskatchewan Indian Art: 1830-1930 . . . which he curated for the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in 1975. His design analysis of the stylistic differences between Cree, Assiniboine, Sioux, Blackfoot and Saulteaux objects — as works of art — departed significantly from the anthropological material culture studies of the time. Boyer's premise extended equally to all objects contained in the two-part circulating exhibition.⁷

The exhibition was important for its acknowledgment of the relevance of “[First Nations] art” within the arts community.

In 1978, Boyer was hired by the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, (now First Nations University of Canada) as a program consultant to write the curriculum for its Department of Indian Art. He soon became an Assistant Professor, then Head of the Department. This provided a tremendous opportunity for Boyer to bring together his many experiences to develop an art program that would encompass elements of his formal education and traditional learning, while also opening a dialogue about the spaces between:

I wanted to develop a program that brought all the cultural elements of [First Nations] art together: spirituality, design, as well as ancient history. I also wanted to bring it up to date with the attitudes of mainstream art.⁸

ACTIVITY: MAKING A TARTAN PAINTING

In this activity, participants will make an abstract painting. They will explore overlapping colours and colour symbolism, and will learn that you can “read” an abstract composition.

Context: Although Godwin’s Tartan paintings may appear to be pure abstraction, tartans can have symbolic meaning. Consider the colour symbolism of the Saskatchewan Tartan:

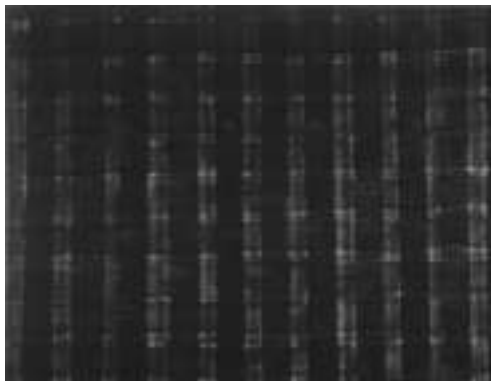
Saskatchewan’s official tartan . . . has seven colours with gold representing prairie wheat; brown for summerfallow; green for the forests; red for the prairie lily; yellow for rapeseed flower and sunflower; white for snow; and black for oil and coal.⁶

Materials

- Heavyweight paper
- Tempera or acrylic paint — colours can either be personally significant, or may relate to a theme
- Corrugated cardboard cut into small rectangles, 3-6 cm wide

Method

Using cardboard instead of brushes allows the paint to be dragged more evenly across the paper’s surface. To create a tartan painting, start by dipping a piece of cardboard into one of your colours, and paint lengthwise across the paper in fairly even rows. Choose another colour and another width of cardboard, and paint stripes in another direction. Lines can be horizontal, vertical and diagonal. Let the lines start to overlap, and watch as your colours mix



Ted Godwin, *Tartan for Me Running*, 1968

and change: the different layers of semi-transparent paint will create many interesting variations.

Discussion Point

Look at examples of paintings by Ted Godwin and Bob Boyer. Are there similarities? Differences?

Optional

Try using the same materials to make a painting in the style of Bob Boyer.

FIRST TALKING CIRCLE

Talking Circles provide us with opportunities to share. As a subject or theme is introduced, participants are invited, one by one, to express their ideas and opinions. It is important to be respectful of the person who is speaking.

This first Talking Circle is intended to engage participants in a discussion of the early influences that may have had an impact on the life and career of Bob Boyer. It also encourages participants to reflect upon their own choices, opportunities and helpers.

Ideas to Consider

Ted Godwin said:

One of the things I really liked about Bob was that he simply let life and destiny pull him in whatever direction it chose. I don’t think I am saying that correctly, as it seemed to me that Bob’s life and career path seemed to flow naturally from one obvious choice to the next naturally-obvious choice. As I write this, I am thinking that maybe he just made it look easy.⁹

In a traditional Aboriginal worldview:

Any person who sets out on a journey of self-development will be aided. Guides, teachers, and protectors will assist the traveller. The only source of failure is a person’s own failure to follow the teachings.¹⁰

Go around the circle and invite participants to relate an experience, or a person, that has provided beneficial “guidance” on their personal journey.

LOOKING BACK: TRADITIONAL VALUES

In this section, we further explore the influence of Northern Plains design and culture on Boyer's development.

An element of Boyer's work that has not changed is its incorporation of Plains [First Nations] motifs. Boyer's close association with the Plains [First Nations] community is linked to his passion for the powwow which is central to his life and art. To [First Nations] people powwows are a celebration of their culture, a confirmation of their identity. The colour, pattern, and the movement of the powwow, stimulated by the rhythm and song of the drum group have an undeniable presence in his paintings. Boyer participates actively in the powwow circuit on the Northern Plains during the summer months when he is not as involved with his teaching duties at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. A visit to Boyer's home may find him and his wife, Ann, making various components of powwow clothing — bustles, head dresses and spreaders, breastplates, aprons, moccasins, chokers, bells, anklets, or beadwork including belts, armbands, headbands, cuffs, capes and the like — which he has designed either for himself or on commission for others. The powwow outfits are under close scrutiny by the Plains [First Nations] community for cultural correctness and appropriateness of their design elements. In his paintings, however, Boyer uses Plains [First Nations] design elements or geometric motifs, ranging from pyramids to crosses and triangles, both for their formal design possibilities and to convey the substance of personal meditations.¹¹

ACTIVITY: MAKING A PAINTED PAPER ENVELOPE

In this activity, participants will explore First Nations cultural designs and begin to understand the significance of symbols and images, as they develop their own symbolic vocabulary.

