

Meet the Masters

January Program

W.H. Brown “Bareback Riders”

Charles M. Russell “The Horse Thieves”

About the Artist:

Very little is known about the folk artist **W.H. Brown** who painted “**Bareback Riders**”. It is known that he was an active painter in the last quarter of the 19th century. He was apparently one of the many untrained (folk) painters who traveled throughout rural America. He and other painters sold their art to customers wherever they traveled. Brown’s painting is lively and imaginative.

About the Artwork:

The paintings by W. H. Brown and Charles Russell represent horses. Each artist paints the horse in a different way. Can you find differences or similarities in each painting? We will focus on the Native American Indian painting by Russell. Our hands-on project will also focus on Indian representations of horses.

Hands-on Art Activity: Sponge Painting Cut-outs – Horses

Materials:

- Brown paper (paper bags work well)
- Tempera paints
- Paper plates for paint
- Small sponges
- Cut-out shapes of horses and other Native American objects (these should be made from stiff paper, such as tag board, and can be saved each year as long as they last.)
- Water cups, paper towels, newspaper

Teacher preparation: Tear bag open and tear edges to look similar to an animal skin – prior to class. Have one “skin” per student. Wet sponges and wring out excess water before passing them out to the children. Keep colors clean by only using one color per sponge. Students can share cut-outs and paints.

Directions:

1. Place brown paper on the table. Place cut-out shape on the paper.
2. Place sponge in tempera paint, dab off heavy excess.
3. Hold shape down and gently dab the paint around the shape.
4. Repeat shapes and colors until the horse composition is complete.
5. Sponges can be used to complete the background and to make a scene around the horses.
6. Make sure student name appears on the front of the artwork.

Horses

W. H. Brown, *Bareback Riders*



W. H. Brown, American, Active late 19th Century, *Bareback Riders*, 1886, painting on cardboard, 18½ x 24½-in. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.

The Artist

Virtually nothing is known about the folk artist who painted *Bareback Riders* except his name, W. H. Brown, and that he was active in the last quarter of the 19th century. He was apparently one of the many untrained painters who traveled throughout rural America, selling their wonderful pictures to customers who enjoyed the liveliness and imagination of this appealing art.

The Art

Bareback Riders by W. H. Brown is an example of American folk art or naive painting. Folk art consists of paintings, sculpture, and decorations that are done by persons without formal training in art, as opposed to so-called fine art or the formal decorative arts. Folk art is a traditional way of expression that is unaffected by the changing styles of academic art. But the line between folk art and fine art is not always clear-cut; there is a large area of overlap. Generally, folk art can be recognized by its imagination, inventiveness, and a strong sense of design. Yet at the same time, it shows less than perfect mastery of technical matters such as perspective and proportion. Usually, the color is effective, and there is interesting pattern and line and popular subject matter.

These features—color, line, pattern, and subject—are very evident in W. H. Brown's painting of bareback riders and other individuals associated with the circus. The distortions, too, are present, but

the artist has given us an honest interpretation of a big-top event. The prancing horse, virtually a silhouette, might have been copied from a weather vane above a farmhouse, it is so typical of other decorative and functional American folk art. The still figures like colored cutouts balance precariously. A chubby clown in gaudy, patterned costume watches with outstretched arm while the ringmaster supervises the action. Under colorful banners and hanging decorations, the audience looks on through the hazy sunlight of the circus tent's interior.

Bareback Riders was painted on cardboard, signed by the artist, and dated 1886.

Guided Analysis

Cultural Context:

In the days before movies and television, one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America was the annual outing when the circus came to town. Beginning in the 19th century, troupes of acrobats, clowns, actors, sideshow freaks, roustabouts, and collections of animals would travel from town to town to provide grown-ups and children alike with excitement and amusement. The main show was performed in a big canvas tent. Often there was a circus parade through the town to the tent to tantalize the local populace and encourage a greater attendance at the big event. Color, noise, and an air of excitement accompanied the circus and its fantastic array of extraordinary animals and unconventional people.

