

Beading Threads Through Time, Space & Science

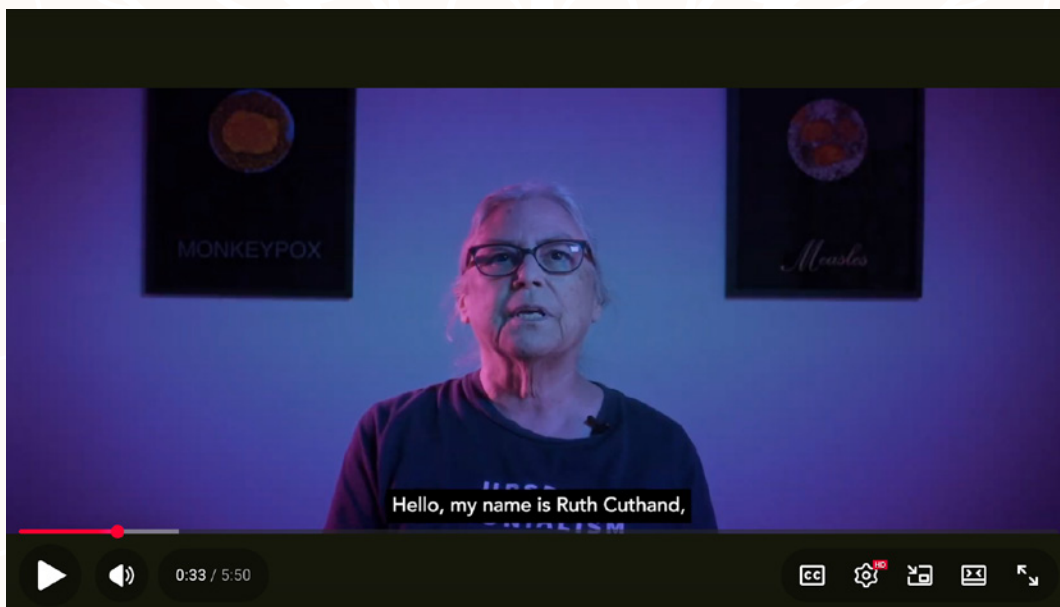
RUTH CUTHAND

Suggested Grades: 7-12

Themes: Indigenous trade networks, cultural resilience, disease impact, and beading as both historical and living art.

Introduction

This lesson features a video with Ruth Cuthand, a Plains Cree artist from Treaty 6 territory in Saskatchewan. In the video we see that Ruth's beading is more than art — her work challenges us to see beadwork not just as beautiful, but as a powerful language of resistance and survival. She shares how her connection to nature helps her find inspiration and how the practice of beading has been transformed from a historical craft to a powerful form of contemporary art. Through her artwork, Ruth explores the complex connections between beading, colonial history, and Indigenous identities. Her beaded pieces, inspired by microscopic images of viruses introduced by European settlers during the fur trade, challenge colonial narratives and draw attention to the devastating impact these viruses had on Indigenous communities. Ruth's artistic journey is deeply connected to both contemporary and traditional Indigenous art forms. She emphasizes the importance of experimentation in art, encouraging young artists to explore and create without fear of failure.



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Background Information

Who is Ruth Cuthand?

Ruth Cuthand is Plains Cree and has Scottish and Irish ancestry; she is a member of Little Pine First Nation in Treaty 6 Territory (Saskatchewan). Ruth Cuthand is known for her beaded depictions of microscopic diseases (e.g., smallpox, influenza, tuberculosis, COVID-19). Her work confronts colonial violence, health disparities, and truth-telling through beadwork.

History of Beading in Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities across North America have always used beading as a form of communication. Early beads and decorative materials were made from porcupine quills (Plains and Woodland Nations); shells, such as wampum (Atlantic regions, Haudenosaunee, Wabanaki); and bones, antlers, stones, claws, animal teeth, seeds, pine nuts and ivory (Arctic regions).

