



Inuit Totem Sculptures

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Project Description:

The Inuit people have lived in Greenland and the Ontario region of Canada for perhaps a thousand years, following a nomadic lifestyle based on the game available each season of the year. They honor the “inui” or life force in all things, and still carve gray soapstone sculptures of animals and people to show their respect for all living things. Students will start with blocks of clay and learn to carve away or “subtract” the unneeded portions to reveal the animal form inside.

Goals - Students will:

Explore the sculpture art of Inuit Native Americans.

Condition polymer clay.

Stack slabs of clay to make a carving block.

Sketch different views of an animal to prepare for carving in 3- dimensional form.

Explore subtractive modeling to carve and sculpt an animal symbol or “totem.”

Add descriptive textural detailing to complete the small sculptures.

Supplies

Sculpey III, Elephant Grey – 1 ounce per student
Sculpey Clay Conditioning Machine or Roller from Firefly Tool Set
Firefly Tool Set

Additional Supplies:

White Acrylic paint
Scraps of matt board, Lucite, ceramic tiles, or aluminum roof flashing tiles for work surfaces, one per student.

Getting Started

Preheat oven to 275 °F. Test temperature with oven thermometer for perfectly cured clay.
Condition all clay by kneading until it's soft and smooth or running it through the Clay Conditioning Machine for several passes on the widest setting. Fold the clay in half after each pass and insert the fold side into the rollers first.

1. Show examples of Inuit soapstone sculptures. Note that the forms are often blocky, without thin, breakable parts. (Note: Carved ivory details are sometimes added to make antlers or other fragile details).

2. Create slabs of clay and stack slabs to make a block about 1 1/2x1 1/2x2", taking care to roll out any air bubbles between the layers.



3. Trim the block to make it a solid form. Let it rest to cool down so it will be easier to carve without distortion.

4. Sketch a side view of an animal or bird, thinking of the form like a stuffed animal – round and fat are better for carving than any long or thin features.



5. Make a second sketch, imagining what the sculpture would look like from above or looking face-on. This step may be difficult for students, so samples of sculptures and their sketches will pave the way for success.



6. Rough out the form from two views on the prepared block of clay.

7. Always carve away small bits at a time, since they cannot be easily put back onto the block if too much is removed.

8. Without rushing, gently carve the form of the bird, fish or other animal until its form begins to emerge. Turn the block after each cut, making sure that the animal takes shape from every angle.



9. The last step is to add decorative textures and facial features, again making sure that the animal totem looks good from every side. All modifications at this point should be very slight!

10. Bake at 275 °F. for 15 minutes per ¼” of thickness. All baking should be completed by an adult.

11. Optional: A white acrylic paint stain can be added to create a patina, and heighten the textural details of the sculpture. Make sure the paint is rubbed off everywhere except the textural grooves. Wash hands and work surfaces immediately to prevent staining them.