Subject:

What do you see first when you look at Brown's *Bareback Riders*? *The graceful black horse seems to be the most important feature of this bright composition.* Balancing on the horse's back is a mustachioed acrobat and his blond companion. Do they look as "real" as the horse? Why or why not? How realistic is the clown? The artist may have been able to copy the figure of the horse by looking at a weathervane, but he may have drawn and painted the rest of the picture from memory or perhaps imagination. How does the clown differ from clowns we see nowadays? Describe this clown's costume and makeup.

Media and Techniques:

The painting was done with oils on stiff cardboard that measures about 18 x 24-in. What kinds and sizes of brushes might he have used? Look closely for clues. *Probably small, soft, pointed brushes because of the smooth surface and fine details.*

Point of View:

How did the artist give us the feeling that we are right in the circus ring? *The viewpoint is so close to the clown that his feet are not in the picture.* How did he show that the audience is far away? *They are small, painted with pale colors, and show few details of features or clothing.* How did he avoid boring the viewer by showing everybody in the crowd? *Only the suggestion of heads colors the area where sunbeams streak through the tent.*

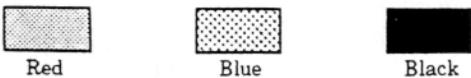
Elements of Design:

What are the main colors in this painting? *Red, black, white, and a pale blue-gray.* The bright colors stand out against the neutral background. The black horse appears almost as a silhouette in the center with the shapes of typical circus performers grouped around it. How has the artist suggested that the action is taking place before an audience? *Small, undetailed shapes have been daubed in rows above the wall to suggest heads of people.*

Principles of Design:

What colors are repeated? If you had made this painting, would you have placed the red banner where the blue one is? Do you think the balance would have been improved by doing that? Why do you think the artist made the ground below the horse so dark? Consider the effect if he had left this dark tone out.

The diagram below illustrates the repetition of color and color patterns.



Brown has repeated the colors of red, blue, and black in this composition.

Expressive Properties

How does the picture make you feel? What else would you have added, or what would you have left out, to make it a better expression of the mood of a circus? Would any of the horses in other paintings work as well for the job of circus bareback riding? What is it about this horse that makes it seem so right for the job?

With newer kinds of entertainment, the circus may one day disappear completely from our culture. Folk artists like W. H. Brown have made a record of a way of life. Talk about art as a way of documenting life.

Comparison:

Does this horse seem as real as others in the Take 5 set of "Horses"? Why or why not? What must an artist know and do in order to paint or draw animals? Arrange the five pictures in order of brightest to duldest color. How does the color of each reflect the artists' feelings about their subjects?

Horses

Charles M. Russell, *The Horse Thieves*



Charles M. Russell, American, 1864-1926, *The Horse Thieves*, 1901, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ -in. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.

The Artist

Charles Marion Russell, cowboy artist, documented the changing West from his arrival in Montana Territory at age 16 until his death forty years later in 1926. A working cowboy, he knew intimately the scenery, animals, and the people of the frontier, and he painted prolifically what he saw. His records of Indians, mountain men, prospectors, trappers, rustlers—as well as the cattle, horses, buffaloes, wolves, and other animals of the plains and mountains—survive as cherished fine art. Russell made hundreds of paintings and thousands of drawings. He illustrated most of the many letters he wrote, and he became a proficient sculptor in bronze as well as an accomplished poet and storyteller.

As a small boy, Russell dreamed of becoming an Indian fighter. His wealthy father sent him from St. Louis to military school in New Jersey, but Charles was returned home at mid-year having failed everything but history class. His father hired a tutor for him and enrolled him in art school. He was bored with formal instruction and quit after three days. Thinking to cure the boy's infatuation with the West, his father sent him along with a family friend to experience some of the real hardships of a ranch in Montana. In spite of some bitter experiences, young Russell loved what he found there and became a ranchhand.

