

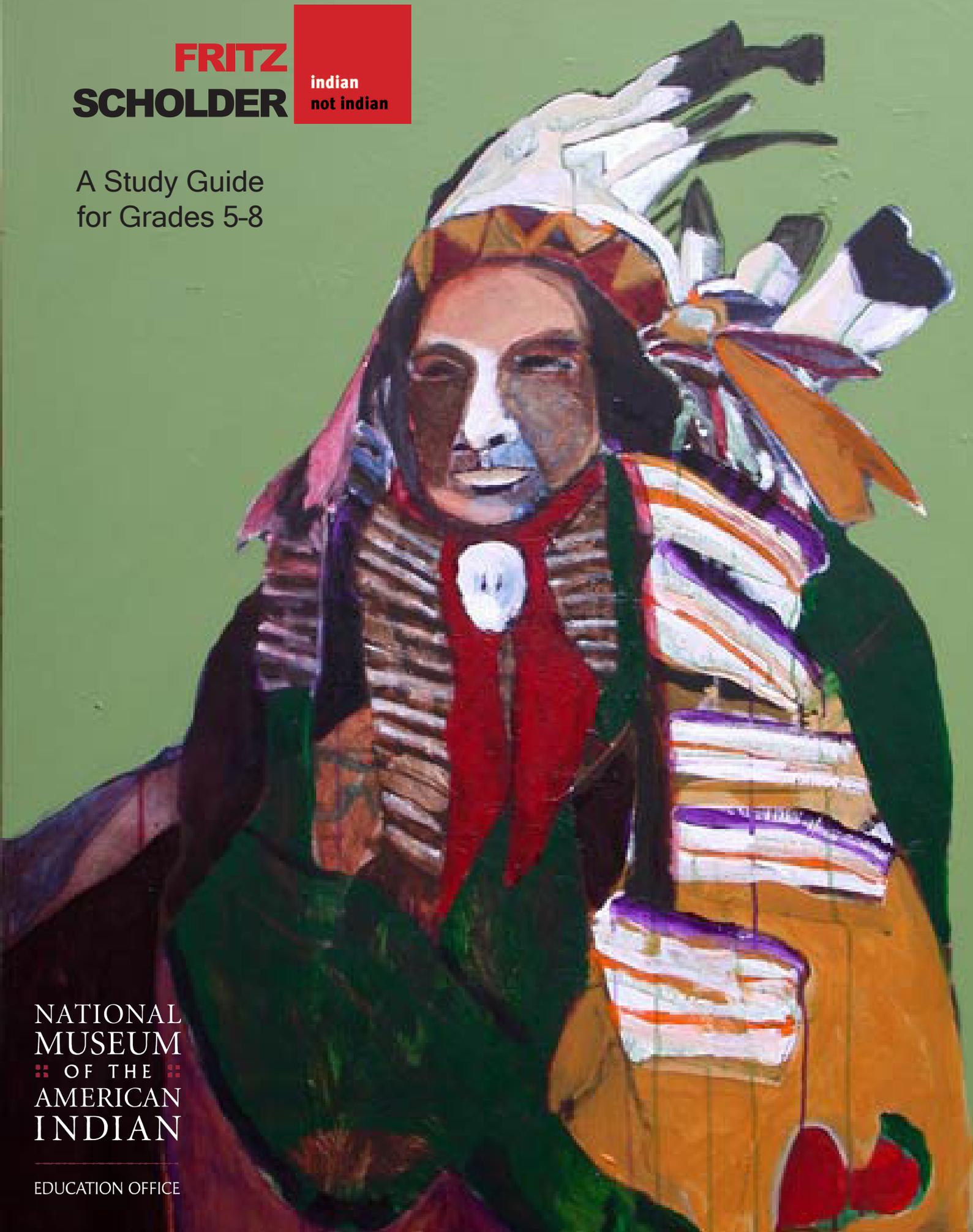
FRITZ
SCHOLDER

indian
not indian

A Study Guide
for Grades 5-8

NATIONAL
MUSEUM
OF THE
AMERICAN
INDIAN

EDUCATION OFFICE



Fritz Scholder ❖ Indian/Not Indian

A Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Students will examine and understand how the abstract expressionist artist, Fritz Scholder (1937-2005), challenged stereotypes of Native American art. This lesson explains abstract expressionism through an examination of a Scholder landscape painting titled *New Mexico No. 1*. Students will also learn how art can make a statement about identity by exploring Scholder's life and examining other works, including *Heart Indian*. Students will create a self-portrait based on the style of Scholder.

PRIMARY SUBJECT AND GRADE

Visual Arts, Language Arts, Grades 5-8

TIME REQUIRED

Flexible, from 1 to 4 class periods

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will learn about the life of artist Fritz Scholder.

Students will build visual literacy skills.

Students will recognize elements of abstract expressionism.

