

Voices in Stone

Inuit Sculpture in Canada

A 60-Minute Elementary Lesson Plan · Grades 1–3 · Canadian Curriculum

■ Visual Arts | ■ Social Studies | ■ Indigenous Culture | ■ Hands-On | ■ Canadian Identity

■ ■
Duration
60 minutes

■
Grade
1 – 3

■
Region
Canada

■
Style
Inquiry + Make

Big Ideas & Learning Goals

Essential Question

"How can a piece of rock tell a whole story about a people, a place, and a way of life?"

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Explain what Inuit sculpture is and why it matters to Canadian culture
- Identify at least 3 traditional materials: soapstone, bone, ivory, antler
- Describe common subjects: polar bears, seals, hunters, mother & child figures, Inukshuk
- Understand that 3D sculpture tells stories without words — showing culture, belief, and daily life
- Respectfully discuss why we celebrate and protect Indigenous art traditions

Curriculum Connections

- Arts Education — Elements of three-dimensional form and sculpture
- Social Studies — Indigenous peoples of Canada and their contributions
- Language Arts — Vocabulary development and oral storytelling
- Inquiry — Observation, questioning, and making connections

Materials & Setup

Teacher prepares before class

- ■ Printed or projected image gallery — at least 6 examples of Inuit 3D sculpture (polar bear carvings, mother & child, Inukshuk, hunting scenes, owl sculptures, swimming seal figures)
- Tactile objects — smooth river stones, bar of soap, or modelling clay that mimics the feel of soapstone (one per student for the creation activity)
- Vocabulary cards — printed word cards on card stock (see Vocabulary section below)
- ■ Canada map poster — with Nunavut, NWT, Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and Labrador labelled and highlighted
- Optional — quiet ambient Arctic soundscape (wind, distant drums) to set the mood during creation time

■ Background: What Makes Inuit Sculpture Special?

■ Teacher Background — Share this with your class!

The Inuit people have lived in Canada's Arctic for over 4,000 years — long before Canada was even a country! Their sculptures are 3D objects carved by hand from materials found in the Arctic. They did not call their carvings 'art' — in Inuktitut they called them *sananguagait*, meaning 'objects made to look like real things.' Each carving told a story: of a hunt, of a spirit, of respect for an animal. They believed every living thing had its own spirit, called an *inua*.

■ Polar Bear	Soapstone, bone	Strength, survival, respect for the Arctic's most powerful animal
■ Hunter Figure	Soapstone, ivory	Daily life, skill, the hunter's spiritual connection to prey
■ Inukshuk	Stacked stone	Navigation, messages between travellers, human presence in wilderness
■■■■ Mother & Child	Soapstone, antler	Family bonds, warmth, the <i>amautik</i> (baby-carrying parka)
■ Owl	Whalebone, stone	Wisdom, the spirit world, connection to Inuit mythology
■ Seal / Swimming Seal	Soapstone	The sea, hunting, gratitude — seals provided food, clothing, and oil

■ The Secret of Soapstone

Soapstone is soft enough to carve with simple tools, but hardens and polishes beautifully. It comes in colours from creamy white to deep green and black — all naturally found across the Canadian Arctic. Before soapstone became popular for sale to southern Canadians, Inuit artists carved from walrus ivory, caribou antler, whale bone, and animal bones — all materials from animals they hunted for survival. Nothing was wasted.

The most famous Inuit art community is Cape Dorset (Kinngait), Nunavut — often called the 'capital of Inuit art.' The Winnipeg Art Gallery holds the largest public collection of contemporary Inuit art in the world.

■ 60-Minute Lesson Timeline

0–5 min

■ Hook: The Mystery Box

Place a smooth stone or a piece of modelling clay in a fabric bag. Pass it around. 'Close your eyes. What does this feel like? What could you make from this?' Students share — introduce the idea that Inuit artists start with a stone and see the animal or person hiding inside it. This establishes curiosity and tactile engagement before a single word of instruction.

5–12 min

■■■ Where in the World? / Where in Canada?

Show the Canada map. Point to the Arctic regions. 'These communities are so far north that in winter, the sun doesn't rise for weeks!' Establish place, climate, and the idea that the land shapes how people live — and what they create. Introduce the word Inuit = 'The People' in Inuktitut.