From his own observations and experience, Russell learned the habits, actions, structure, and coloring of not only horses and cattle but also of deer, buf-

falo, elk, bear, and other mammals. His spare time was spent in sketching and modeling animals in different poses and the cowboys and Indians he encountered in his work as a wrangler. Young as he was, he realized that the "Wild West" was fast disappearing. With his pen and ink, watercolors, and oils, he captured as much as he could of the old ways. In 1903, he moved into a new log cabin studio in Great Falls, Montana, and continued to produce the more than 2,500 works of his long career. His largest work is the huge mural, 25 x 12-ft., that covers an entire wall in the Montana State Capitol.

The Art

The Horse Thieves, an oil on canvas painted in 1901, documents an occurrence that Charles M. Russell knew all too well. As a tenderfoot in his first year on a Montana ranch, he had been hired as a shepherd. But he lost so many animals that he was not only fired but blacklisted from any further jobs in the area. Eventually, he did succeed as a horse wrangler, and for seven years, he observed firsthand incidents such as the one pictured here.

Russell had many good encounters with Indians, however, and he painted them more often than he did cowboys. "Man for man, an Injun's as good as a white man any day. When he's a good friend, he's the best friend in the world," he insisted. He realized that cattle ranchers had displaced the Indians and destroyed their buffalo. What else could the Indians do but raid the cowboys' horses?

By the light of a full moon, a small band of Indians have "liberated" a string of horses from a white man's ranch. They are moving steadily across the sagebrush-spotted high desert country into Indian territory, from where they will soon be traded or sold. Russell depicted the sturdy quarterhorses and pintos he knew so well and the Indian's still colorful appearance. The event was painted from memory, however, as by the turn of the century, such occasions no longer occurred. The Indians had been reduced to living on reservations or idly hanging around the white man's towns. The historians of the Western frontier are indebted to Charles Russell for he felt that an era was dying, and he did something about it.

Charles M. Russell, *The Horse Thieves*

Guided Analysis

Cultural Context:

Is this storytelling painting by Charles M. Russell a true work of art or merely an illustration? For many years, America's finest museums scorned the work of Russell. It was collected by historical museums of the West as documents of the disappearing frontier and by individuals who enjoyed its authentic portrayal of cowboys and Indians. In recent years, however, Russell has been recognized as a talented and prolific regional artist. This painting is typical of his work.

Subject:

What is the story that Russell has told here? Are there enough details to prove that the artist knew his subject matter? What are they? *Authentic horses, Indians' clothing and decoration of their horses, landscape features, plant life.* How did the artist indicate that this adventure occurred at night? In what direction are the horses headed? *Logically, the horses would have been stolen at night. The moon is setting toward the west; therefore, the horse thieves are taking the string north at dawn, perhaps across the border to Canada.* Russell often told a story to accompany his paintings, and he even called the pictures "illustrations."

Elements of Design:

What gives the effect of great space in this painting? *Pale, hazy landscape in background, smaller figures*

in the distance, and more details and brighter colors on the larger horses and Indian in the foreground. What textures can be identified? Does the painting seem to be carefully composed? Why or why not?

Principles of Design:

Where is the action in this painting? *In a horizontal band in the middle third of the picture.* Which is the most important figure in this story-telling painting? *The Indian leader on his white horse.* How did Russell make sure that we would see this Indian first? *He made him the largest figure and placed him in the center. He showed more detail in his figure and silhouetted him against a pale background.* What are some other objects that help to tell the story? *The moon, indicating nighttime, the string of horses, and the desert plants.*

Interpretation:

