



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Grandfather Mountain State Park*, 2020, acrylic and oil on canvas. On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

# Lesson Plans

Spotlight on *Safe Places*: Robert Johnson

Including Integration with Core Curriculum Standards



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Carolina Beach State Park [Detail]*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas. On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

## “Safe” Places

What is a *Safe Place*? Do you spend time outdoors in the woods? Do you enjoy being far away from city streets and buildings?

When Robert Johnson is outdoors observing and sketching he is very content. For Robert, there is even a spiritual part of being outdoors. He says, “Whatever we have in the natural world is sacred. And so connecting with that I think is really what’s behind my big draw to go out and sketch and connect with that. That’s the most important part for me. That’s the most important part for me. That’s why I make paintings - they are almost like prayers.”

Robert’s painting *Carolina Beach State Park* (see fig. 2) shows four very different areas in the park. Which area do you think you would enjoy? Describe what you see in the environment that makes you happy or curious.

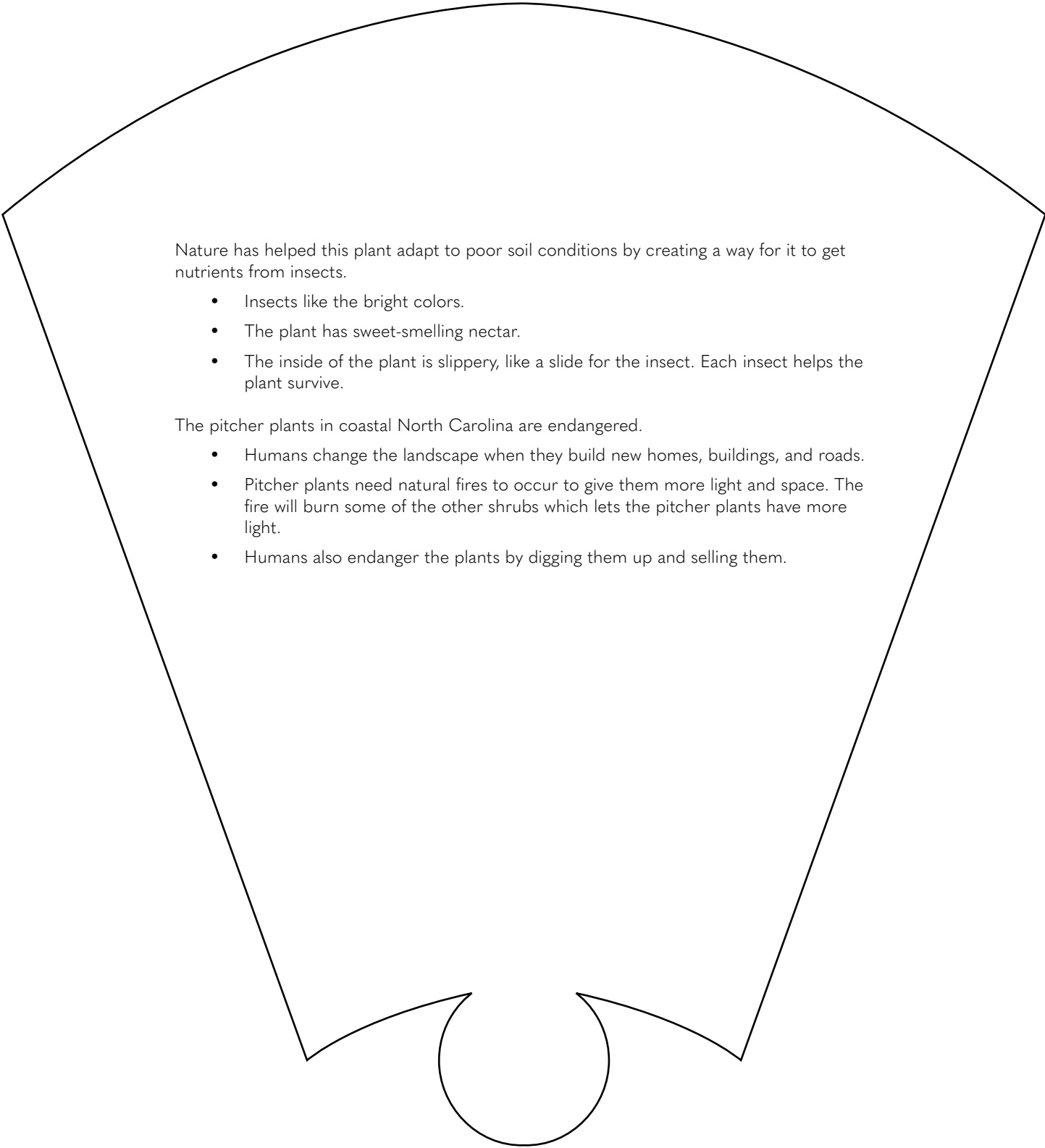
The yellow pitcher plant that grows at Carolina Beach State Park is shaped like a long, green tunnel. Take a piece of paper and roll it into a soft tube and look down into it. As you look inside:

- What happens to the light?
- What happens to the space? Does it appear welcoming and safe?
- If you were a small insect, what would cause you to crawl inside?