The beadwork creations carry cultural significance, representing family, nation, clan, spiritual beliefs and relationships with the land. Beadwork has been used in ceremony, storytelling and diplomacy. European traders introduced glass beads as part of trade goods for furs and other resources. Indigenous people adapted these new materials into traditional designs. Beading became more intricate and widespread, especially in the Great Lakes region (Ojibwe, Métis and Cree florals), Plains Nations (geometric, symbolic designs), and the Northwest Coast (beadwork integrated into woven robes and headdresses).

During the residential school era, when policies of forced assimilation were at their height, cultural practices like beading regalia for ceremony were banned or discouraged. Many Indigenous people were punished for practicing cultural arts. Despite the attempts to suppress it, beadwork, like many cultural practices, survived and was kept alive by women, grandmothers and community leaders.

During times of cultural suppression, beadwork became a symbol of identity and resistance. Even as communities suffered, beading and **story belts (like wampum)** recorded history and kept traditions alive.

Today, beading is a living art form created and used for a wide range of purposes from regalia to jewelry to activism. Indigenous artists are using beadwork to revitalize traditions in ceremonies, express political messages, and blend a traditional artform with modern style through fashion, streetwear, sculpture and digital media. Beading is **not just historical**—it's a **thriving art form** today. Many Indigenous artists use beading to explore **identity, resistance, healing**, and even **social issues** (like Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [MMIWG], climate, and sovereignty).

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Key Concepts for Teachers

Beading = Knowledge

Beading teaches patience, balance, and mindfulness. Many designs are mathematical in nature.

Beading = Language

Many patterns and shapes are visual stories. In some languages, beadwork terms reflect movement, sound, and nature.

Beading = Resilience

Despite colonization, beadwork as an artform was preserved and passed on, now playing a major role in cultural resurgence.

Beading = Diversity

Styles vary by Nation - floral, geometric, shell, quillwork. There is no one "correct" style, and many styles are shared/adopted by other Nations.

Disease and Indigenous Peoples in North America

At the time of contact with Europeans, diseases such as smallpox and influenza were introduced and devastated Indigenous populations. Trade routes unintentionally carried disease far inland – often ahead of settlers – disrupting art, language, and knowledge sharing.

Before European contact, Indigenous Peoples had well-developed health practices, closely tied to land, plants, and spiritual knowledge. Nations used medicinal plants, ceremonial healing, and communal care systems. Chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease were virtually non-existent in many communities. Infectious diseases existed (e.g., tuberculosis in some regions), but epidemic diseases were rare due to population patterns (smaller, mobile groups) and limited exposure.

In some cases, European colonists intentionally used disease to weaken Indigenous resistance. Example: Fort Pitt, 1763 (Pontiac's War) – British forces gave smallpox-infected blankets to Indigenous leaders (documented in letters by General Jeffrey Amherst). This act is now recognized as biological warfare.

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Preparing the Environment:

Know yourself and your students:

The colonial impacts on Indigenous Peoples are historical, intergenerational and ongoing. It is important to take care of yourself during the unlearning, relearning and learning process. Be aware of your students and of the direct connections that they may have with these sensitive topics. Learning about sensitive issues can affect us emotionally, mentally, and physically. We need to be able to navigate our feelings while finding caring ways to restore balance in ourselves. Be prepared for emotional responses, especially if students have Indigenous ancestry or community ties.

Building the foundation:

It takes time to acquire and build knowledge about Indigenous Peoples. Most Canadians have been taught a one-sided story about the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples. This lack of accurate and authentic information has resulted in Canadians believing misconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples and not fully understanding their rich history and contributions to this country.