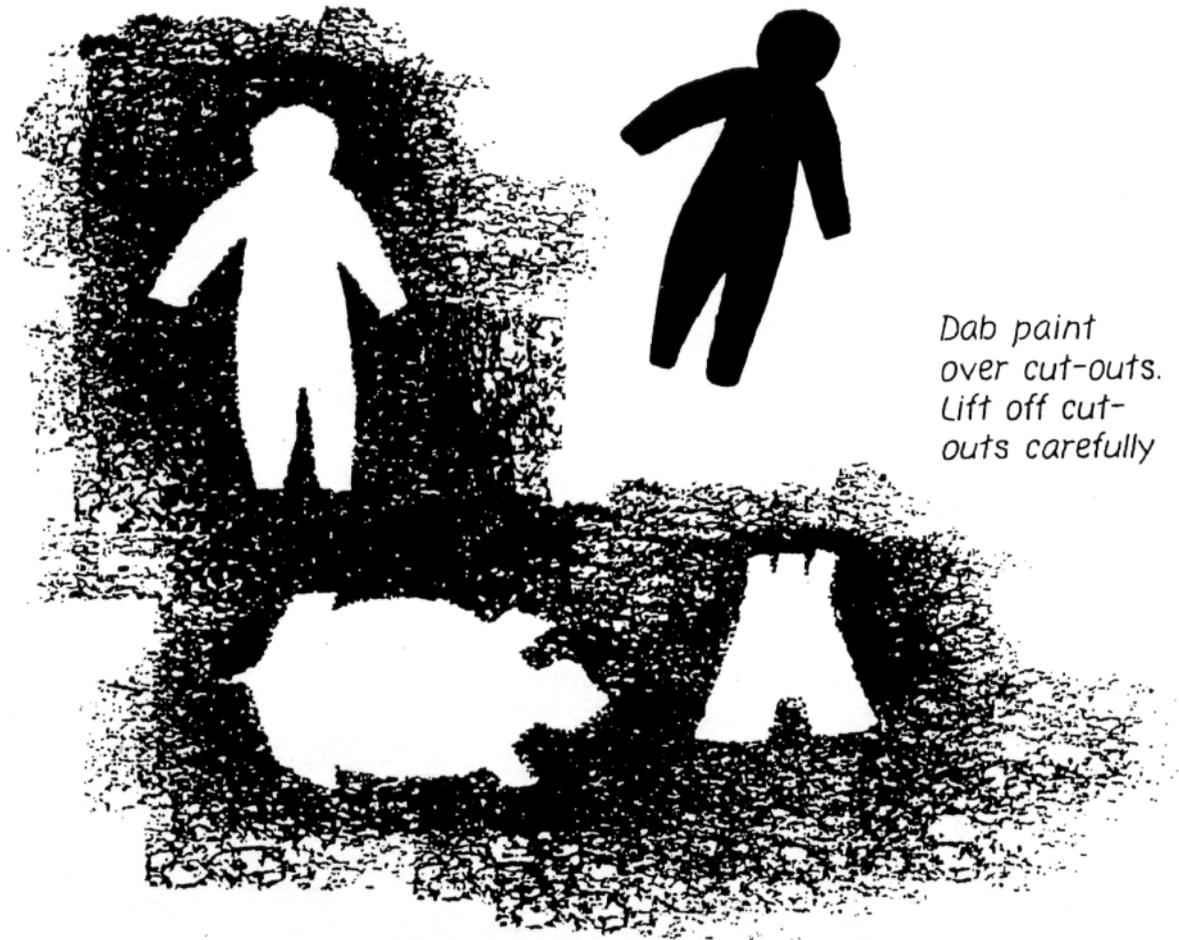
Was Charles Russell able to communicate his feelings about the West as well as his understanding of Indians and horses in this painting? What does the picture say to you?

Comparison:

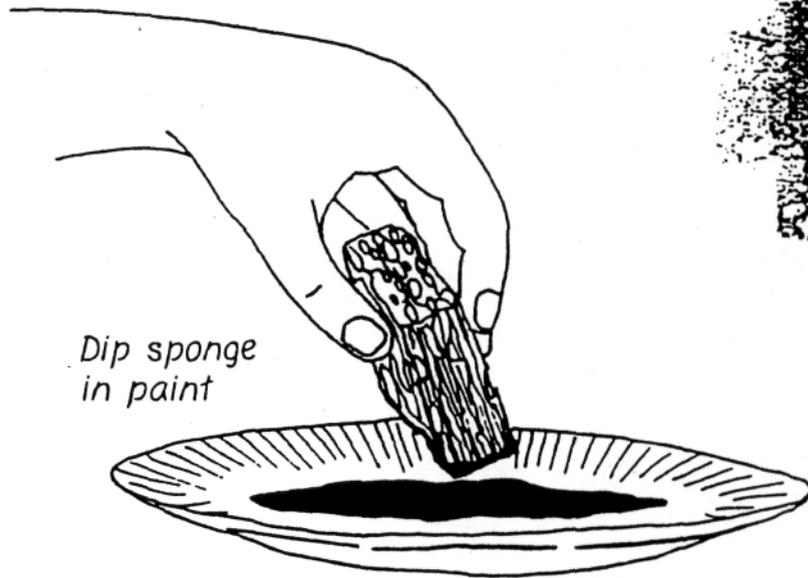
After looking at all of the paintings in this Take 5 set, decide which artist(s) knew the most about horses. Did every artist feel the need to show the horse realistically? What are some reasons for showing horses unrealistically?

