

# ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

REDEFINING THE ALASKAN NARRATIVE: PERSONHOOD

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## Untitled, wolf transformation mask

**Sam Fox, 1979**

Wood, Wolf fur, Walrus Ivory, Baleen, Pigment  
Anchorage Museum collection; 1980.031.001

ANCHORAGE  
MUSEUM

## UNIT AT A GLANCE

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Learn more about personhood and how it affects our relationships with our environment. Students will examine objects from the Anchorage Museum collection and design non-human characters and create comic book dialogue.

*Redefining the Alaskan Narrative* is a series of lesson plans connecting to the Anchorage Museum's previous *Lines of Sight: Comic Art and Storytelling in Alaska* exhibition that ran from November 2023 to October 2024. This series seeks to explore both storytelling themes from Alaska's Indigenous cultures and the processes involved in comic books.

## MATERIALS

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Images of animals and objects

Paper

Laminator

Magnetic tape

Whiteboard

Dry erase marker

Drawing and writing utensils

Sticky notes

Safety scissors

## KEY TERMS

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<i>anthropomorphism</i>	Giving literal human behavior to non-humans
<i>personification</i>	Giving human characteristics to animals in a non-literal way
<i>personhood</i>	Who or what counts as a person in each environment
<i>inanimate</i>	Something that is typically not considered living
<i>reciprocity</i>	Doing or giving equally for one another
<i>stewardship</i>	Proper planning and care for resources
<i>qenexi</i>	Inland Dena'ina term for animal, literally 'living thing'
<i>ella</i>	Central Alaskan Yup'ik term for weather/awareness/the universe

## CLOSE-LOOKING

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**TIME FRAME**                      Approximately 40 minutes

**MATERIALS**                      *Untitled, wolf transformation mask*, Sam Fox, 1979, Anchorage Museum collection; 1980.031.001

*Poonk Timertik Inua (Punk Walrus Spirit)*, Lawrence Beck, 1987, Anchorage Museum collection; 1992.006.001

## DIRECTIONS

1. Begin by looking closely at provided photographs. Use the questions below to guide discussion.

[30 min.]

**CLOSE-LOOKING:** Look closely and quietly at the objects for a few minutes.

**OBSERVE:** Share your observations about each photograph.



**Untitled, wolf transformation mask, Sam Fox, 1979, Anchorage Museum collection; 1980.031.001**

**ASK:** What words would you use to describe what you see in this image?  
What are some shapes and colors within this object that grab your attention?  
What do you think this object is made out of?  
What would this object feel like if you could touch it?  
What does this remind you of?  
What more can you find?



**Poonk Timertik Inua (Punk Walrus Spirit), Lawrence Beck, 1987, Anchorage Museum collection; 1992.006.001**

**ASK:** What do you first notice about this object?  
How is this object similar or different to other objects that you know?  
What might this object feel like if you could touch it?  
Why do you think this object was made?  
What does this remind you of?  
What more can you find?

**DISCUSS:** Use the [20 Questions Deck](#) for more group discussion questions about the photographs.

2. As a class, discuss how we see ourselves in the world. Ask: Are we separate from it? What do we think of animals, plants, landforms, and bodies of water?

[10 min.]

## EVERYTHING'S ALIVE (GRADE K)

### TIME FRAME

Approximately 35 minutes

### MATERIALS

Images of animals and objects x 3  
Paper  
Laminator  
Magnetic tape  
Whiteboard  
Dry erase marker

### DIRECTIONS 1.

To prepare for the activity, print out and copy images that you can attach onto a board. These may be magnetized, laminated, or projected onto the board. Ensure that

these animals and objects do not have a background and that there are 2-3 of each animal and object.

**2.** As a class, discuss who we may think of as a person. Ask students if they consider pets as members of their family.

[2-3 min.]

**3.** Read aloud the section below titled *Personhood and Indigenous Storytelling*. Afterward, ask students: *How would we treat everything if we knew they were alive?*

[5 min.]

**4.** Invite students to choose two objects from step 1. Draw or project three panels to form a comic strip. Place one of each object into each panel. Ask students: *What would these objects say to one another if they could talk?*

[3 min.]

**5.** Encourage students to create a dialogue between the two objects in each panel and write or project it onto the board.

[5 min.]

**6.** Afterward, repeat steps 3 and 4 as needed.

[10-15 min.]

