

# Positive and Negative Space

Grade 3 – Lesson 6

(*Art Connections*, Level 3, pages 76-79)

## Big Idea

*Intentionally using both positive and negative space can make visually interesting designs.*

## Learning Targets and Assessment Criteria

**Target 1:** Identifies both positive and negative space in a work of art. (Arts EALR 1.1.2 *Principles of Organization: Positive and negative space*)

**Criteria 1:** Points out closed shapes and the empty spaces around them.

**Target 2:** Creates a pattern. (1.1.2 *Principles of Organization: Positive and negative space, Repetition and pattern*)

**Criteria 2:** Repeats positive and negative shapes in a print.

**Target 3:** Uses symbolism. (Arts EALR 3.1 *Art as Communication: Symbolic meaning*)

**Criteria 3:** Creates an image to represent the meaning of a proverb.

## Local Art References



**Keet Shagoon (Killer Whale)**, 2003  
*Preston Singletary*  
2003.12  
Seattle Art Museum



**Sunday cloth (Kwasiada Adinkra)**,  
20th century, *African, Asante,*  
*Ghanaian*  
81.17.472  
Seattle Art Museum

## Looking at Art Questions

(Note to Teacher: Discuss the Incan *Sleeveless Shirt* and Stanistawa Bakula's *Tree of Life* from *Art Connections*, Level 3, pages 76-77 first, because they are good simple examples of positive/negative space. Then share Preston Singletary's *Keet Shagoon (Killer Whale)* and the Asante adinkra cloth pieces from SAM as more complex examples.)

1. In art, we call the solid shapes that are filled in (with lines, colors, patterns, etc. **positive space**. What objects do you see in positive space of these two art works?
2. The space in between the positive shapes is called **negative space**. What colors are the negative spaces in these works of art?

3. How does the negative space in each work of art help make the positive shapes stand out?
4. The positive shapes on the **Asante** (Ah-sahn-tay) **adinkra** (ah-deen-krah) cloth from Ghana in West Africa are made by stamping **print** blocks carved from calabash gourds. Where do you positive shapes that repeat several times on the cloth?
5. The positive designs on an adinkra cloth usually represent specific **proverbs** from Asante culture. For example, the paired curling spirals **motif** is called the “Ram’s Horns” design. It’s associated with the proverb, “When two rams clash in a fight, one must give way to the other,” meaning with strength one must have humility.



## **Art Making Activity**

### **Make a Proverb Print**

*How can you make a print with positive and negative shapes?*

1. We’re going to make prints with both positive and negative spaces that are inspired by proverbs too!
2. First pick out a proverb that you like. What does it mean?
3. Can you think of a symbol, a simple positive shape that could remind you of your proverb?
4. Steps for the Teacher:

Day 1

- a. Help students interpret the proverbs they select and brainstorm a visual symbol to represent that proverb. Students can sketch different ideas for symbols in their sketch books. Remind students that **symbols** are simple pictures that represent ideas. To avoid tiny images, suggest students make their finished sketch as big as their palm.
- b. Have students copy their symbol onto the middle of the piece of file folder/tagboard.
- c. Have students cut out their shape, keeping the tagboard around it in one piece. This will be their stencil.
- d. Demonstrate printing the positive shapes by holding the stencil in place and dabbing a corner of the sponge in

the paint and then gently pressing it inside the stencil to make a print.

- e. Guide students in printing their positive shapes. Have each student print their stencil several times to fill the paper.

### Day 2

- a. Demonstrate printing the negative shapes by holding the positive shape (what was cut out of the center of the stencil) in place, dabbing a corner of the sponge in the paint and then gently pressing it around the outside edges of the shape.
- a. Guide students in printing their negative shapes in a different color from their positive ones. Have each student print their negative shape several times on top of their dry positive ones to fill the paper.
- b. Put up the work and facilitate full-class critique, looking for interesting positive and negative shapes, as well as how the symbol represents the proverb. Mount the work on black construction paper with the proverb attached.