Open your sheet of paper and in the center write about a space where you feel safe.

- Describe the light and temperature you would like.
- What would you find on the ground?
- Would you prefer to be inside or outdoors?
- Would you be able to see lots of sunlight, or would you like to be under the branches of trees?  
Would you choose a space that is rural or urban?
- Who would you have with you to help you feel safe?

Sketch a shape of a pitcher plant around your words. You can cut out the shape and use tape to hold it together. Your words will be safe inside!



Nature has helped this plant adapt to poor soil conditions by creating a way for it to get nutrients from insects.

- Insects like the bright colors.
- The plant has sweet-smelling nectar.
- The inside of the plant is slippery, like a slide for the insect. Each insect helps the plant survive.

The pitcher plants in coastal North Carolina are endangered.

- Humans change the landscape when they build new homes, buildings, and roads.
- Pitcher plants need natural fires to occur to give them more light and space. The fire will burn some of the other shrubs which lets the pitcher plants have more light.
- Humans also endanger the plants by digging them up and selling them.

## Resources

<https://sites.google.com/site/barrierislandecology2013/terrestrial-flora/pitcher-plant>



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Carolina Beach State Park [Detail]*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas. On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

## Carolina Beach State Park Scavenger Hunt



### Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944)

In 2017, Robert decided that he wanted to visit all 41 North Carolina State Parks. He would travel to each park in his camper, sketch outdoors in his sketchbook and identify different plants and animals, and then capture the different things in the landscape in one large painting. Robert enjoys the diversity of natural habitats in the parks. When he was at Carolina Beach State Park, he learned that there are several different ecosystems in the park and over 20 species of frogs! He enjoyed Carolina Beach so much that he spent a week sketching at the park.

Look closely at the work Robert Johnson created for *Carolina Beach State Park* (**see fig. 2**). Can you find:

- 1 Venus Flytrap
- 1 Familiar Bluet Damselfly
- 2 Pink Sundews
- 2 Prickly Pears
- 3 Southern Cricket Frogs
- 3 Pitcher Plants
- 4 Pond Cypress
- 4 Solitary Sandpipers
- 6 Dwarf Palmettos
- 6 Waterlilies
- **Bonus:** 1 Man-made object

	Describe what each plant or animal looks like	What size is it?
Venus Flytrap		
Bluet Damselfly		
Pink Sundew		
Prickly Pear		
Southern Cricket Frog		
Pitcher Plant		
Pond Cypress		
Solitary Sandpiper		
Dwarf Palmetto		
Water Lily		

Many plants can be found on the North Carolina Native Plant Society website: <https://ncwildflower.org/plant-gallery-and-plant-id/>

Robert Johnson likes to play with scale in his paintings; the plants, birds, and animals we see in the artwork may be very different in size in nature. Why do you think he changes the size of objects?

Look up the objects and find out their true size in nature. Place them in order from smallest to largest:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Jordan Lake State Park [Detail]*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas.

# A Delicate Balance in Nature

## Objectives

- Students will recognize and illustrate the chain of organisms in an ecosystem.
- Students will discern influences from Buddhist painting traditions.

## Focus Questions

- Are we aware of the delicate relationships between organisms in nature?
- How does Johnson show the interdependency in nature in the compositions?

## Grade Level(s)

6-7

## Visual Art

6.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

## Science

6.L.2 Understand the flow of energy through ecosystems and the responses of populations to the biotic and abiotic factors in their environment.

EX.6.L.3 Understand the role of producers and consumers in an ecosystem.

EX.7.L.1 Describe characteristics of living organisms that enable them to survive.

Carolina Beach State Park is home to several coastal ecosystems. Johnson makes notebook pages with details of specific organisms in the landscape, then he composes a larger painting that synthesizes the organisms, their relationship to one another, and the emotional experience he had while at the park. Look at the two works by Robert Johnson (see fig. 2 and 3). What are some of the tools he uses to show different habitats in the paintings?