**7.** Once finished, discuss with students: *How might we treat objects and animals if everything was alive and could talk to us?*

[5 min.]

## ASSESSMENT

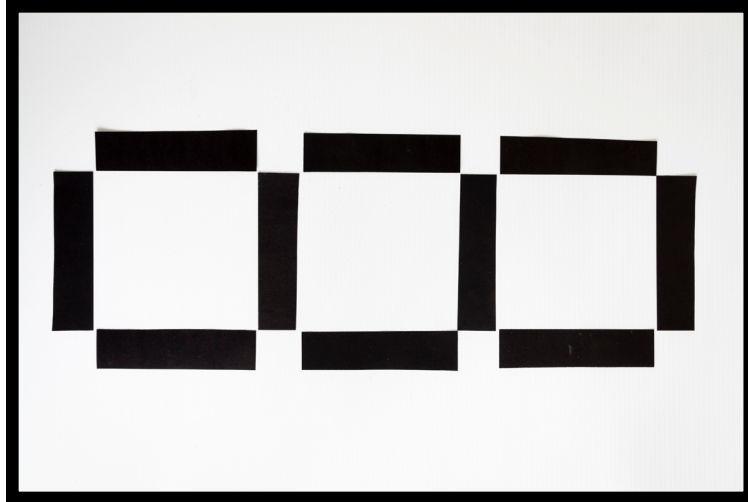
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Students will be assessed based on participation and in class discussion.

## EVERYTHING'S ALIVE (GRADES 1-2)

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<b>TIME FRAME</b>	Approximately 30-45 minutes
<b>MATERIALS</b>	Paper Drawing and writing utensils Sticky notes Safety scissors
<b>DIRECTIONS</b>	<p><b>1.</b> As a class, discuss who we may think of as a person. Ask students to think about whether they consider pets as counting as members of their family. [2-3 min.]</p> <p><b>2.</b> Read aloud the section below titled <i>Personhood and Indigenous Storytelling</i>. Afterward, ask students: <i>How would we treat everything if we knew they were alive?</i> [7 min.]</p> <p><b>3.</b> Invite students to create 2-3 of their own characters based on inanimate objects. [10 min.]</p> <p><b>4.</b> Let students know that they will be creating short comic strips based on these characters. Pass out 10 strips of black paper for each learner and instruct them to create 3 panels as shown.</p>



Inform students that these three panels will form the base of their comic strips.

[3 min.]

**5.** Invite students to create copies of their characters in different positions. Inform them that these will be in the comic book panels that they have created.

[5 min.]

**6.** Pass out safety scissors to students and instruct them to cut out their characters and to place them within their panels.

[1 min.]

**7.** Pass out sticky notes and invite students to write short dialogues. Instruct students to place their sticky notes into their panels near their characters as speech bubbles.

[5 min.]

**8.** Invite students to trade places with a partner seated close to them to create dialogue to replace the original one on new sticky notes. Instruct students to place the new dialogues on top of the existing ones.

[3 min.]

**9.** When finished, discuss as a class: *How might we treat objects and animals if everything was alive and could talk to us? How might we treat the places we visit if they could tell us how they felt?*

[5 min.]

## ASSESSMENT

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Students will be assessed based on completion of their comic, participation, and in class discussion.

## EVERYTHING'S ALIVE (GRADE 3-5)

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<b>TIME FRAME</b>	Approximately 30-35 minutes
<b>MATERIALS</b>	Paper Drawing and writing utensils Sticky notes

Safety scissors

## DIRECTIONS

1. As a class, discuss who we may think of as a person. Ask students to think about whether they consider pets as counting as members of their family.  
[2-3 min.]
2. Read aloud the section below titled *Personhood and Indigenous Storytelling*. Afterward, ask: *How would we treat everything if we knew they were alive?*  
[7 min.]
3. Invite students to draw a landscape with at least two different features such as a mountain, body of water, trees, or glaciers. Request students to not include any humans in their landscape.  
[7 min.]
4. Once finished, invite students to recreate their landscapes two more times. Let students know that they can change elements of the landscape such as seasons, or by adding additional wildlife.  
[14-16 min.]
5. Afterward, invite students to trade all of their landscapes with a partner of their choosing. Instruct students to lay out their newly acquired landscapes side by side to form three panels.  
[1 min.]
6. Pass out sticky notes to all students. Invite them to create dialogue between different elements of the landscapes by writing speech bubbles in the sticky notes.  
[5 min.]
7. Once students finish creating their dialogues, re-read the section titled *Personhood and Indigenous Storytelling* to the class and return to the idea from step 2: *How might we treat objects and animals if everything was alive and could talk to us? How might we treat the places that we go to if it could tell us how it felt?*  
[5 min.]