Centre Indigenous Perspective:

- Learn about Indigenous Peoples on whose territory your school is located (what communities/ Nations are in your area? What are their languages? What relationships exist between your school and these communities/Nations?)
- Meet with Indigenous Peoples who know the territory you live on.
- Contact your School Board/Regional Indigenous Education Coordinator/Consultant or Indigenous School Advisor.
- Connect with local First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations for information or to arrange to have a speaker visit your classroom.
- Connect with your Province/Territory Treaty Commission Office or Indigenous Department, as several have Speaker Bureaus.
- Watch Indigenous documentaries, films, and webinars.
- Listen to Indigenous podcasts and music.
- Read Indigenous magazines, books, and articles.
- Attend or volunteer at Indigenous events, rallies, and gatherings.

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Inclusion in the classroom:

Take the time and make the effort to teach about Indigenous Peoples throughout your instructional practice, so that it is not a one-off lesson or activity. Use every opportunity that you can to include Indigenous presence and pedagogy in your instructional practice or learning environment. There is Indigenous context, content and knowledge related to every subject, issue and topic that we could teach.

A safe environment has parameters to prevent the type of anti-Indigenous talk that can reinforce negative stereotypes and further harm Indigenous students (who may or may not self-identify because of past harms like residential schools).

Tips for this lesson:

- Avoid framing Indigenous Peoples as passive victims. Emphasize the resilience, survival and revitalization of Nations.
- Avoid “craft” language. Refer to beadwork as art or traditional practice.
- Respect protocols, understanding that some designs or beadwork pieces may not be appropriate for reproduction.

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKOrdWwZK4>

It is important to understand not all Indigenous people/Nations use the medicine wheel, while at the same time, many have adopted its use. Here it is being used to describe a holistic approach to learning.

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NORTH

Mind - Thinking - Reading

WEST

Physical - Doing - Writing

EAST

Spirit - Feeling - Listening

SOUTH

Emotion - Watching - Speaking

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NORTH

Mind - Thinking - Reading

AFTER Watching

Discussion questions

- Why is beading still important today?
- How do we see Ruth's Cree background and teachings influence her art?
- Where does her inspiration come from?
- How does Ruth's work challenge stereotypes about Indigenous art?
- Why is it powerful to show disease through beadwork?
- What truths does Ruth Cuthand's art make visible?
- How can art be a tool for change and cultural survival?

Research specific beading traditions of local Indigenous nations (e.g., Métis "floral beading," Haudenosaunee wampum).

EAST

Spirit - Feeling - Listening

In the video, Ruth describes how she finds inspiration in nature. Have you ever experienced creativity while spending time outdoors? How did it affect your ideas or emotions?

Have you ever struggled with trying to create something that matches your vision? How did you overcome that challenge?

Ruth encourages young people to experiment with art without fear of failure. Why do you think failure can be an important part of the creative process?



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SOUTH

Emotion - Watching - Speaking

RADICAL STITCH ARTWORK/info:

<https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/exhibitions-and-galleries/radical-stitch>

Explore some of the other examples from the RADICAL STITCH exhibit that Ruth talks about.

<https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/exhibitions-and-galleries/radical-stitch>

What might Ruth mean when she refers to the exhibit as “a love story to Canada”?

Choose 1–2 pieces from Ruth Cuthand's work at:

<https://www.ruthcuthand.ca/trading-series/>.

Display them and ask:

1. What do you see? Describe colours, patterns, materials.
2. How do you feel when you look at this?
3. What message do you think the artist is trying to share?
4. Why do you think she used **beads**—a traditional medium—to show something like a **disease**?

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WEST

Physical - Doing - Writing

Loom Beading Activity

What you will need:

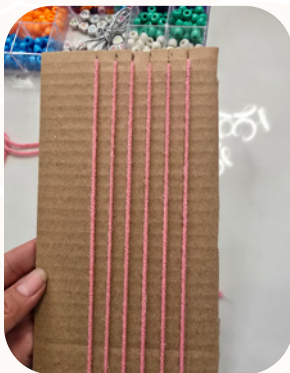
- Yarn
- Pipe cleaner (or large plastic needle)
- Cardboard
- Pony beads
- Scissors
- Pen



Step 1: Mark out six 2 cm deep lines, about 2 cm apart.



