Australian Aboriginal Dot Art

Background:

Did you know that the Australian Aboriginal culture is at least 60,000 years old? Like most peoples, Aboriginal Australians felt the desire to express themselves by creating art. They originally used ochres (earth pigments) to paint on rocks. Their pictures told sacred stories that they wanted to pass down through the generations.

According to the Artlandish Aboriginal Art Gallery in Kununurra, Western Australia, dot painting originated about 50 years ago when art teacher Geoffrey Bardon noticed Aboriginal men drawing symbols in the sand as they told stories. He wanted to help Aboriginal artists create depictions of their stories on canvas so they could be more widely shared.

Some Aboriginal artists grew concerned that the sacred objects they painted would be seen by those who did not understand their tribal stories. They felt that it would not be right to bare their secrets to those who were not part of their culture. They therefore removed the sacred elements from their art and abstracted the designs into dots to hide their sacred origins.

The decorative art that resulted has charmed people the world over. Artists have used varying techniques to develop their personal styles. Some overlap dots, while others simply place them side by side. Some enclose their dots within larger dots. Dots can be merged into lines, and patterns can be abstract or realistic. Paint can be raised or flat. Today, the most successful Aboriginal artists are women.

Why not try your hand at creating an Australian dot painting?
Procedure:

Find images that you would like to use. You can use typical Australian animals, such as kangaroos, koalas, turtles, or snakes. If you are worried about your drawing ability, you can download silhouettes of animals, cut them out, and trace them.

You can also simply trace around your palm. For an abstract project, try tracing around varying sizes of jar lids. It's fun to overlap shapes so that you get more complicated images.

If you have a white charcoal pencil, your drawing will show up more clearly on the dark paper, but even if you don’t you should still be able to see your outlines.

Place small amounts of acrylic paints on a scrap of cardboard or other palette surface. Dip cotton swabs, pencil erasers, pencil tips and/or plastic needles in the paints and dot onto your construction paper. Experiment with creating patterns.

Do you want your picture to tell a story? It might be fun to create a family story around your art. Several people can work together on one larger piece or you can work on different small pieces to be mounted together.

Let us know if you try this project! Look for a new project next week.

Supplies:

Pencils

Black construction paper (or other dark colors)

Crafter’s acrylic paints (readily available at Michaels Arts & Crafts)

Cotton swabs and/or pencils with erasers

Optional items: White charcoal pencils, plastic needles