

American Indians

Discovering Cultural Differences

Overview: After completing this lesson, students will better understand that the term “American Indian” refers to many different tribes as exemplified by differences between traditional housing.

Subject Area: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Age Group/Grade Level: 8-10 years, grades 3-5

Duration: approximately 60 min.

Background

In 1830, Euro-American lawyer and painter George Catlin traveled up the Missouri River and through the Great Plains, committed to documenting Native cultures. When Catlin went west, he witnessed Native ceremonies and customs firsthand, and, writing about them in detail, he showed respect for their purposes. However, Catlin considered it a foregone conclusion that Indians would lose their lands. He even mistakenly believed that changes in the frontier would annihilate Indian tribes entirely.

In 1879 the Bureau of Ethnology (later changed to the Bureau of American Ethnology) was created under the Department of the Interior. A German immigrant, John K. Hillers, was hired by the bureau as staff photographer. Hillers began his work as part of a geological survey team, but eventually his emphasis shifted from geography and geology to archaeology and ethnology. His portraits of the Hopi (Moki) and Navajo (Diné) peoples, as well as his photographs of architecture, domestic life, and rituals, were used by the bureau to record traditional ways of life and supplement artifact collections.



Explain that today most American Indians live in houses and apartment buildings like the ones students may be familiar with. The homes portrayed in these artworks are traditional types of housing specific to two different tribes. Prompt students to compare and contrast the works. List similarities and differences between the houses, landscape, and any other details they see.

Explain to students that when referring to an American Indian person or group, it's best to use the specific tribal name, such as Mandan (Numakiki) or Zuni (A:shiwi). This honors the diversity of Native peoples, as well as the person or group's heritage and identity. The diversity of traditions, types of houses, languages, and lifestyles often originates from the geographic location of these Native peoples' homelands. Before relocation, the Mandan lived in what is now North Dakota. The Zuni remain on ancestral lands in New Mexico and Arizona, where they have lived for 3,000-4,000 years.

Encourage deeper thinking by asking students:

- Based on what you see, how can you tell that these are the homes of people from different tribes?
- Beyond what you see in the artwork, what else might be different about the people who live in these two different environments? (houses, food, clothes, etc.)
- What might be the same for the people living in the houses you see?

Discussion

Begin by having students sketch their own homes. Follow up by asking them the following questions, recording similarities and differences between student responses:

- What is your house made of?
- What job(s) does it do?
- Why do you think your house is shaped the way it is?

Have students compare their sketches with other students'. In small groups, have them brainstorm: How might the look and materials of your house be different if you lived in a very different climate?

Display Catlin's *Bird's-eye View of the Mandan Village* with Hiller's *View in Zuni, Looking Northeast*. What do these houses seem to be made of? Why might they look so different?



George Catlin, [Bird's-eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St. Louis](#), 1837-1839, oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 29 in., Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr., 1985.66.502.



John K. Hillers, [View in Zuni, Looking Northeast](#), ca. 1880, albumen silver print, sheet and image: 10 1/4 x 12 in., Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1994.91.78.

Activity

Several tribes representing various cultures and geographical locations are listed below. The name that each tribe calls or called itself is noted in parentheses.

Many Native peoples, like the Zuni (A:shiwi), have lived in the same regions for millennia. Have students research and record historical information about each tribe's culture, including location, language, housing, food, and any other information that might differentiate that American Indian tribe from another.

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|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| • Blackfeet (Niitsitapii) | • Creek (Muscogee) | • Pequot |
| • Shoshone (Ne'we) | • Seminole | • Navajo (Diné) |
| • Comanche (Numunuu) | • Cherokee (Aniyunwiya) | • Hopi (Moki) |

Have students compare and discuss their research using the following questions:

- What are some of the differences between the tribes that you researched?
- How might the environment cause those differences? What other reasons might there be for these differences?

Provide students with a theoretical climate and environment (e.g., rainy most of the year, lots of tall trees and small animals). Have them sketch a type of housing appropriate to that area made from available resources.

In closing, remind students that today many American Indians live in houses and apartment buildings similar to those students may be familiar with. Challenge students to think about life for modern American Indian peoples by posing the following questions:

- Most American Indians live in modern houses today. What other differences might exist between traditional and modern life-ways?
- How might traditional elements be incorporated into a modern house?

For a full-size image of George Catlin's *Bird's-eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St. Louis*, visit:
https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1985.66.502_1

For a full-size image of John Hillers's *View in Zuni, Looking Northeast*, visit:
https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1994.91.78_1