In the early 1980s, Boyer created paintings that related to the symbolism and structure of the painted *parfleche*. Historically, *parfleches* were box-like containers made from thick rawhide, painted with geometric designs. The word “*parfleche*” actually comes from the French noun *flèche* — arrow, and the verb *parer* — to ward off.

Materials

- Large sheets of paper (one per participant)
- Painting and/or drawing materials
- Ribbon, sinew or string

Before You Begin

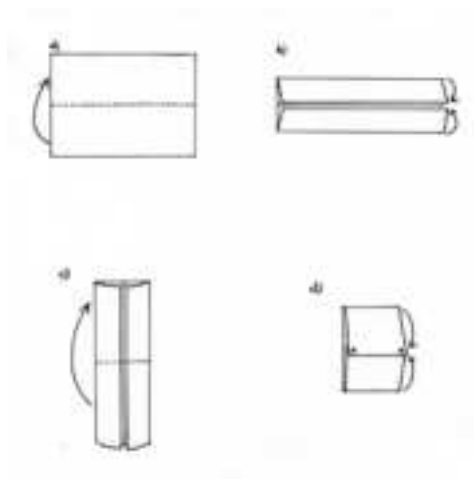
- Research traditional *parfleche* designs.
- Review design elements in the work of Bob Boyer.
- Consider bilateral symmetry (see page 12).



Dakota parfleche, date unknown, rawhide, paint, 19.5 x 34.0 x 21.0 cm, Collection of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (E418.14/4547). Photo: Don Hall

Making the Paper Envelope

- Fold a sheet of paper in half lengthwise.
- Unfold, then fold each side to the centre.
- Turn 90° and fold in half top-to-bottom.
- Unfold again and fold each side to the centre, but with this fold overlap the edges to allow for holes through both edges. This is where you will add ties with ribbon or sinew.



Decoration Options

- Use geometric designs and bilateral symmetry (see activity on page 12).
- Reflect Boyer's incorporation of traditional design with contemporary materials and concerns.
- Choose a theme such as The Natural Environment, Taking a Stand, or The Spirit of the Landscape.
- Use the layers of folded paper to reflect a multi-layered self-portrait. Who am I on the outside? On the inside?
- Study traditional Indigenous designs and create painted envelopes to represent various cultures.

ACTIVITY: SYMBOLISM

This will help participants to differentiate between personal, cultural and universal symbols.

Materials

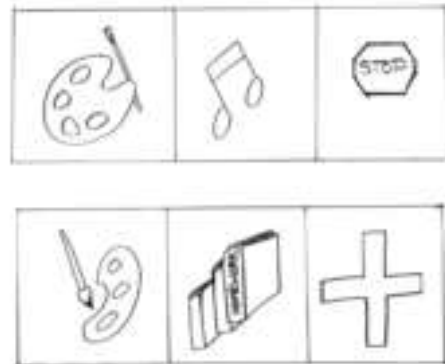
- Sheets of paper (one or two per participant)
- Painting and/or drawing materials

Method

Fold a piece of paper into three sections. The first section will be used for your personal symbol, the second for your cultural symbol, and the third for a universal symbol.

- Your **Personal Symbol** should have specific meaning to you — you would not necessarily expect others to identify this symbol's significance.
- Your **Cultural Symbol** can be related to your cultural heritage, or it can relate to any group with which you are closely associated — for example, football, hockey, dance, etc.
- A **Universal Symbol** is something that can be easily recognized by many people, in many places.

Design and draw the three symbols you have chosen. Start to compile a "vocabulary" of significant symbols.



BEADWORK DESIGN

Traditional beadwork design also provided stimuli for the art of Bob Boyer.

When glass beads were introduced to First Nations people by European settlers, these beads became important to many groups. They were described in several First Nations languages, using terminology that had typically been reserved to describe gifts from the spirit world, and were so valuable that a horse might be traded for just a handful of them.¹²

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, the mobility of First Nations people was restricted. One effect this had was the creation of more leisure time that many used for activities including, but not limited to, weaving, basketry, beadwork and quillwork.¹³ The blossoming of these so-called “women’s arts,” the products of which came to represent a Nation’s ethnicity, may have occurred in response to a popular Euro-Canadian belief at the time that the First Nations way of life was a dying one.¹⁴

Stylistic and technical approaches to beadwork differ from region to region, as well as from nation to nation, and the attribution of such works to a particular nation is not always straightforward: in the past and present, summers witness the gathering of Plains peoples for festive occasions at which artists show each other their most recent works. This provides an opportunity to share design ideas with one another, which individuals can then adapt and incorporate into their own respective design vocabularies.¹⁵

The latter half of the twentieth century saw a reconsideration of the gender roles in First Nations art production: beadwork, which was traditionally considered to be a woman’s art, is currently practiced by men as well as women.¹⁶



Design for Marie, 1986

In 1986, [Boyer] created two beautifully-lyrical floral beadwork designs: one for his mother, Design for Leona . . . and another for his sister, Design for Marie.¹⁷

How is this design similar to other art works by Bob Boyer? How is it different?