4 Dip the piece of sponge lightly in the paint, dabbing the sponge all over the paper's (or object's) surface. Dab over the cut-outs.

5 Lift the cut-outs off carefully and the unpainted shapes will appear. Let dry.



*Dab paint
over cut-outs.
Lift off cut-
outs carefully*

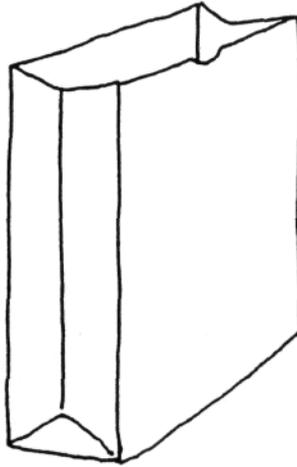


*Dip sponge
in paint*

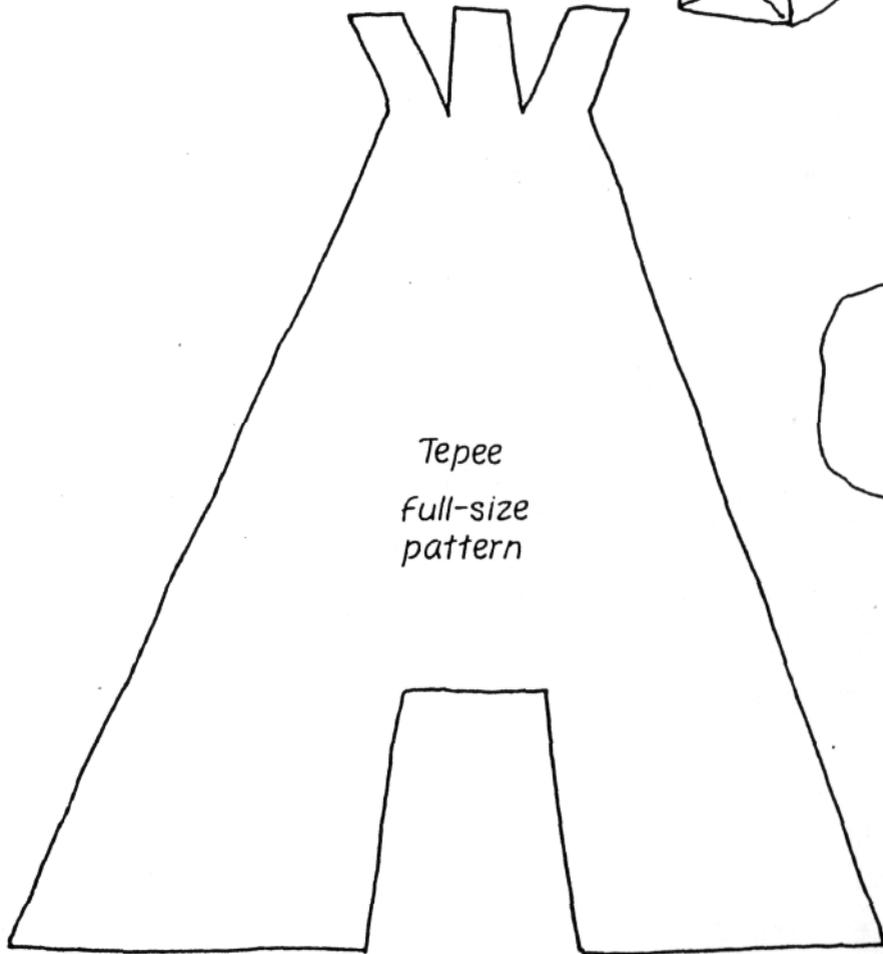


☆ **Art Options!** ☆

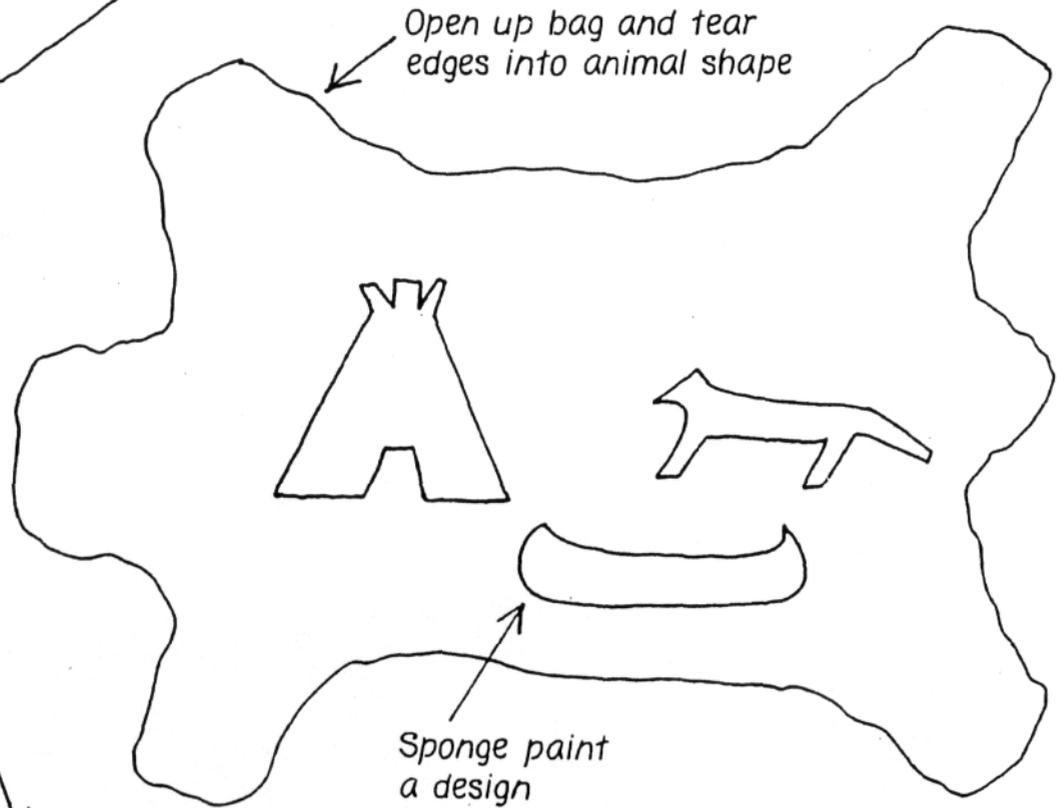
Open up a brown paper bag and tear its edges to form the shape of an animal skin as shown. Place the cut-outs on the "animal skin" and sponge paint a design on it.



Brown paper grocery bag



*Tepee
full-size
pattern*



*Sponge paint
a design
(use cut-outs)*



SPONGE PAINTING CUT-OUTS



The Chippewa made cut-outs from white birch bark for patterns to decorate objects. The cut-outs, often of animals, were traced or stencilled on an object such as a mokuk. Cutout patterns were also used on moccasins (shoes) to show where beads would be sewn on.

Use your own cut-outs made from poster board to sponge paint designs on notebooks, a tin can, pencil holder, gift wrap, stationery, or art objects you've made.

- 1 Trace any cutout pattern shown, or draw your own patterns on the scrap paper. Cut out.
- 2 Trace the paper patterns onto the poster board, and cut out.
- 3 Lay the cut-outs on a large piece of paper, or the object you are painting. Put a small curl of masking tape under each cut-out to hold in place as you paint.