12–22 min	<p>Gallery Walk: Sculpture Stations</p> <p>Display 6 printed sculpture images at stations around the room (polar bear, hunter, mother & child, Inukshuk, owl, seal). Students rotate every 90 seconds. At each station: one student describes WHAT they see (3D shape, size, texture), one says WHAT STORY it might tell. Teacher circulates: 'Is this big or small?' 'What animal is this?' 'Why did the artist carve THIS?' Remind students these are 3D objects you can walk all the way around!</p>
22–32 min	<p>Story Time: The Inukshuk Speaks</p> <p>Teacher-led discussion centred on the Inukshuk — the most iconic Inuit 3D sculpture. Stacked stones shaped like a human, used as a landmark and message between travellers. 'Imagine a world of endless snow with no roads, no signs, no GPS. How would you tell your family where to go? The Inukshuk was their signpost, their message board, their hug from far away.' Connect: Canada used an Inukshuk as the symbol for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics!</p>
32–38 min	<p>Vocabulary Power-Up</p> <p>Introduce vocabulary cards. Play 'What's my word?' — teacher reads a definition, students race to hold up the correct card. Keep it energetic! Words: Inuit, Inuktitut, soapstone, sculpture, carving, Inukshuk, Arctic, Nunavut, sananguagait, inua. Students pair up and quiz each other for 2 minutes.</p>
38–52 min	<p>Hands-On: My Animal Spirit Carving</p> <p>Students use a bar of Ivory soap (pre-scored with safe lines) or soft modelling clay to create a small 3D animal figure. Prompt: 'Which Arctic animal feels like YOU? Brave like a polar bear? Wise like an owl? Fast like a caribou?' Students carve or shape their creature, then write/dictate one sentence: 'I chose a ___ because ___.' Remind them: sculpture is 3-dimensional — we can see it from ALL sides!</p>
52–58 min	<p>Gallery Share</p> <p>Each student places their sculpture on the desk. The class does a seated gallery walk — standing to look at their neighbours' work. 3–4 students share their animal and reasoning. Celebrate! 'Our classroom now has its own sculpture collection, just like the Winnipeg Art Gallery!'</p>
58–60 min	<p>Exit & Reflection</p> <p>3-2-1 Exit Ticket: 'Name 3 things you learned, 2 things that surprised you, 1 question you still have.' Collect for assessment. Close with: 'Every time you see Inuit sculpture in a gallery or museum, you now know it carries 4,000 years of culture inside it.'</p>

Key Vocabulary

Inuit	Means 'the people' in Inuktitut; Indigenous people of Canada's Arctic
Inuktitut	The language spoken by Inuit people across Canada's Arctic and Subarctic regions
Soapstone	A soft, smooth stone from the Arctic — the most common sculpture material used today
Sculpture	A 3D work of art you can see and touch from all sides — not flat like a drawing
Inukshuk	Stacked stone figure shaped like a human; used as a landmark, compass, or message
Sananguagait	Inuktitut word for carvings — 'objects made to look like real things'

Inua	The spirit or soul the Inuit believed lives inside every living and nonliving thing
Nunavut	Canada's newest territory (1999), home to the largest Inuit sculpture communities
Amautik	A traditional Inuit parka with a pouch for carrying babies — depicted in many carvings
Cape Dorset (Kinngait)	Small Nunavut community considered the 'capital' of Inuit art worldwide

Discussion Questions by Grade

GRADE 1
Simpler, concrete questions

- What animals can you see in the sculptures? Have you ever seen these animals?
- If you could touch this carving, what do you think it would feel like?
- Why do you think the artist made this — to play with, to sell, or to tell a story?

GRADE 2
Making connections

- How is carving stone different from drawing a picture? What can 3D sculpture do that a drawing cannot?
- The Inuit carved with what they found around them. What materials would YOU find near YOUR home to make art?
- Why is it important that we keep these sculptures in museums and galleries for everyone to see?

GRADE 3
Deeper thinking

- The Inuit didn't have a word for 'art' — they called carvings 'useful objects.' Does something need to be pretty to be art?
- How do Inuit sculptures help keep a culture alive? What happens to a culture if people stop making its art?
- An Inukshuk helped travellers survive in the Arctic. Can a sculpture save a life? How?

Assessment & Differentiation

Formative Assessment

- 3-2-1 Exit ticket (3 learned, 2 surprised, 1 question)
- Oral sharing during gallery walk
- Teacher observation during clay/soap activity
- Vocabulary card game participation

Differentiation Strategies

- Advanced: Write a paragraph from the sculpture's point of view
- Support: Provide sentence starters; allow verbal responses
- ELL learners: Vocabulary cards with drawings; bilingual labels
- Accessibility: Air-dry clay is easier than soap carving for fine motor challenge

Extension Activities

For the Classroom

- Read aloud: Inuit legend picture books (check your school library for age-appropriate titles)
- Visit the Winnipeg Art Gallery's online Inuit art collection at gallery.ca
- Build a classroom Inukshuk with small rocks or building blocks — discuss teamwork and messages
- Write a class 'story in stone' — each student adds one clay piece to a shared group scene
- Trace on a map: Where does YOUR family come from? How does your home shape YOUR art?

Take-Home Connection

'Tonight, ask someone in your family: if YOU were going to carve something that told the story of our family, what would you carve? Draw it and bring it back tomorrow.' This connects the lesson to students' own cultural identities.

Amazing Inuit Sculpture Facts — Share with your class!

■ Pauta Saila of Cape Dorset was famous for his 'dancing polar bear' sculptures — the bears seem to balance on one toe! · ■ In Arctic winters, sculptors worked by the light of a qulliq (oil lamp) inside their igloos. · ■ When Inuit sculpture appeared in London galleries in the 1953, critics compared it to the greatest modern sculptors in the world! · ■ The Inukshuk was Canada's symbol for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. · ■ The Winnipeg Art Gallery holds over 13,000 pieces — the world's largest public collection of Inuit art.