ACTIVITY: SYMMETRY IN NATURE

In this activity, participants will learn to see bilateral symmetry in nature.

The natural environment is the traditional teacher of the natural order of things.¹⁸

Symmetry in biology is the balanced distribution of duplicate body parts or shapes. In bilateral symmetry, one half is an approximate mirror image of the other (sometimes called “reflection symmetry”). For example, the elaborate patterns on the wings of a dragonfly are one example of bilateral symmetry.



- List examples of symmetry in nature.
- Find images and create a Symmetry in Nature display.
- Make copies of the images and let students divide them symmetrically.
- Draw your favourite.

ACTIVITY: FOLDED-PAPER SYMMETRICAL PAINTING

In this activity, participants will learn to see and understand symmetry and balance in art.

Materials

- Drawing paper
- Tempera or acrylic paints
- Paintbrushes

Before You Begin

Prepare by looking at examples of beadwork designs and symmetrical paintings by Bob Boyer.

Method

Fold the paper in half, then open it up again. Paint a design on one side, fold the paper and rub the two sides together.

Option 1: Work from a plan. Make a light pencil sketch on one side of the paper. To transfer the paint from one side to the other, you will have to paint a little bit at a time. Each time you paint a bit, fold and press.

Option 2: Start painting without a plan. Make a line or two on one side, fold and press. When you see the results, plan your next lines. Continue.

Other options: Find a beadwork design that you like and use it as a model for your painting.

ACTIVITY: BEADWORK DESIGN

In this activity, participants will create a beadwork design.

Materials

- Paper
- Lead pencils
- Coloured pencils

Method

Using what you've learned in the previous two activities, make your own beadwork design.

ACTIVITY: DESIGNING FOR SOMEONE ELSE

In this activity, participants will consider the value of quiet reflection or meditation in the creative process, as they respectfully and thoughtfully create a gift for someone else.

Method

Everyone must have a partner — known or secret. To make a design for your partner you will need to find out more about them: their favourite colours, activities, symbols, dreams.

Once you have gathered the information you need, it is time for quiet reflection. Go for a walk, sit in nature, meditate, listen to music. Make symbolic drawings from the information on your list. Close your eyes and try to arrange the images you have collected from your partner. Open your eyes and start to create.

Optional

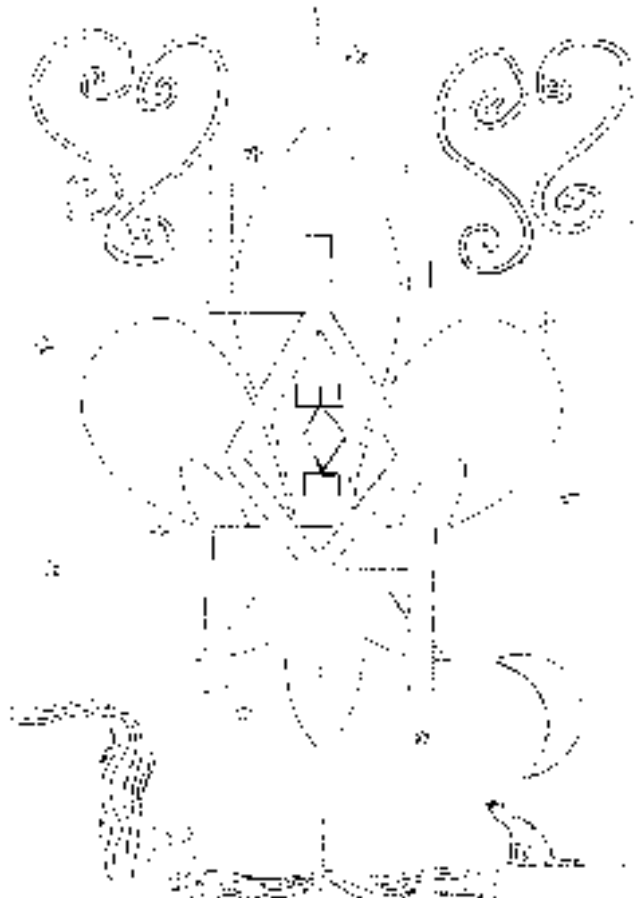
Incorporate bilateral symmetry.

Once you feel that you are ready, create a design for your partner. Present the design as a gift.

SECOND TALKING CIRCLE

Consider the influence of Northern Plains art and culture on the art of Bob Boyer. What do you know about First Nations and Metis art and culture? How could you learn more?

Provide participants with resources to help them learn more about First Nations and Metis culture. Ask each participant to find one interesting thing to share in the circle.



Artwork by a student at Chief Kahkewistahaw Community School

BLANKET STATEMENTS: FINDING ONE'S VOICE

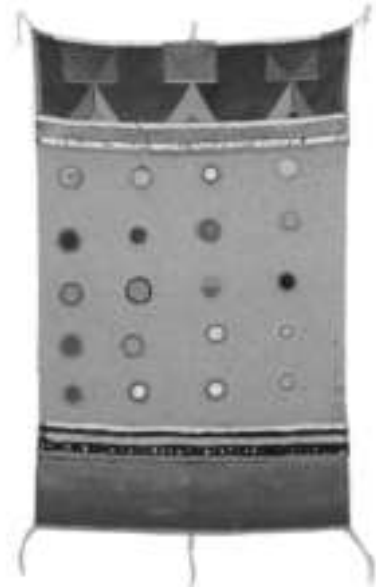
Participants will explore the development of Boyer's concern for the issues of Indigenous peoples. They will make interpretations of paintings from this period and reflect upon issues for Indigenous cultures, and will produce a work of art based on personal and cultural issues.