## ASSESSMENT

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Students will be assessed based on participation in class discussion and completion of creating their landscape dialogue comics, and participation.

## LEARN MORE

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### PERSONHOOD AND INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING

Who counts as a person? In the west, people are often used to thinking of human beings as the only persons. Some people think of their pets as persons. What about other animals, rocks, or trees? As recently as the early 20th century, European countries would charge animals with crimes and hold a trial to determine if they were guilty, meaning that animals at that time in Europe had rights and were expected to be responsible for their actions. Many Indigenous cultures believe that what counts as a person often goes beyond human beings and animals. For example, Yup'ik culture holds that because everything has a soul, it has awareness. As such, everything from rocks to rivers can think and feel just as humans do. In many traditional Alaska Native stories, animals who speak and interact with people and each other are common. In many of these stories, animals act, think, and look like people in their own worlds and may choose to appear either as animals or as humans when talking to people. Many Indigenous people believe these stories to be true and use them to pass on lessons about how to properly respect all persons including animals and the land.

## **PERSONIFICATION VS. ANTHROPOMORPHISM:**

Personification and Anthropomorphism are two very close ideas with plenty of overlap. In both cases, animals act in ways relatable to humans. For example, if your pet smiles back at you when you smile at them, this would be an example of both personification and anthropomorphism as we cannot be sure if an animal is smiling because they are happy or because they are copying us.

This raises a question: what is the difference between personification and anthropomorphism? Simply put, anthropomorphism is literal and personification is figurative. For example, if a printer is not printing, people might say that it is cruel. Obviously, the printer does not have any intent as far as we know and cannot possibly be cruel. We are representing a human quality with something that a printer is prone to doing and personifying it. On the other hand, if a dog in a story is holding a glass and asks for ice water in perfectly comprehensible English, then this would be an example of anthropomorphism as these would not fall under regular dog behaviors.

## **CHARACTER DESIGN**

Comic book characters are usually easy to find in a comic book. Their costumes often set them apart from everyday people. Sometimes, these costumes are made with details that most people would not wear day to day. For example, capes and masks are common in many superhero comics, but less so in daily life. These pieces of clothing become a quick way for readers to recognize certain characters within a story.

In all the world's cultures, details like color, shape, and texture make up a specific visual language. These details make sense to those who grew up with this visual language and can differ in different contexts and cultures. For example, colors represent associations that differ between countries. For example, the colors red, white, and blue all hold significance to the citizens of the United States, Russia, and France. Each color on their respective flags have meanings unique to each country. As such, details can take on additional layers of meaning for different audiences.

## **WATCH:**

Palle Schmidt - [Character Design for Comics](#)

CrashCourse - [Non-Human Animals: Crash Course Philosophy #42](#)

Associate Press - [Endangered Amazon river gets personhood status](#)

## **READ:**

Morrow, P., & Schneider, W. (1995) - [When Our Words Return](#)

Boraas A., & Peter D. - [The true believer among the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina](#)

Anderson, D. G. - [Humans and animals in northern regions](#)

Langlois, K. - [When Whales and Humans Talk](#)

Fienup-Riordan, A. - [Yup'ik Eskimo understanding of geese and those who study them](#)

Kawagley, A. O. - [Alaska Native holotropic mind and science](#)

Sepie AJ - [More than Stories, More than Myths: Animal/Human/Nature\(s\) in Traditional Ecological Worldviews](#)

Evans, E. P. (1906). The criminal prosecution and capital punishment of animals. w. Heinemann.

## **A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY**

The Anchorage Museum refrains from using the terms Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut and instead uses language identified by the Alaska Native language groups. Due to these words' complicated history, the Anchorage Museum does not use these terms. However, it is important to note that Indigenous communities and individuals are at different places of healing and self-identity and may use these terms.

The largest Indigenous language family in North America is the Dene language family, which is commonly identified as 'Athabaskan' – a word that is not native to any of the Indigenous languages to which it refers. Dene is a word for Indigenous peoples belonging to several cultures whose languages belong to the Dene language family with traditional homelands in Interior Alaska and into Western Canada; the word Dene means 'people' in several Dene languages.