◆ MATERIALS ◆

Poster board, 14" x 14"

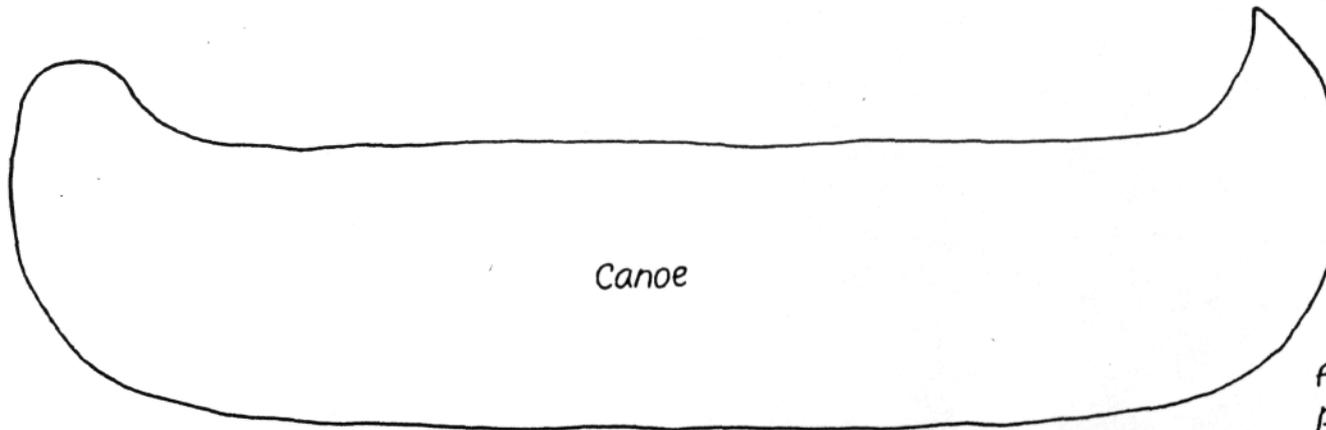
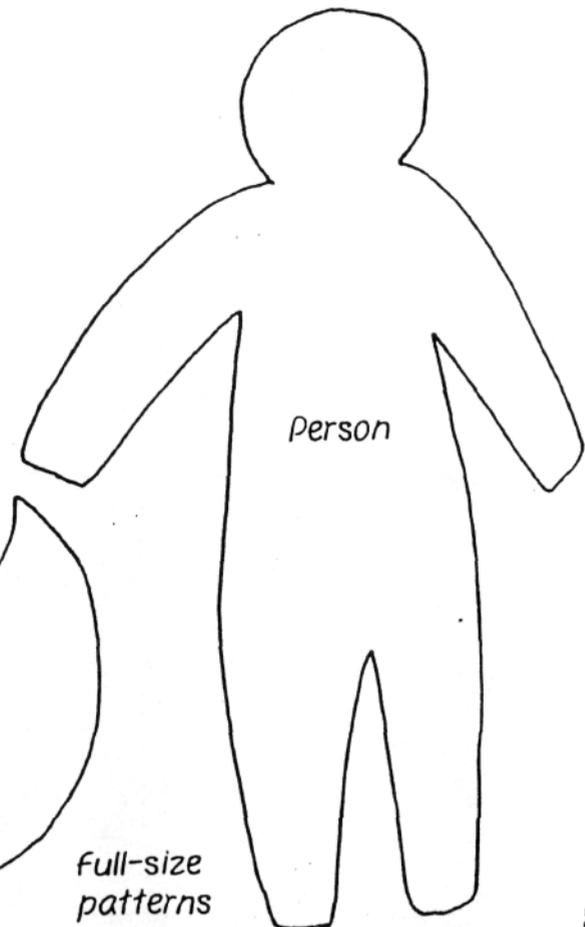
Scrap white paper
(large enough to trace patterns)

Large piece of paper (or object)
for sponge painting

Tempera paint for paper, or acrylic paint
for objects, in small cup

Paper plate, small piece of sponge

Pencil, scissors



Full-size
patterns