In October 1983, Boyer painted his first blanket, A Smallpox Issue . . . which was actually a flannel sheet, not a blanket, heralding a new direction that was at once political and narrative, abstract and provocatively traditional.¹⁹

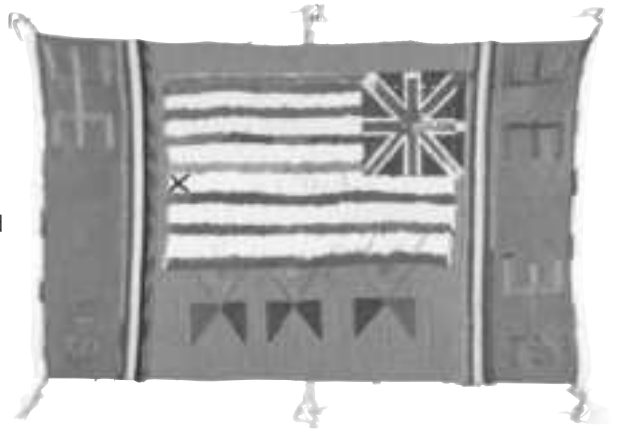
The following have all been cited as reasons why Bob Boyer began painting on blankets:

- He had travelled to China and was impressed by the abstract designs of the rugs in the portable Mongolian dwellings known as yurts.
- He found stretching canvas to be a tedious process.
- He was referring to the painted aprons affixed to the interior of a tipi, and to the painted tipi as well.
- He saw tipi liners as the perfect portable artwork.
- He was thinking about a blanket's ability to receive, enclose, and protect.
- He wanted to make reference to the tradition of giving blankets as gifts within Aboriginal cultures.
- He was thinking about when we are born and wrapped in baby blankets.
- He had an old blanket in his studio and, in a moment of frustration, he picked it up, drove nails into it, and started to paint.²⁰

ACTIVITY: COMPARE AND CONTRAST TWO BLANKET PAINTINGS



A Smallpox Issue, 1983



A Government Blanket Policy, 1983

Look at these two paintings. What are the similarities? What are the differences? Based on your observations alone, describe what you think might be important to the artist, then read the context for each painting. Keep in mind that there are no right and wrong answers. Even with the information provided, remember that all interpretations are valid, and artists often appreciate new insights into their work.

Context: A Smallpox Issue

A Smallpox Issue addresses the deliberate and horrific impregnation of the smallpox virus into government-issued blankets distributed to Aboriginal populations during the nineteenth century. The brightly-coloured dots in the central panel read as fever sores from the disease that decimated scores of Aboriginal people. Three tipis at the top balance the strip of bloodied and red land at the bottom of the blanket. This work is a stunning verbal and political allegory that relates directly to the blanket itself as subject. "In fact, the whole gesture of the artist selling blankets back to the whites in the form of art is a highly ironic and political act."²¹

Context: A Government Blanket Policy

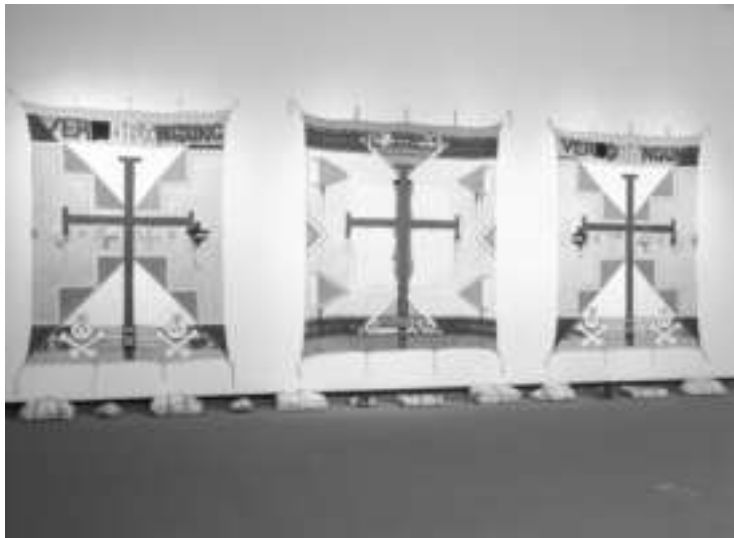
The three tipis appear again in the bottom centre of A Government Blanket Policy and become a recurring symbol of Aboriginal cultural history, self determination, spirituality and sovereignty. The combined British and American flags are reversed and superimposed over the upside-down tipis to represent the conflation in "blanket policies" of the two countries that dominated Aboriginal rights and decimated Aboriginal peoples in North America. The inverted tipis here become a metaphor for a world forever turned upside-down for the continent's Indigenous populations. The Union Jack signifies the British role in developing treaties within their Canadian territories. The "X" at centre-left suggests a black mark on both countries for the wrong enacted, while also alluding to the signing of treaties by First Nations peoples who did not write or understand English. It is interesting to note that the American flag was also a popular design motif among the Lakota and Dakota during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²²

How does reading the information above affect your interpretation of the paintings?

