

MoNA

Museum of Northwest Art

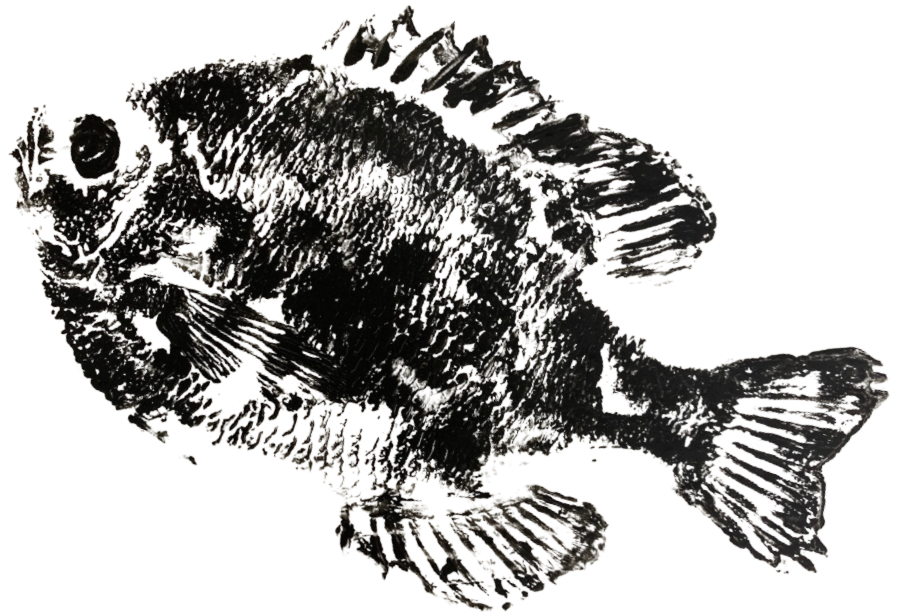
Age: 2nd- 4th Grade

Lesson Duration: 1.5 hours

Subjects: Printmaking, "Gyotaku"

Fish Prints Inspired by Dennis Cunningham

A HANDS-ON ART
ACTIVITY DESIGNED BY
MONA EDUCATORS



Example of completed Fish Print
Source: Museum of Northwest Art

Materials

- A variety of latex fish
- Linoleum block print ink, speedball, or any thick water-soluble ink
- Old newspapers
- Soft foam brayers
- Plexiglass sheets or cookie sheets
- Stack of faded construction paper or newsprint
- Printing paper
- Sharpened #2 pencils
- Masking tape
- Spray bottles with water
- Damp paper towels
- Bucket of water for cleanup
- Mats

Description

Students will explore Dennis Cunningham's fish-themed linocut artworks and the history of "gyotaku" or fish-printing. Students will also learn about printmaking techniques in a hands-on way using modern materials and have a better understanding of how Cunningham used his love for fishing to inspire his art.

Inspiration

1. Begin by introducing students to the *gyotaku* (pronounced ghio-ta-koo) art form, which means fish rubbing (gyo=fish, taku=rubbing.) Fish printing originated in Japan or China in the early 1800's. In Japan, *gyotaku* is practiced by sportsmen to preserve records of their catches. "A fish print never lies, but fishermen do." In the United States, it has been practiced as an art form for about 25 years. Practicing the art of *gyotaku* is a good way to gain appreciation of the beauty and great variety of marine organisms.
2. Share the work of Dennis Cunningham to get students inspired. A biography and images are included at the end of this lesson plan.

Instructions

Have a table set up with the fish on it and with written directions for the students. You may want to prepare two printing stations per table. Two students can be at the printing station at a time. One can watch while the other is printing. An adult should be there to assist by monitoring the amount of ink and changing paper. It will help to provide damp paper towels for easy clean up.

- **Paper:** Cover the entire table with newspaper or another disposable paper that is taped in place. Cut a stack of sheets of newspaper or faded construction paper that is the same size as the good printing paper. Place under the fish. After each child inks a fish, you can gently slide the top sheet out so that the underlying sheet is clean when the print is made.
- **Ink:** Set up the plexiglass or cookie sheets with ink by squeezing an inch length of ink on the plate. Demonstrate inking the brayer with an even coat. It is very important that the brayer be loaded properly. If the ink dries too quickly, spray a few drops of water and roll into the ink.

- **Inking:** Ask the student to roll a thin coat of printing ink on the fish, using a soft foam brayer. The ink should be tacky, not runny. First, they can roll on the ink from head to tail. After the whole fish is covered, reverse the direction of the strokes from tail to head. This will put ink under the edges of the scales and spines and will improve the print. Encourage them to try using different colors that will blend beautifully.
- **Clean Printing Surface:** Now slide the top sheet of newspaper out so that the surface beneath the fish is clean.
- **Placement of Paper:** Take a sheet of clean, thin printing paper and hold it several inches above the fish. Position the paper so the print will be made in the location and angle you desire. Align the edges and corners of the top and bottom pieces of paper for good registration and centering. Do not move it once it has touched the fish, or you will have smudges.
- **Assistance:** An adult should hold the head of the fish so the paper will not slip around as the child rubs the paper above the fish. The child should rub the fish gently; try to touch all the parts of the fish (including the fins) so there will not be any blank or faint spots on the print. A few helpful tips to share with the students: Take your time, the paper will wrinkle a little bit, but that is all right. Try not to press the same spot twice or you will get a double image and smudges.
- **Pull Print:** After you have pressed the entire fish, carefully peel off the paper to reveal the fish print! Look closely at the print. If you see a smudge, that means you let the paper slip. If there is a blank spot, that part of the fish was missed.
- **Drying and Signature:** Hang the print to dry for 30 minutes or more. Select a complementary mat and tape the mat to the print. Sign your name on the original print in pencil in the lower right corner of the print. Start writing four inches from the corner and allow room for signature and date.

Learning and State Standards

Fulfills **Washington State Arts Learning Standards:**

- **VA:Cr2.1.II** (Through experimentation, practice, and persistence, demonstrate acquisition of skills and knowledge in a chosen art form.)
- **VA:Cr2.1.I** (Explore uses of materials and tools to create works of art or design.)
- **VA:Pr5.1.2II** (Distinguish between different materials or artistic techniques for preparing artwork for presentation.)

Example of completed Fish Print

Source: Museum of Northwest Art



Dennis Cunningham

Dennis Cunningham, born in 1949, was an artist from Oregon who passed away in 2021. He was known for creating detailed linoleum prints and paintings. He had a particular love for fishing, which was often reflected in his artwork. His linoleum prints and paintings often featured a lone figure engaged in the act of fishing, surrounded by beautiful landscapes of lakes and streams. Through his art, Cunningham explored his personal connection to nature and the environment, as well as the importance of preserving natural habitats for future generations to enjoy.

Cunningham received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Museum Art School (now Pacific Northwest College of Art) in Portland, Oregon in 1975. In addition to creating art, he taught printmaking at Pacific Northwest College of Art and Marylhurst University, both located in Oregon.



Dennis L. Cunningham, River City Salmon, 1989
Image and biography from ArtsWA



Dennis L. Cunningham, Pesca Cabeza #7, 1983, linocut on paper, gift of Esther Podemski and Melvin Hess, Portland Art Museum, 88.24.1

“You can identify the artist through his work.”

So Dennis Cunningham posted on his website, and though it may not always hold true, it was at least true for him as a committed regionalist. A native of the Northwest—Cunningham married his art to the place he loved.

-Sue Taylor



Dennis L. Cunningham, *The Same But Different*, 1996
Image from ArtsWA