#### Each Student Needs

- A proverb (either from own background, or copied from attached list of African proverbs)
- A sketch book
- Sketching pencil (2H-4H)
- A Staedtler eraser
- ¼ of a recycled file folder or 4x5 piece of tagboard
- Scissors
- A 11x17 piece of watercolor paper (for making their print on)
- Laminated art mat (to minimize mess when Printing)

#### Every Small Group of Students Needs

- Small sponges (2 sponges/tray)
- 6 Styrofoam trays (1 color/tray)
- Tempera paints, various colors (1 color/tray)

#### Tips for Teachers

##### *Before class*

- Put 4-5 T of tempera paint onto each Styrofoam tray, one color per tray. Put two small sponges on each tray. Give each table group an assortment of colors

##### *During class*

- When demonstrating how to print both positive and negative shapes, dab less paint than you think at first. You can always add more, but too much paint makes a sloppy image.

#### Vocabulary

Positive space	Proverb
Negative space	Motif
Adinkra	Symbol
Asante	Print

## Reflecting on Our Art

- **Describe:** Point to your positive shapes. Point to your negative shapes. Did you discover any surprise shapes after you finished your print?
- **Analyze:** How would your print be different if you used only the stencil to make it?
- **Interpret:** How does your print express your proverb?
- **Decide:** If you could change one thing on your print, what would it be?

## Self-Assessment

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*What positive shape did you make?*

(Trace it here)

*What negative shape did you make?*

(Color it here, by shading around your positive shape)

*What was your proverb?*

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*How does your symbol represent your proverb?*

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## **African proverbs on Peace and Leadership**

1. Peace is costly but it is worth the expense. ~Kenyan proverb
2. War has no eyes ~ Swahili saying
3. When a king has good counselors, his reign is peaceful. ~Ashanti proverb
4. Peace does not make a good ruler. ~Botswana proverb
5. There can be no peace without understanding. ~Senegalese proverb
6. Milk and honey have different colors, but they share the same house peacefully. ~ African proverb
7. If you can't resolve your problems in peace, you can't solve them with war. ~ Somalian proverb
8. When there is peace in the country, the chief does not carry a shield. ~Ugandan proverb
9. Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far. ~ West African proverb
10. He who thinks he is leading and has no one following him is only taking a walk. ~ Malawian proverb
11. An army of sheep led by a lion can defeat an army of lions led by a sheep. ~ Ghanaian proverb
12. He who refuses to obey cannot command. ~ Kenyan proverb
13. A large chair does not make a king. ~ Sudanese proverb
14. A leader who does not take advice is not a leader. ~ Kenyan proverb

15. If the cockroach wants to rule over the chicken, then it must hire the fox as a body-guard. ~ Sierra Leone proverb

### **African Proverbs on Unity and Community**

16. Unity is strength, division is weakness. ~ Swahili proverb

17. Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable. ~ Bondei proverb

18. It takes a village to raise a child. ~ African proverb

19. Cross the river in a crowd and the crocodile won't eat you. ~ African proverb

20. Two ants do not fail to pull one grasshopper. ~ Tanzanian proverb

21. A single bracelet does not jingle. ~ Congolese proverb

22. A single stick may smoke, but it will not burn. ~ African proverb

23. If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. ~ African proverb

### **African Proverbs on Wisdom**

24. Wisdom is wealth. ~ Swahili

25. Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it. ~ Akan proverb

26. The fool speaks, the wise man listens. ~ Ethiopian proverb

27. Wisdom does not come overnight. ~ Somali proverb

28. The heart of the wise man lies quiet like limpid water. ~ Cameroon proverb

29. Wisdom is like fire. People take it from others. ~ Hema (DRC) proverb

30. Only a wise person can solve a difficult problem. ~ Akan proverb
31. Knowledge without wisdom is like water in the sand. ~ Guinean proverb
32. In the moment of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build dams. ~ Nigerian proverb
33. If you are filled with pride, then you will have no room for wisdom. ~ African proverb
34. A wise person will always find a way. ~ Tanzanian proverb
35. Nobody is born wise. ~ African proverb
36. A man who uses force is afraid of reasoning. ~Kenyan proverb
37. Wisdom is not like money to be tied up and hidden. ~ Akan proverb

### **African Proverbs on Learning**

38. Learning expands great souls. ~ Namibian proverb
39. To get lost is to learn the way. ~ African proverb
40. By crawling a child learns to stand. ~ African proverb
41. If you close your eyes to facts, you will learn through accidents. ~ African proverb
42. Money, if you use it, comes to an end; learning, if you use it, increases. ~ Swahili proverb
43. You always learn a lot more when you lose than when you win. ~ African proverb