Why were these paintings significant in the development of Boyer's career?

MORE BLANKET STATEMENTS

Trains-N-Boats-N-Plains: The Nina, the Santa Maria and a Pinto



Trains-N-Boats-N-Plains: The Nina, the Santa Maria and a Pinto, 1991

ACTIVITY: INTERPRETING A WORK OF ART

Start by making a simple list of the words that come to mind as you look at this work of art. This can include shapes, identifiable objects, words — anything at all.

Next, consider how the piece was created. Where did the artist begin? Do you think he worked on all the panels at the same time? Did he paint one at a time? What are some of the decisions he would have made in the process?

What appears to be important to this artist?

If this painting was used on the cover of a book, what do you think the content of the book might be?

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

In 1992, several exhibitions were organized in response to the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas. Bob Boyer was invited to participate in *INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years*. This exhibition, organized by the Canadian Museum of Civilization, invited contemporary Aboriginal artists to challenge the "celebration" of this encounter and respond to issues such as colonization.

READING THE WORK OF ART

The **Title** makes reference to Columbus's three ships, as well as to the Burt Bacharach song, "Trains and Boats and Planes." Boyer often employed wordplay in his titles, and these can serve as keys to understanding the multiple references in his paintings. Changing "Planes" to "Plains" is a reference to a geographical region in North America, and altering the Pinta to "a Pinto" is an inside joke that plays upon the stereotype of a "rez car."

Turtle Island refers to North America before the arrival of Christopher Columbus. Many Aboriginal people today still refer to North America as Turtle Island.

Verdrängung is a German word Boyer heard on the radio while working on this painting. It refers to the process by which a person can suppress and repress a memory, as if it didn't happen. Boyer heard the word used in the context of the Holocaust, as part of a discussion on how a younger generation is able to "carry on" by personally and culturally suppressing this horrific historical event.

The **Three Crosses** can have multiple interpretations. Most viewers see them as Christian iconography, and read them as indicating religious suppression of Aboriginal culture. In the context of Christopher Columbus, they can also be envisioned as the ships' masts as they might have appeared from shore. Boyer also provided another interpretation: upon discovering new land, an explorer would drive his sword into the earth. These crosses also resemble swords.

The **Pipe Bowls** are a reference to Aboriginal ceremonial pipes.

Triangles can often be read as tipis. Boyer's travel and research extended his iconography to include other Indigenous cultures, leading to his use of the stepped pyramid as another common triangular shape.

The **Black Marks** are the result of Boyer's misspelling of the word "Verdrängung" when he added it to the painting. He used black paint to correct the spelling and took out the first "N," then re-balanced the imagery by adding other black marks, blotting out some of the pipes in the process.

The **Drips of Red Paint** allude to the bloodshed of Aboriginal peoples. Boyer's earlier blanket paintings also employed dripping red paint and had significant political references.

Boyer often employed aerial **Perspective**. Mountains and tipis are presented horizontally or from an aerial view directly above the land. This created a kind of "cosmic landscape."²³

The **Parcels** on the floor are objects wrapped in maps. They look like gifts, but the wire and chain that bind them present a contradiction — when is a gift not a gift? In conjunction with the other references to Columbus and colonization, they become contentious "parcels of land."

The **Skull and Crossbones** can be interpreted as pirates, poison, graveyards, and ancestors, among other possible interpretations.

Boyer's paintings on **Blankets**, and their provocative titles, often contrasted the historical and cultural symbolism of a blanket (security, warmth, generosity) with difficult issues related to the colonization of North America.

What is your interpretation of this work of art? Does it offer a good opportunity for reflection? In your opinion, can art make a difference in how we live our lives?

ACTIVITY: MAKE A STATEMENT

In this activity, participants will make a work of art related to an important issue.

This project can be done individually, or in small groups.

Before You Start

Choose an issue and collect an assortment of materials and images to represent your ideas. Lay your materials out in a design that expresses your ideas. Play with the use of images and words. Combine, arrange, alter, distort, blend, isolate and re-organize your images. Consider incorporating all of the following: drawing, painting and writing.

Method

Treat this as a process. Take your visual research and begin planning your work of art. Write about your intentions, the process and the results. Add comments such as, "What I would really like to do with this concept is . . ." Create your work, display it and be prepared to discuss it. Invite others into a dialogue with you about your concerns and ideas.

ACTIVITY: IDENTITY PORTRAITS

In this activity, participants will make symbolic self-portraits. This can involve drawing, painting, printmaking, collage or a mixed-media project.

Ask participants to make a list of things that are important to them. They will then create and/or search for images that illustrate these things (words can also be incorporated). The images will then be organized into a design that further defines their personal identity. The portrait may or may not have a reference to the participant's physical appearance.

Sample Self-Portrait

Things that are important to this artist:

- Canoeing
- The artist has two children: a "moon child" and a "sun child."
- The eyes tell us that this person is an artist.
- The artist was born in the Year of the Snake.
- The flower is a lotus blossom and represents harmony.
- The words "escape" and "eternity" represent the different forces that are part of daily living.
- The words "wind-water-sun-earth-wind-water" represent the natural elements.