Students will understand how the visual elements of a painting can express ideas.

Students will learn about the concept of identity.

MATERIALS

Fritz Scholder biography, reproducible (included)

Image 1: *New Mexico No. 1*, reproducible (included)

Image 2: Photo of New Mexico landscape, reproducible (included)

Image 3: *Heart Indian*, reproducible (included)

Large art paper, tempera paints, large paint brushes, paper towels, newspapers

Teachers can request a free full-sized poster of *Heart Indian* by emailing

NMAI-GroupReservations@si.edu.

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VOCABULARY

abstract expressionism, ethnicity, identity, Luiseño, nationality, palette, stereotype, technique, underpainting

Activity 1 - Learning about the artist and identity

1. Have students read the biographical sketch of Fritz Scholder.

Ask students:

- *What ethnicity and nationality was Fritz Scholder?*
- *Was he Indian or non-Indian?*
- *How do you know?*
- *Can art be Native American if the artist is not Native American?*
- *What do you think Scholder meant when he said, "I felt it to be a compliment when I was told that I had destroyed the traditional style of Indian art, for I was doing what I thought had to be done"?*
- *What makes someone a specific nationality?*
- *How can you tell what nationality someone is? By what they wear? By what they do? By how they talk?*
- *What nationality and ethnicity are you?*
- *If you were part German, part French, part Italian, and part Swedish, but lived in the United States, what nationality would you be? What ethnicity?*
- *How would you decide?*
- *What other traits make up your identity?*

Have students make a list of words that identify who they are and share them with each other.

Activity 2 - Learning about abstract expressionism

1. Show students *New Mexico No. 1* without telling them the title.

Ask students:

What does this painting look like to you? Does it remind you of anything?

Tell students the name of the painting and the artist. Tell students that this kind of art is called abstract expressionism. Explain that abstract expressionists do not try to paint things as they look, but instead try to give a feeling of something. Tell them that abstract expressionists tend to use bright colors and broad strokes.

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Show students the photo of the New Mexico landscape.

Ask students:

- *Can you see the similarities between the photo and the painting?*
- *Can you recognize some of the same colors?*
- *Do you understand why the artist painted New Mexico No. 1 the way he did?*
- *What colors and shapes would you use to give the feeling of the land where you live? Would they be like the ones in New Mexico No. 1? Why or why not?*

Tell the students that Scholder used the colors in *New Mexico No. 1* in many of his paintings. Those colors are known as his palette.

2. Show students the image of *Heart Indian*.

Ask students:

- *How is this painting similar to New Mexico No. 1?*
- *How is it different?*
- *Why is this painting considered abstract expressionist art?*
- *Is Heart Indian like other images of American Indians you have seen?*
- *How is it the same? How is it different?*
- *Why do you think the painting is called Heart Indian?*

3. Play a detail game. Have the students look carefully at the painting and identify as many details as they can (headdress, eyes, nose, feathers, colors, shapes, etc.). Divide the class into two teams. Have each team compile a list of all the details they can find, without any repetitions. Compare the lists, and see which team came up with the most details.

Activity 3 - Interpreting art

1. Ask students to look at *Heart Indian* and write a story or poem about its subject.

Motivational questions:

- *What do you think the man in the painting is thinking?*
- *How do you think he feels?*
- *Why do you think he is posing for the picture?*
- *Where do you think he is from?*
- *How old is he?*
- *Might he be alive today or did he live long ago?*
- *Why is he dressed the way he is?*

2. Have students work in groups of four or five. Have them go to the virtual exhibit [Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian](http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/scholder/works.html) (<http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/scholder/works.html>) and pick out another Fritz Scholder painting and discuss what they think he was trying to say with the painting. Have students make a presentation to the class saying what they think about the painting and how they interpret it.

Activity 4 - Creating abstract art

Write on the board:

“It’s all up to you. And you, in a way, can’t make a mistake, because if you don’t like a certain area, cover it over.”

–Fritz Scholder

Hand out art paper, paint, brushes, newspaper, etc.

Tell students:

- *You will be painting a self-portrait using the techniques of Fritz Scholder.*
- *Your painting is supposed to be abstract expressionistic, so don’t worry about making it realistic.*
- *Using colors and brush strokes, try to make it show how you feel.*
- *Work quickly.*
- *Use water to thin the paint so that it flows easily.*
- *Apply the paint as thickly or as thinly as you want.*
- *Begin your painting by covering the paper with one or two colors, leaving no white space. Let it dry before you begin your figure.*
- *Experiment with dripping and smearing.*
- *Think of Scholder’s quote while you paint.*
- *Have a good time! Painting should be fun.*

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

Content Standard 1

Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes

Content Standard 3

Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Content Standard 4

Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Content Standard 5

Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Fritz Scholder
1937–2005



Fritz Scholder in Taos, New Mexico, 1977

Photo by Meridel Rubenstein

Artist Fritz Scholder is best known for his abstract paintings of American Indians. Scholder was born in Breckinridge, Minnesota, in 1937, the son of a white mother and a father who was half-Luiseño Indian (a California mission tribe) and half-German. Because Scholder was one-quarter Indian, he was an enrolled (official) member of the Luiseño Indian people. However, Scholder often said that he was not Indian. “I’m very proud of being one-quarter Luiseño...but you can’t be anything if you’re a quarter,” he said. Even so, Scholder is considered to be one of the most famous Native American artists of the 20th century and is especially known for a series of paintings of American Indians.