44. You learn how to cut down trees by cutting them down. ~ Bateke proverb
45. What you help a child to love can be more important than what you help him to learn.  
~African proverb
46. By the time the fool has learned the game, the players have dispersed. ~Ashanti proverb
47. One who causes others misfortune also teaches them wisdom. ~ African proverb
48. Ears that do not listen to advice, accompany the head when it is chopped off.  
~African Proverb
49. Advice is a stranger; if he's welcome he stays for the night; if not, he leaves the same day. ~Malagasy Proverb

### **African Proverbs on Family**

50. A family is like a forest, when you are outside it is dense, when you are inside you see that each tree has its place. ~ African Proverb
51. A united family eats from the same plate. ~ Baganda proverb
52. If I am in harmony with my family, that's success. ~ Ute proverb
53. Brothers love each other when they are equally rich. ~ African proverb
54. Dine with a stranger but save your love for your family. ~ Ethiopian proverb
55. There is no fool who is disowned by his family. ~ African proverb
56. Home affairs are not talked about on the public square. ~ African proverb
57. If relatives help each other, what evil can hurt them? ~ African proverb
58. He who earns calamity, eats it with his family. ~ African proverb

59. The old woman looks after the child to grow its teeth and the young one in turn looks after the old woman when she loses her teeth. ~ Akan (Ghana, Ivory Coast) proverb

60. When brothers fight to the death, a stranger inherits their father's estate. ~ Ibo proverb

### **African Proverbs on Friendship**

61. To be without a friend is to be poor indeed. ~ Tanzanian proverb

62. Hold a true friend with both hands. ~ African proverb

63. The friends of our friends are our friends. ~ Congolese proverb

64. A friend is someone you share the path with. ~ African proverb

65. Show me your friend and I will show you your character. ~ African proverb

66. Between true friends even water drunk together is sweet enough. ~ African proverb

67. A small house will hold a hundred friends. ~ African proverb

68. Bad friends will prevent you from having good friends. ~ Gabon proverb

### **African Proverbs on Money, Wealth, Riches and Poverty**

69. Make some money but don't let money make you. ~ Tanzania

70. Poverty is slavery. ~Somalia

71. One cannot both feast and become rich. ~ Ashanti

72. The wealth which enslaves the owner isn't wealth. ~ Yoruba

73. Lack of money is lack of friends; if you have money at your disposal, every dog and goat will claim to be related to you. ~ Yoruba

74. Dogs do not actually prefer bones to meat; it is just that no one ever gives them meat. ~ Akan

75. Money can't talk, yet it can make lies look true. ~ South Africa

76. You become wise when you begin to run out of money. ~ Ghana

77. Having a good discussion is like having riches ~ Kenya

### **African Proverbs on Patience**

78. Patience is the key which solves all problems. ~ Sudanese proverb

79. To run is not necessarily to arrive. ~ Swahili proverb

80. Patience can cook a stone. ~ African proverb

81. A patient man will eat ripe fruit. ~ African proverb

82. At the bottom of patience one finds heaven. ~ African proverb

83. Patience attracts happiness; it brings near that which is far. ~ Swahili proverb

84. Always being in a hurry does not prevent death, neither does going slowly prevent living. ~ Ibo proverb

85. However long the night, the dawn will break. ~ African proverb

### **African Proverbs on Food**

86. Don't take another mouthful before you have swallowed what is in your mouth. ~Malagasy Proverb

87. A healthy person who begs for food is an insult to a generous farmer. ~Ghanaian Proverb
88. A dog knows the places he is thrown food. ~Acholi Proverb
89. One who eats alone cannot discuss the taste of the food with others. ~African Proverb
90. Man is like a pepper, till you have chewed it you do not know how hot it is. ~Hausa Proverb
91. No one gets a mouthful of food by picking between another person's teeth. ~Igbo Proverb
92. If you watch your pot, your food will not burn. ~Mauritanian, Nigerian, and Niger Proverb
93. You cannot tell a hungry child that you gave him food yesterday. ~Zimbabwean Proverb
94. However little food we have, we'll share it even if it's only one locust. ~Malagasy Proverb
95. Good words are food, bad words poison. ~Malagasy Proverb

**Art Background** (for **Keet Shagoon (Killer Whale)**, 2003, by *Preston Singletary*)

"The Killer Whale image is my family crest symbol. This image is presented in the form of a screen that would be used to separate the chief's quarters from the rest of the clan house. It provides a portal for a chief to make a dramatic entrance when entertaining guests. I like to look at it as a metaphor for the term 'threshold.' The medium of glass can be a threshold to the future for the cultural growth of Native people."