Artwork by Wendy Winter

ACTIVITY: AN APPRENTICESHIP

In this activity, participants will create an artwork similar in style to the work of Bob Boyer.

- Look for symbols and images that express notions of personal and cultural identity (see symbols activity on page 10).
- Play with the images, altering them to fit within a geometric format (using graph paper may be helpful).
- Review Boyer's use of symmetry and balance.
- Sketch the design for your identity portrait painting.
- Transfer the design to your painting surface.
- Review Boyer's use of colour and layering of paint.
- Select colors that are personally and culturally significant to you.
- Paint colours in layers, allowing one layer to dry before adding the next layer.
- Allow areas of colour to show through, and allow earlier edges to show up as shape outlines.

ACTIVITY: BLANKET PAINTING

Participants will work in groups of three to five people.

Materials

- Large sheets of paper
- Blankets (one per group)
- Exterior white latex primer
- Drawing/painting materials

Method

Provide each group with a blanket. Prepare the blankets with a primer (exterior white latex primer is suggested). Have each participant work on as large a sheet of paper as possible to start organizing important images and symbols.

Have participants look at Bob Boyer's paintings for inspiration. Ask them to research other First Nations and Metis artists. Suggest that they look for artists who make large-scale paintings, and ask them to reflect upon similarities and differences in the artists' approaches.

With their sketches in hand, have participants discuss how they can bring the team's various concepts together. Have them do a large group sketch that incorporates some of each individual's ideas and images. Ensure that each member of the group feels that they are represented in the final sketch.

Participants will now paint the blanket, taking all of the elements into account — colour, shape, texture, line. Is one element more prominent than the others? If so, have each group resolve these issues.

THIRD TALKING CIRCLE

[Boyer] was at the forefront of a Canada-wide art movement, in which Aboriginal artists began to question not only the painful colonial history in the Americas, but also the long history of exclusion from mainstream galleries and the discourses around contemporary Canadian art. In moving from canvas to cotton blankets and developing his own unique approach to the abstract, Boyer's ironic works became highly socio-political in subject matter.²⁴

Why did these paintings have such a strong impact?

What issues in the history of Canada's Aboriginal peoples has Boyer addressed in his paintings?

Do you think that this is a valuable form of expression?

What issues did Boyer reveal in these paintings?

What are the issues facing Aboriginal peoples and communities in Canada today?

How can we learn more about these issues?

Do these issues only affect Aboriginal peoples?

In your opinion, can art make a difference?

LOOKING FORWARD: THE SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPES

This section looks at the importance of nature, concepts of harmony and balance, and the cyclical nature of the universe.

What I remember most is how deeply Bob connected to nature — to Mother Earth, and how appreciative he was of all her gifts. Bob once said, “Mother Earth treats us so well. Do you know there are children who do not know where food comes from? There are kids who believe milk comes from a cardboard box. There are people who do not know where things go when they flush. Look after your Mother.”

When I consider the legacy of Bob Boyer and what that legacy would include, I believe that it would undoubtedly include the recognition of a need to keep our children close to the Earth and to its “softening influence,” to educate our children as complete and whole human beings, so they may become the nurturers, the keepers of the seed, and perpetuate a legacy of “connectedness.”

Therefore, this teacher’s resource package has as one of its main objectives the opportunity for students to develop skills, creativity and inspiration, through the extraordinary experience of art, while connecting with Mother Earth and to the extraordinary magic and wonder of her many gifts.²⁵

The Lakota was a true naturalist —
a lover of Nature.
He loved the Earth . . .
the attachment growing with age . . .

[T]he old Lakota was wise . . .

[H]e knew that lack of respect for
growing, living things
soon led to lack of respect
for humans too.

So he kept his youth close to its
softening influence.²⁶

BOB’S SUMMER ART CLASS

One summer, Bob taught a weekend workshop to a group of teens. He started with a brief talk about finding inspiration in nature. Participants were then instructed to go outside, find a quiet space in the park, sit and do nothing.

Bob had collected willow branches for the workshop. When the students had finished their meditation in nature, they were invited to take the branches and some other materials, and construct an outdoor sculpture.

ACTIVITY: BRINGING NATURE INSIDE

Take students into the natural environment. When working outdoors is not feasible, bring nature inside.

Set up a nature display, or make a Nature Mobile.

Your students will see that nature can be a wonderful aesthetic stimulus, and that “closeness with nature” can be achieved within the four walls of a classroom.

MAKING A NATURE MOBILE

Materials

- A branch or stick
- Natural objects such as pebbles, pine cones, leaves, wildflowers, twigs, nuts, apples, mushrooms, string, twine or sinew

Method

Tie collected objects to the branch or stick with twine, string or sinew.

Tie twine or string onto the branch to hang.

ACTIVITY: PASTEL PAINTING

Materials

- Coloured paper or pastel paper (at least 30 x 71 cm)
- Chalk pastels or oil pastels

Method

Connect with nature. Go for a walk, sit in a park. Take your time. Wait until you feel a change come over you from being in a natural environment. Write a poem, diarize your experience, sketch. Review concepts of balance, symmetry and symbolism. Look at the chalk or oil pastels. Consider colour and texture. Express yourself by creating a work of art.

