



# CRAFT IN AMERICA

## BISKAKONE GREG JOHNSON: WHAT MAKES A PLACE HOME? EDUCATION GUIDE

### Background Reading

*"Home is where we harvest our fish. Home is where we knock the rice. Home is out there in the canoes. Home is when we are out there with our families and we're picking those berries, getting scratched up in the thorns, you know, that's home.*

*Home is also above the clouds where our ancestors go into the stars, into the northern lights. That's our other home—where we come from and where we go in the end.*

*Home is where we raise our children.*

*Home is where we make our life with our partner.*

*Home is all those things, you know. That means home is a huge range, you know, a huge range, and within it we can find all the things that will give us the good life."*

– Biskakone Greg Johnson

### LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson students explore the theme of Home while learning about the life and work of Ojibwe artist Biskakone Greg Johnson. The artist lives with his partner, artist Anungo Kwe Alexandria Sulainis, and their children, in Lac Du Flambeau, Wisconsin, the land that was home to many generations of his ancestors. The students discover that the artist's idea of home relates to the places where he and his people live and continue the day-to-day traditions that have been passed down through the years. Johnson continues many of the craft traditions of his Ojibwe culture, including beading, weaving, moccasin making, and the techniques and process of birch bark etching. He creates and embellishes baskets and containers made from the local tree bark, repeating images that represent the natural world. After making connections with their own ideas about home, students list the places, special times, people, and ideas that help define home for them. They are asked to consider symbols or images that might represent their associations with the theme. Borrowing from the Ojibwe tradition of birch bark etching, students create India ink or crayon etchings, using imagery to suggest their own associations with the idea of Home.

### Key Concepts

- Artists may choose to work within cultural traditions that have personal meaning to them.
- People have long created and embellished functional objects from materials and tools found in their local environment.
- Functional objects can be formed and embellished to reflect what is important to those who create and use them.

### Critical Questions

- What does Home mean to you?
- How can the idea of Home be honored through the continuation of cultural traditions?
- Why might it be important for an artist to work with materials and techniques that represent long standing traditions within the artist's culture?



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### Objectives

Students will:

- Observe and discuss the work of Biskakone Greg Johnson and how it connects with the idea of Home.
- Compare and contrast cultural traditions of Ojibwe people and traditions associated with their own family and community.
- Create an India ink or crayon etching with personal meaning that communicates a message about Home.

### Interdisciplinary Connections

**Environmental Science:** This lesson explores materials and objects found in the natural world. The artist is inspired by place, cultural traditions, and the natural environment. Science classes can investigate Birch bark and other natural materials and how they can be used in daily life.

Science classes can also consider these materials in the environment that could be repurposed and used to make functional containers. Ask, How do these materials make us aware of sustainability? How can these materials be repurposed?

**History/Social Studies:** This lesson explores aspects of materials found in the natural world. The artist is inspired by place, geography, family, and the natural environment. Students may investigate the history of Birch Bark etching, materials and functions as related to cultural traditions and regions. What purpose did Birch bark and other types of tree bark serve in a particular culture or society?

**Language Arts:** The activity in which students are encouraged to explore the idea of Home both metaphorically and realistically, could be extended within a Language Arts context. Write a story about your Home and/or an explanation of its purpose and meaning to you.

### National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Anchor Standard #1, CREATING: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #2, CREATING: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #4, PRESENTING: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- Anchor Standard #8, RESPONDING: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11, CONNECTING: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

### Worksheets

- Worksheet 1: Exploring Traditions and Home
- Worksheet 2: Reflections on the Ideas of Home



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## Materials

- Scratchboard (options): Commercially available scratchboard, India Ink over clayboard, Crayon cover over crayon base on construction paper or cardstock
- Pencils for sketching
- Sketchbooks
- Tools for etching: scratch knife, sculpting tools, etching tools, scraper tool, popsicle sticks, paper clips
- Paper Towels or soft buffing cloths
- Pictures and/or objects from natural environment

## About Biskakone Greg Johnson

Biskakone Greg Johnson is a cultural practitioner and teacher in the Anishinaabe tradition. As a young man, he saw beautiful objects in museums that were attributed to his culture. He was determined to learn how to create them. He sought knowledge from members of his community or, when he could not find a teacher, he taught himself how to engage in many of the craft traditions of the Ojibwe people. He now teaches youth and others the craft making traditions of his culture. Working with traditional materials such as birch bark from the natural environment, the artist creates baskets and containers for functional use in everyday life. He has been making baskets for 15 years and has mastered the crafts of cedar bark mat weaving, beadwork, weaving winnowing baskets, moccasin sewing, and canoe building. He is an instructor at the North House Folk School, teaching the skills and knowledge of his culture. He is also an Ojibwe Language teacher. He states that he is inspired by the Ojibwe cultural traditions that were lost and believes it important to teach these traditions because that is "who we are."