

The Stars We Do Not See: Australian Indigenous Art

Conceptual Map Activity

Adaptable for all ages

Before you visit the exhibition, spend time with your students exploring the question, “**What is a map?**” Consider a variety of subjects that maps might address and different forms they may take.

Find inspiration and Oregon/Australia connections in these free, digital resources:

- [Student Atlas of Oregon \(2026\)](#), PSU Center for Geography Education in Oregon
 - See Topography, p. 16; Plate Tectonics, p. 19; Vegetation Zones, p. 34; Native American Tribes and Language Groups, p. 44
- [The AITSIS Map of Indigenous Australia](#) - presented in the exhibition
- [Native Land Digital](#)
- [Collective Cartography: Oregon Maps of Memory and Imagination](#), Erick Gordon and Fawn Canady, Southern Oregon University
- [Sound Maps Activity, Sensory Trust](#) - create a map based on sounds
- Consider political maps and the use of mapping in colonization

When you visit the exhibition, spend time with one of the conceptual map paintings, such as **Ngayartu Kujarra** or **Spirit Dreaming Through Napperby Country** in the first gallery, under the *Maningrida Fish Fence*.

Encourage students to look closely and share their observations. You might use open-ended prompts such as these Visual Thinking Strategies: What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?

Introduce the terms *Country* and *conceptual map*. Looking at the painting, how might it show many different aspects of Country?

Refer to the artwork labels and catalogue to share more specific information about the artists and their work.

With gratitude to Sarah K. Anderson for the rich list of recommended resources above and to members of the PAM Educator Advisory for collaborating to develop this activity. Glossary terms are adapted from the exhibition catalogue and texts. Myles Russell-Cook with contributors, The Stars We Do Not See: Australian Indigenous Art (National Gallery of Victoria: Melbourne, 2025).

When you return to the classroom, invite students to create their own conceptual maps of places that are important to them.

1. Choose a place you know well that you would like to depict. Perhaps it's your bedroom, home, school, or neighborhood. How large or small an area do you want to include in your artwork?
2. Think of the physical features of your place. What are your landmarks? What are the routes that you and other people or animals use to move through this place? How might it look from a bird's perspective, flying over it?
3. Bring in your senses. What colors do you see or associate with your place? What sounds, smells, or textures do you experience when you're there?
4. Think of several experiences that you connect with your place. How would you like to represent those stories in your artwork? One possibility is to use symbols, such as a simple line or x, a small pattern, or a geometric shape, to represent an event or experience.
5. Create your artwork on paper or canvas, using any materials you choose.
6. Reflect on the process. What was it like to create your conceptual map? What did you notice about the process?

Glossary:

Country: The nexus of land, skies, waters, knowledge, bodies, and Law. Country, capitalized, is regarded as its own being that requires physical and spiritual care, and is also closely tied to personal identity as a marker of one's nation and Ancestral links to a place.

Conceptual map: Semi-abstracted, aerial views of Country, developed by Western Desert artists. They depict places and natural features as well as the spiritual significance and Ancestral knowledge connected to them. They express the artists' deep knowledge and relationship with Country. Artists may lay canvases on the ground to paint these works, which often have no horizon line or fixed orientation.

Dreaming: Known by many names, Dreaming is an anglicized word that refers to the sacred Laws and narratives that recount the formation of people and Country, the details of which vary between nations and clans.

Additional Resources related to Australian Indigenous art:

- National Gallery of Victoria:
 - [Possum Skin Cloaks with Maree Clarke](#)
 - [Accessible Learning with DHAMBIT MUNUDGURR](#)
 - [Celebrating the Everyday Inspired by CLAUDIA MOODOONUTHI](#)
- [Australian Curriculum Cross-Curriculum Priority](#)
- [NAVA First Nations Educator Guide](#)
- [Australian's Together Curriculum Resources](#)
- [Ngarrngga Curriculum Resources](#)
- [AIATSIS Curriculum Resources](#)
- [Narra Gunna Wali Curriculum Resources](#)