—Preston Singletary, 2003

*Keet Shagoon*, or *Killer Whale*, takes the traditional form of an interior house screen and transforms it into glass. The bold design features a split killer whale, the blow hole represented by the circles on either side of the whale's head. Preston Singletary refers to this contemporary version of an older screen as "modern heritage art."

**Excerpted from Seattle Art Museum Close-Ups online at:**

<http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/SAMcollection/code/emuseum.asp?style=browse&currentrecord=55&page=collection&profile=objects&searchdesc=WEB:CloseUps&newvalues=1&newstyle=single&newcurrentrecord=62>

**Art Background** (for **Sunday cloth (Kwasiada Adinkra)**, by an anonymous Asante artist from Ghana in West Africa)

Adinkra is the only African cloth printing tradition of pre-Colonial origin. It is one of the prestigious royal crafts produced in villages around the Asante capital Kumase, in this case being almost entirely confined to the village of Ntonso and the Kumase district of Asokwa. According to Asante legend it was introduced in 1818 following the capture of a rival monarch by the name of Adinkra, who wore the cloth to express his sorrow on being taken to Kumase. Adinkra involves the printing of designs in a black dye made from the bark of certain trees, using stamps carved from sections of calabash. The earliest examples in museum collections are printed on locally woven cloth, and this is still done today, but for most of the twentieth century the use of imported cloth as a background has been more common. The plain cloth is pegged out on a flat piece of ground ready to be decorated. The artist begins by marking out the grid of lines using a device like a broad toothed comb. Once this is complete he fills in one square at a time, recharging the stamp in the dye each time before pressing it lightly onto the cloth. Sometimes two or more designs are alternated in a single square, more usually each square has a distinct motif. On older cloths the sections are usually joined by multi-colored cotton stitching.

Proverbs play an important role in Asante culture, their use being a mark of wisdom and cultural knowledge. Like many other aspects of Asante art, many of the Adinkra stamp designs are named by reference to proverbs, while others have naturalistic referents. Some of the links on this page give good accounts of these design names. Nevertheless it doesn't seem that the cloth as a whole is intended to be "read" or decoded. The communicative import of the cloth was instead conveyed by the colour, with red, brown, and black cloths associated in the past with funerals and periods of mourning, while white cloths were worn for post-mourning celebrations and joyous occasions more generally. Today they have taken on a more general significance as an important and

unique form of African textile artistry. Adinkra symbols are found in numerous contexts both in Ghana and in the United States

**Excerpted from:**

<http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/adinkraintroduction.htm>

## **Cross-Curricular Connections**

Math – Positive and negative space

Reading – Interpreting proverbs

## Assessment Checklist

Student	Points out closed shapes and the empty spaces around them	Repeats positive and negative shapes in a print	Creates an image to represent the meaning of a proverb	TOTAL 3
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<b>Total Points</b>				
<b>Percent Comprehension</b>				

*Teacher Notes:*

## Letter Home

*Dear Family,*

*Today we learned that artists use **positive** and **negative space** to make their art more interesting. We looked at lots of different examples of positive and negative space in art, from a 500-year old Incan shirt, to a cut paper design of the Tree of Life by Polish artist Stanistawa Bakula, a cast-glass piece by contemporary Native artist Preston Singletary, and a **printed** cloth from an anonymous Asante artist from Ghana, called an **adinkra** cloth. Adinkra cloths are covered with symbols that represent certain **proverbs**. We learned that a **symbol** is a simplified picture that stands for something else.*

*After looking at art, we made our own symbols to stand for proverbs that we chose. We printed our symbols both as positive and negative shapes. At home you could explore more proverbs that you know in your family. Is there one that expresses an important value in your family? What symbol could you make to stand for family proverb?*