Step 2: With scissors, cut the lines you've made, only 2 cm deep into the cardboard.



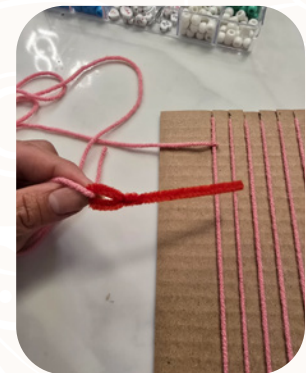
Step 3: Take your piece of yarn (about one arm's length) and wrap around and into your spaces (keep all one piece).



Step 4: Tie the yarn at the back of the cardboard.



Step 5: Make a "needle" out of pipe cleaner.



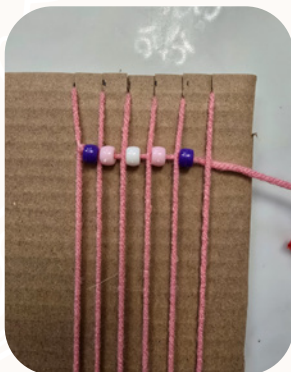
Step 6: Take another arm's length piece of yarn and tie the end of it to the first string. Thread your needle with this piece.

Loom Beading Activity

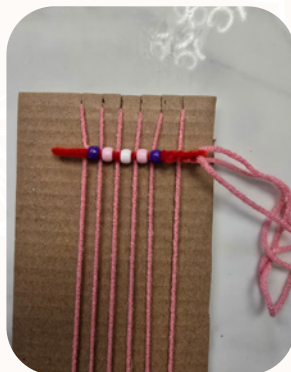


Step 7: Add five beads.

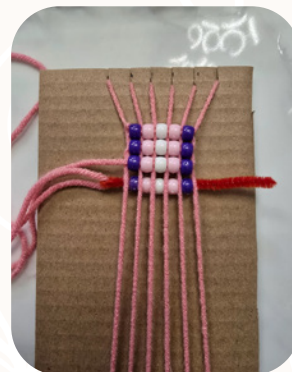
Step 8: With your five beads added, take your needle **BEHIND** and under all strings. Add five beads.



Step 9: Organize beads neatly into each space between yarn lines.



Step 10: Take your needle and go back through beads, make sure you are on **TOP** of the vertical yarn lines. Pull through.

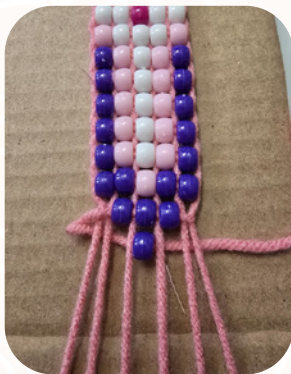


Step 11: Repeat Steps 7 through 10 for 15 rows.



Step 12: To finish with a taper, add three beads instead of five (you must still include the other lines).

Then add the final one bead row.



Step 13: Repeat on opposite side by adding more yarn.

Once finished, tie off with simple double knot on both sides. Make sure to include all strings.

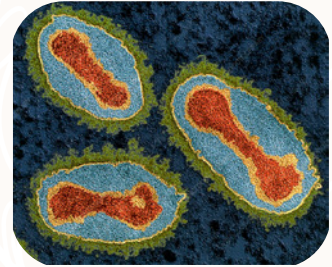


Step 14: Cut and release all strings in the back. Tie all together and enjoy your bracelet.

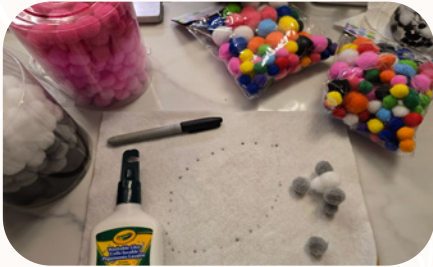


Pom Pom Cell Activity

Ruth describes beading viruses as a therapeutic and healing process. As your students go through this process, ask them to think about the virus they chose. What are the implications of the virus on society? How does it impact the individual? How does it impact family? Students should include this reflection as part of their finished project.