What made Scholder so famous is that his art is very different from what people expected of Native American art. Before Scholder, most Indian artists painted in what is called the Studio style. Paintings in the Studio style were extremely precise line drawings showing figures in native dress on flat backgrounds. Usually the paintings depicted scenes of hunting or dancing. These paintings were produced largely for non-Native buyers and were not meant to express the feelings of the artist. Scholder thought that the Studio style of art misrepresented Native American people. He wanted his art to express his feelings about Native American identity, not to just be pretty and popular with non-Natives.

Fritz Scholder

"I felt it to be a compliment when I was told that I had destroyed the traditional style of Indian art, for I was doing what I thought had to be done."

—Fritz Scholder

Scholder painted in a style called abstract expressionism. Abstract expressionists often create large canvases with forms and colors that are meant to express feelings and emotions. The artwork often does not look like the subject of the painting, but just represents the subject in some way. Sometimes the artist makes the subject recognizable, but distorts the image or uses colors that are unexpected. Although abstract expressionism was well known in New York and other cities, it was very unusual for an American Indian to work in that style. Scholder combined abstract expressionism and Native American images.

Because his art was so different from previous Indian art, many people thought it was disrespectful to Indian people, but Scholder did not care. "I felt it to be a compliment when I was told that I had destroyed the traditional style of Indian art, for I was doing what I thought had to be done," he said.

Scholder painted his Indians using broad strokes of vibrant color and drips, smudges and smears. "Color is always the first priority in my painting," he said. "My work is a celebration of paint, an expression of paint." Many of his paintings have bold backgrounds on which he used a technique called underpainting. Underpainting means that the artist applies a layer of paint on a canvas that will be the foundation of the

painting. Scholder covered the whole canvas with one or two colors, let that dry, and then painted a figure on top in a way that sometimes showed the background color. All these things, along with the contrasting colors that he chose, give his artwork a lot of energy.

Like many abstract expressionist painters, Scholder worked very quickly on a painting, sometimes finishing in as little as two hours. Many of Scholder's paintings are portraits, or pictures of people. He painted people he knew, people he imagined, and himself. The faces in many of his portraits look almost like masks and do not have many details. He focused on the colors and the mood of the artwork instead.

Scholder did not just paint Indians. In the last years of his life, he stopped painting Indians completely. He wanted to paint other things that interested him. He wanted to be thought of as an artist, not just an Indian artist. "You have to fight against what you become famous for," he said. However, even though for many years he created paintings and sculptures of everything from vampires to flowers, Scholder is still best known for his Indians and as an Indian artist whose work has inspired many other Native artists.

Fritz Scholder died in 2005 at the age of 67.

VOCABULARY

Abstract expressionism: A painting style and movement in which artists typically applied paint rapidly and with force to their huge canvases in an effort to show feelings and emotions, sometimes applying paint with large brushes, sometimes dripping or even throwing it onto the canvas. A style of art that achieves its effect by simplifying or altering the visual elements (e.g., line, shape, color), rather than by representing recognizable things or people.

Ethnicity: Sharing a common and distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic, or cultural heritage. Belonging to a national group by heritage but residing outside its national boundaries.

Identity: The set of personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.

Luiseño: Native American people who live in Southern California near San Diego.

Nationality: The status of belonging to a particular nation by origin, birth, or naturalization.

Palette: The range of colors used by a particular artist. Also a thin board or tablet used by painters for holding and mixing colors.

Stereotype: An overly simple and, therefore, distorted image of a group, such as “Football players are stupid.” A generalization, usually exaggerated or oversimplified and often offensive, that is used to describe or distinguish a group.

Technique: A method or procedure used in producing a work of art.

Underpainting: The preliminary coats of paint in a painting used for the basic outline before the final paint layers are added to complete the work. Before an image is painted onto the canvas, colored paint is applied to that canvas. This underpainting might be a single color, swipes of multi-colored brush strokes, or the shape of the image the artist plans to paint.

Fritz Scholder,
New Mexico No. 1,
1964
Oil on canvas.
Collection of the Estate of
Fritz Scholder.





Photo of New Mexico landscape, 2004. Courtesy of photographer James Gordon.



Fritz Scholder,
Heart Indian, 2004

Acrylic on canvas.

Collection of the Estate of Fritz Scholder.