ACTIVITY: THANKING THE EARTH

Materials

- Markers
- Watercolours
- Brushes
- Paper
- Water
- Poems and pictures that portray your gratitude for Earth's natural resources.

Discussion Point

What natural wonders make our planet unique? Choose one topic that really interests you, such as water, mountains, or endangered species. Research information on how these natural wonders can be preserved now for the future.

Ideas

- Outline a scene that reflects the beauty of nature, then paint it.
- Write a colourful accompanying poem thanking Earth for its natural gifts. Describe the beauty represented in your painting, and convey the urgency for preservation of resources in a convincing way.

Adaptations

- Create a scene with a grandparent or other older person who remembers what Earth used to be like.
- Invite an Elder into your classroom.

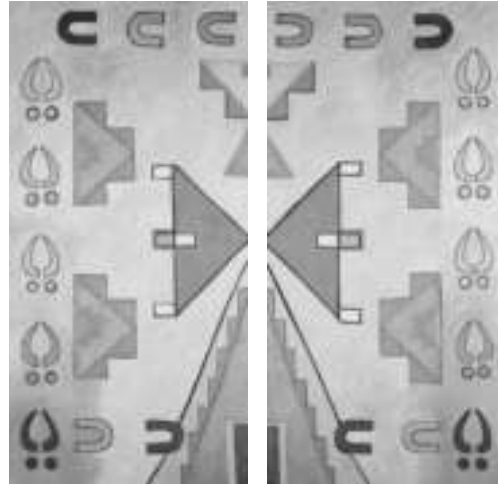
BOYER REVISITS THE HISTORY OF FRESCO PAINTING

In an interview with his friend and art dealer James Kurtz, Bob Boyer referred to his use of petroglyphs in the painting *Scene/Seen at St. Victor's*, as looking to history as a way of reflecting upon the present. He saw this painting as "a representation of the ongoing existence of the First Nations community," and that "the past is the present, and the present is the past."

He was also interested in historical painting techniques. Indeed, some of Boyer's earliest paintings were painted with egg tempera, a paint composed of egg yolk, water and dry pigment that was popular at the end of the fifteenth century. He was also something of a revisionist, in that he considered rock painting and petroglyphs to be precursors to fresco painting. He developed his own contemporary fresco technique by mixing paint with drywall plaster, and applying it to a surface covered in burlap.

SCENE/SEEN AT ST. VICTOR'S

One of the inspirations for *Scene/Seen at St. Victor's* is the petroglyph site at St. Victor Provincial Park in Saskatchewan. Ask participants if they know what a petroglyph is, and if they have been to the St. Victor site.



Scene/Seen at St. Victor's, 1993

ST. VICTOR PETROGLYPH SITE



Detail of petroglyphs at St. Victor Provincial Park, Saskatchewan. Photo: Saskatchewan Archives Board (R-PS 84-2454-146)

WHAT IS FRESCO PAINTING?

Fresco is:

Wall-painting in a medium like watercolour on plaster . . . buon fresco [or true fresco], practiced in Italy from the thirteenth century and perfected in the sixteenth, is one of the most permanent forms of wall decoration known. . . . An area [of the wall] . . . is covered with . . . damp plaster . . . then painted with pigments mixed with plain water or lime-water, allowance being made for the fact that the colours dry much lighter. Because the plaster is still damp a chemical reaction takes place and the colours become integrated with the wall itself.²⁷

Contemporary Fresco Technique

Boyer begins . . . with fresco, a painting technique, currently little used, in which paint is directly applied onto limestone plaster walls rather than canvas (Boyer has substituted drywall compound on plywood out of conservation and portability concerns). Although fresco is familiar to many students of European art history who trace its use from early Roman villas through to the chapel paintings of Giotto to the masterworks of Leonardo and Michelangelo during the Italian Renaissance, it is, according to Boyer, a technique with a longer linear heritage than this accepted history would have us believe. Boyer not only identifies this technique as one practiced by Indigenous peoples the world over but links it directly to the earliest extant visual expressions in human history, cave and rock paintings. He cites many examples of painting on rock from those over 15,000 year old caves found at Lascaux in Southern France, to the pictographic images on rock found throughout North America, to the more ritualized and hence formalized images found on the walls of Incan and Mayan stone temples. By equating his own use of fresco here to its use by (much) earlier Indigenous peoples, Boyer creates a divergent trans-historical reading of the practice of fresco which allows him to reclaim it from the grasp of dominant and elitist European models. Moreover, Boyer identifies visual symbolism not as a manifestation of the European tradition but as an abstract language of colours and forms long employed by Indigenous artists who used it to synthetically describe and encode a variety of knowledges.²⁸

ACTIVITY: CONTEMPORARY FRESCO PAINTING

Materials

- 30 x 45 cm hardboard
- Tempera or acrylic paint (high-quality paint is not essential)
- Drywall compound
- Plastic knives, paint scrapers
- Painting palettes (cardboard squares covered in wax paper work well)

Method

You will need three painting sessions.

Session 1: Developing the Imagery/Design

- Keep the design simple: signs and symbols, shapes and colours.
- First Fresco Application
 - Mix plaster with paint on your palette.
 - Apply mixture to board using plastic knives or paint scrapers.
 - Allow to dry.

