

Exploring the Natural World and Carving Stamps

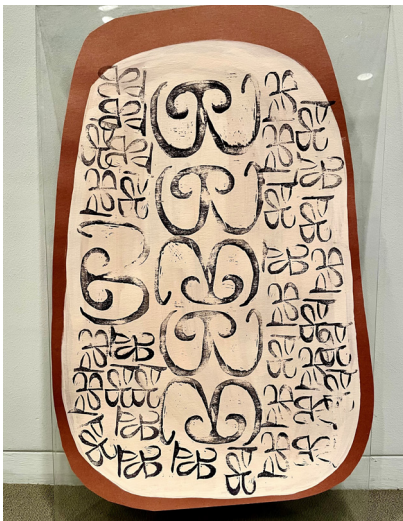
Time: 1.5 hours

Difficulty level: High

Messy level: Medium



This activity will guide you in exploring how the Asmat people of New Guinea use imagery of animals as powerful symbols carved into protective shields. You will also learn the basics of carving when you make your own stamp.



Top: Asmat people, *Shield*, 1950–60, wood and paint, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund, 91.1924.

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To view a hi-res image of the work, visit the [MFAH Collection online database](#).

Investigate the Work of Art!

Humans, trees, and wood sculpture are inseparably linked in the origin stories of the Asmat people of southwest New Guinea. The human body is related to the tree: the legs and feet are the roots, the torso is the trunk, the arms and hands are the branches, and the head is the fruit.

1. Describe the steps you imagine would take place in creating this shield from start to finish.
2. This shield is 79 3/4 x 23 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches in size. It served the purpose of protecting the home and family from evil with its decoration of powerful symbols that both frighten and paralyze enemies. Do you find this shield intimidating? Why or why not?
3. The Asmat people were inspired by the animals around them. The symbols on the shield are imaginative images of fruit bats, herons, and the curly tails of the cuscus, a small tree-dwelling mammal similar to a possum. What animals from your neighborhood and community would you choose to depict on a carving?

Let's Make Some Art!

Gather These Art Materials

- 1 large piece of brown poster board
- 1 large paintbrush
- White acrylic paint
- Brown acrylic paint
- Cup for mixing paint
- Carving tools
- Pencil
- Black ink pad
- Scissors
- Paper towels
- Beginners carving block made of rubber

To purchase some of the recommended art materials, visit [dickblick.com](#).

Step-by-Step Artist Instructions

1. Find a clear spot at home with a hard surface to work on.
2. Gather supplies.
3. Cut your poster board into the desired shape of your shield.
4. Blend white and brown paint to create the background color for your shield.
5. Use paintbrush to cover most of your shield with paint, leaving a brown border.
6. While that's drying, think about what symbols you want to have on your shield. Do you want to recreate the Asmat people's shield or come up with your own symbols?
7. Cut your carving block into whatever size and shape you want your stamps to be.
8. Use a pencil to draw the symbols onto the block.
9. Use the carving tools to remove all area around your symbols so that they will be the only part of the stamp to pick up ink.
10. Press stamps onto black ink pad and then stamp onto your shield.
11. Repeat until your shield is covered with stamps.

Tip: Think about varying the size of your stamps to add interest.