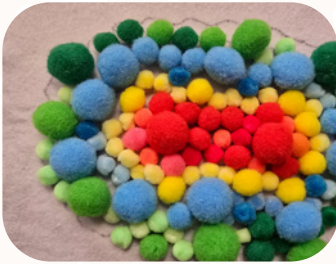


This is an example of what we chose for this activity, smallpox.



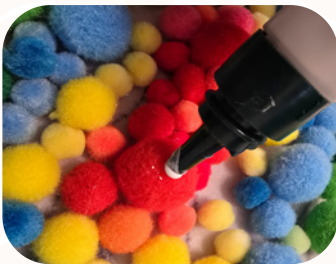
What you will need:

- Pom poms
- Glue
- Pen
- Felt or cardboard (for backing)



Step 1: Have your students choose a cell to imitate.

Step 2: On the backing, plan where the different colours and shapes will go with a marker. Place the pom poms where you'd like them to be.



Step 3: Put a small amount of glue on a pom pom and place in the correct spot.



Step 4: Press it into the felt/cardboard. Continue with the next pom poms.

Step 5: Let glue dry.



Step 6: Cut out your art representation of the virus and display with your reflection on the impacts of the virus to society.

Extend Your Learning

Explore more Indigenous artists, and how they are using traditional artforms in contemporary times, for example:

Christi Belcourt (Métis) — Known for floral bead-inspired painting and environmental activism. <http://christibelcourt.com/>

Blake Angecone (Lac Seul First Nation) — Acrylics and multimedia on canvas, blending woodlands art with pop culture references. <https://www.instagram.com/blakeangecone/?hl=en>

Tania Larsson (Gwich'in) — Combines traditional beadwork with contemporary jewelry design. <https://tanialarsson.com/>

Meryl McMaster (Nêhiyaw [Plains Cree]) — Photography and art featuring beaded elements as cultural symbolism. <http://merylmcmaster.com/>

Catherine Blackburn (Dene) — Creates fashion, beadwork, and sculpture, blending tradition with political commentary. <https://www.catherineblackburn.com/>

Nico Williams (Aamjiwnaang First Nation) — Utilizes beadwork for storytelling through sculptural art. <https://www.nicowilliams.com/>

Explore Indigenous Fashion Arts — Contemporary Indigenous designers using beadwork. indigenousfashionarts.com

Science: Study the materials used in traditional beadwork and the ecological trade of shells, bones, or natural dyes.

Learn more about **Ruth Cuthand's** work and explore her collections: Ruthcuthand.ca

Get outdoors, observe nature, and let it inspire your creativity: [Canadian Geographic Education — Getting Started With Fieldwork](#)

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Glossary

Abstracted: A style of art that does not attempt to represent reality but instead uses shapes, colours, and forms to express ideas.

Beading: A traditional Indigenous art form that involves sewing beads onto fabric, leather, or other materials to create intricate designs.

Colonial: Relating to the control or influence of one country over another, often involving settlement and exploitation of land and people.

Conservation Areas: Protected natural spaces set aside to preserve wildlife and ecosystems.

Contemporary art: Art that is created in the present time, often reflecting modern ideas and social issues.

Indigenous: A term used to describe the original peoples of the Americas and their descendants. There are three groups of Indigenous peoples in Canada: First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

Microscopic: Something so small that it can only be seen with a microscope.

New World: A term used by Europeans to describe North and South America after their arrival in the late 15th century.

Old World: A term used to refer to Europe, Africa, and Asia before contact with the Americas.

Stereotyped: A simplified and often inaccurate idea about a group of people or things.

Utilitarian: Designed to be practical and useful rather than decorative.