- What do you see going on in the image? What do you notice first?
- How does Johnson show interdependency in the composition?
- How does he demonstrate any hierarchy among the organisms?
- What is the eagle's relationship to the tree and the water? What is the bird's relationship to the artist?

Robert Johnson has documented the wilderness both domestically and abroad. He is also a student of traditional painting styles in India, Bali, and Nepal. Influences from his studies of Tibetan Thangka paintings may be found in his work. Consider these ideas as you examine the compositions:

- Thangka can be translated to "a recorded message that can be rolled". Thangkas are a form of sacred art. They were once used by lamas to travel and to teach in different villages. A Thangka is a tool for meditation and the artist that creates a Thangka is not as invested in personal creativity as much as he is a channel for the enlightenment of others.
- Buddhism teaches that we are stuck in a cyclical existence. Positive actions during our lifetime can lead to positive outcomes in the next life. Individual enlightenment and enlightenment for the good of other beings are key tenets of Buddhist practice.
- Thangkas are created with a complex grid system. Each deity is made according to specific iconographic measurements. These proportions are sacred and are detailed in scriptures the artist must study over time using multiple texts.
- There are many levels of meaning in a Thangka. It will illustrate details about the deity or teacher in the center. The background will contain symbols and images from the life of the teacher as well as complex patterns. Mandala patterns, often used in Buddhist paintings, are meant to show the whole universe in one image. It reflects the ongoing cycle of living, suffering, and being reborn.



A thangka (religious painting) of Avalokiteshvara, School of Traditional Arts, Thimphu

Working individually or in small groups, select one of the habitats within the park to study. Carolina Beach State Park is home to plants that survive in the ecotone, the transitional space between two ecosystems. Identify elements in Robert Johnson's painting and add the additional organisms for the ecosystem you select.

Find local objects in nature for sketching in addition to photo references. Does the range of some plants and animals at the coast extend to the area where you live? Consider all the organisms that exist in the ecosystem. How can you use scale or repetition to describe a relationship among the different plants and animals? Include the element of humans in the ecosystem. What impacts do humans have as a help or a hindrance? How can your composition serve as a teaching tool about nature and also a meditation about your relationship with nature? Johnson works primarily in watercolor for his notebook pages and acrylic for his larger works. Consider using actual twigs, dried flowers, or other found organic matter in your composition.

## Extensions

In this video by Oregon Metro, you will hear the work "Earthrise" by Amanda Gorman and discuss the idea of climate change. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6EYHY4D0S4>



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Weymouth Woods State Park - White Privilege [Detail]*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas.  
On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

# The Cape Fear Indians in the Cape Fear Landscape

## Objectives

- Students will learn about the history of the Cape Fear Indians.
- Students will understand aspects of the population before and after European settlement.

## Focus Question(s)

- Why do we know so little about the Cape Fear Indians?
- What evidence have we found from these early inhabitants?
- How did they use the environment for their survival?

## Grade Level(s)

5-6

## Visual Art

5.CX.1.3 Classify North American artists in terms of styles, genre, and/or movements.

6.V.2.3 Understand that original imagery is a means of self-expression used to communicate ideas and feelings.

## Social Studies

5.H.1.1 Evaluate the relationships between European explorers (French, Spanish, and English) and American Indian groups, based on accuracy of historical information (beliefs, fears, and leadership).

5.C.1.1 Analyze the change in leadership, cultures, and everyday life of American Indian groups before and after European exploration.

6.E.1.1 Explain how conflict, compromise, and negotiation over the availability of resources (natural, human, and capital) impacted the economic development of various civilizations, societies, and regions.

6.H.2.1 Explain how invasions, conquests, and migrations affected various civilizations, societies, and regions.

## Vocabulary

Archeology, Artifact, Shell Midden, Shard, Hunter-gatherer, Privilege

## Resources

<https://www.starnewsonline.com/article/NC/20071109/Lifestyle/605099550/WM>

<https://www.ncpedia.org/archaeology>

<https://www.ncpedia.org/cape-fear-indians>



1. Study the sketchbook page of Robert Johnson (**see fig. 1**). Notice where he places drawings on the page as well as the notes he includes on the page. What does he include in the images on the outside, and what does he compose in the center? What text does he provide? Bring objects from your environment for sketching: rocks, leaves, twigs, bark, shells, insects, etc.

- Try to identify the objects you are sketching. Look carefully at the sketchbook page and compare the species that are identified.
- Do you have any of the same trees or plants in your environment?
- Compare your location on a map with the location of the Carolina Beach State Park. Are you located in the coastal region of North Carolina?