Session 2: Second Fresco Application

- Apply a second layer to areas that you wish to enhance.
- Allow to dry.

Session 3: Finishing

- Add last layer where desired to heighten colour, or add detail.



Artwork by Wendy Winter

CONCLUSION

Bob Boyer started on his path in small-town Saskatchewan. He was a gifted and perceptive person who found, received and appreciated guidance along the way. His path took him far from home and brought him back again. He became an important teacher and artist, but throughout he continued to be a lifelong learner.

Each of us is travelling our own path. If we allow Boyer's story to guide us, we will recognize that we are not travelling alone — that others have gone before us, are travelling with us, and that there are helpers for our journeys. We will learn to appreciate nature as our greatest teacher. We will also learn to be respectful, know when to listen, and when to act. We will grow to understand that those who have been on their paths longer have life experience and knowledge to offer, if we are prepared to listen. We will learn that sometimes we must take a stand, and that at other times it is better to stop and meditate on the wonders of the natural and spiritual worlds.

We hope this booklet has been helpful in providing access to the ideas and inspirations of artist Bob Boyer.

IMAGES

BOB BOYER

1. *A Seven Arrow Storm*, 1984
oil over acrylic on cotton blanket
190.5 x 232.4 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina
Collection
1984-007
2. *On the Way to Melfort*, 1970-1971
oil on wood panel
43.1 x 58.2 cm
Collection of Tammi Shanahan
3. *Design for Marie*, 1986
watercolour on paper
28.0 x 22.5 cm
Collection of Allen and Marla Dufour
4. *A Smallpox Issue*, 1983
oil with rawhide on blanket
190 x 122 cm
Saskatchewan Arts Board Permanent
Collection, 1984-012
5. *A Government Blanket Policy*, 1983
oil and acrylic on cotton blanket
121 x 195 cm
Canadian Museum of Civilization Collection
V-Z-16
6. *Trains-N-Boats-N-Plains: The Nina, the Santa Maria and a Pinto*, 1991
roadmaps, chain, wire, styrofoam tray,
crayon, mixed media and oil over acrylic on
blanket, 295 x 730 x 50 cm
Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
Regina, purchased with funds from the
James Kurtz Memorial Foundation
1998-002
7. *Scene/Seen at St. Victor's*, 1993
oil over acrylic on burlap
Diptych: 243.5 x 122.0 cm (each)
Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery,
Regina, gift of James Kurtz
1994-153

TED GODWIN

8. *Tartan for Me Running*, 1968
elvacite on canvas
190.8 x 251.2 cm
MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina
Collection, 1968-001

PHOTO CREDITS

Canadian Museum of Civilization: 5
Don Hall: 1-4, 6-8

Notes

- 1 Ted Godwin, "Pauses on the Pollen Path," *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008), 149.
- 2 For the purposes of this publication, a choice was made to omit the accent on "Metis" out of respect for Bob Boyer's memory and his own personal preference.
- 3 As per information published on the Statistics Canada website, <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Analytic/companion/abor/canada.cfm#5>.
- 4 *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 7 August 1973.
- 5 Robert Enright, *Border Crossings*, 11 (December 1992): 53.
- 6 Canadian Heritage, "Ceremonial and Canadian Symbols Promotion: The Symbols of Canada: Tartans," Canadian Heritage, http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-ccsp/sc-cs/o6_e.cfm (accessed August 14, 2008).
- 7 Lee-Ann Martin, "Bob Boyer: His Life's Work," *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008), 22.
- 8 Enright, 54.
- 9 Godwin, 149.
- 10 The Four Worlds Development Project. "12 Principles of Indian Philosophy." Saskatchewan Schools and School Divisions. http://www.saskschools.ca/curr_content/aboriginal_res/supplem.htm (accessed August 13, 2008). From Saskatchewan Education and the Four Worlds Development Centre.
- 11 Andrew Oko, *Spiritual Landscapes: Recent Paintings by Bob Boyer* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery), n.p.
- 12 Adapted from Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 29-30.
- 13 Berlo and Phillips, 126.
- 14 Berlo and Phillips, 126.
- 15 Berlo and Phillips, 117-18.
- 16 Berlo and Phillips, 35.
- 17 Martin, 49.
- 18 The Four Worlds Development Project. "Four Directions Teacher Resource Kit." Saskatchewan Schools and School Divisions. http://www.saskschools.ca/curr_content/aboriginal_res/supplem.htm (accessed August 13, 2008)
- 19 Martin, 34.
- 20 Martin, 36; Enright, 54.
- 21 Martin, 39; includes a quotation from Elizabeth McLuhan, "Introduction" in *Horses Fly Too*, exhibition catalogue (Regina: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1984), 14.
- 22 Martin, 39.
- 23 Oko, n.d.
- 24 Martin, 37.
- 25 Susan D. Bear, "Letter to the Teacher," *Bob Boyer Legacy Project* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2006).
- 26 Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 192, 197.
- 27 Peter and Linda Murray, *The Penguin Dictionary of Art and Artists*, sixth edition, Penguin Reference Books (London, England: Penguin, 1989), 148.
- 28 Jack Anderson, *Timelessness* (Regina: Rosemont Art Gallery, 1999), n.p.