2. **Read the article** about the Cape Fear Indians. Students will understand that historians and archaeologists are still uncovering information about these inhabitants. Students should be able to answer questions about the Indians and their society.

- Were early inhabitants nomadic or settled? What did they use for building shelters? Are those resources still in the coastal landscape today?
- How did the climate affect the native settlers?
- What did they use for travel or transportation?
- What does the composition of their pottery tell us?
- What village has been identified as part of the Cape Fear Indian lands?
- What were the food sources for early Native Americans?
- What do we know about their burial practices?

Create a sketchbook page that demonstrates what we know about the Cape Fear Indians. Consider 5-6 objects that tell the story of how they lived. Explain to students that Johnson uses notebook pages to make recordings of the things he sees. He will then make a painting that combines images from his notebook in a creative way to tell his full experience with the environment.

3. Study Johnson's images from *Weymouth Woods State Park* (**see fig. 4 and 5**). What is different in these images? What does he demonstrate in plant and animal interaction and dependency? Explain the relationship between natural fires and prescribed fires and the maintenance of the landscape. What is he presenting in each of the vignettes in *White Privilege*? Why might he compose the image in this way? Robert has this story about the work: **"As I traveled between parks on this sketch trip I would listen to the news at the time when the Black Lives Matter demonstrations were taking place. The term White Privilege was being talked about a lot. I hiked down to a beautiful site to sketch. I realized I was the beneficiary of White Privilege. Also, as I was sketching, I had several women on horseback riding by. This area is near Southern Pines, a very wealthy area and many of the residents benefit from White Privilege."**

Johnson was born in Venezuela and has traveled to places like Bali and Nepal to study painting. He has painted from the natural world on three continents. He works alone in nature, but he also observes the things going on in society.

What does the artist want us to consider about tensions in society? Consider the tensions in society between the native people and Europeans.

- With whom did Cape Fear Indians trade before Europeans arrived?
- What ceremonies are known? How were these customs perceived by Europeans?
- How did slavery play a part in Cape Fear Indian history?
- Did the two groups compete for natural resources?

On his notebook pages, Johnson often composes a vignette in the center that combines the small sketches. For the notebook page about the Cape Fear Indians, illustrate one of the concepts discussed in the history of European settlement and the impact it had on native inhabitants. How can you illustrate an idea like: trade, collaboration, fear, safety, competition, trust, tradition, disease, or different appearances? Discuss Johnson's compositional tools like scale, repetition, and color for communicating ideas.

## Additional Resources

<http://americanindian.net/StatesN.html>

<https://omny.fm/shows/cape-fear-unearthed/the-cape-fear-indians>

<https://www.ncpedia.org/history/early/native-settlement>



# Let your class experience Safe Places!

## Virtual Tours of Cameron Art Museum

### Virtual Classroom Visits

Students can experience an interactive tour that will deepen their understanding of art and its relevancy for history, culture, communication, and self-expression. Your experience begins with a video introduction to the museum and our exhibitions, followed by a virtual tour in real time. Our tours are informed by the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and can be customized for your classroom for lessons in all content areas. Make a reservation online at least two weeks in advance of the requested date.

**Children 17 & under: \$5 per student**  
**College & Adult, 17 & up: \$10 per student**

### Virtual Art +

Following a virtual tour, you can enhance the museum experience through exhibition-inspired, hands-on activities. The museum will be happy to work with you to connect the tour and a follow-up project with your interests or curriculum.

**Children 17 & under: additional \$5 per student**  
**College & Adult, 17 & up: additional \$10 per student**

Interested in an in-person tour? Email [education@cameronartmuseum.org](mailto:education@cameronartmuseum.org)

# Fig. 1



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), Carolina Beach State Park - Pitcher Plant, 2020, watercolor and pencil on paper. Collection of Cameron Art Museum Claude Howell Endowment for the Purchase of North Carolina Art.

Fig. 2



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Carolina Beach State Park*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas.  
Collection of Cameron Art Museum Claude Howell Endowment for the Purchase of North Carolina Art.

Fig. 3



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Jordan Lake State Park*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas. On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

Fig. 4



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Weymouth Woods State Park - Red Cockaded Woodpeckers*, 2019, gouache on paper.  
On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

Fig. 5



Robert Johnson (American, b. 1944), *Weymouth Woods State Park - White Privilege*, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas.  
On loan from Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC.

# Teacher Appreciation Week

## May 3-9, 2021

**Free admission for teachers with valid ID**



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