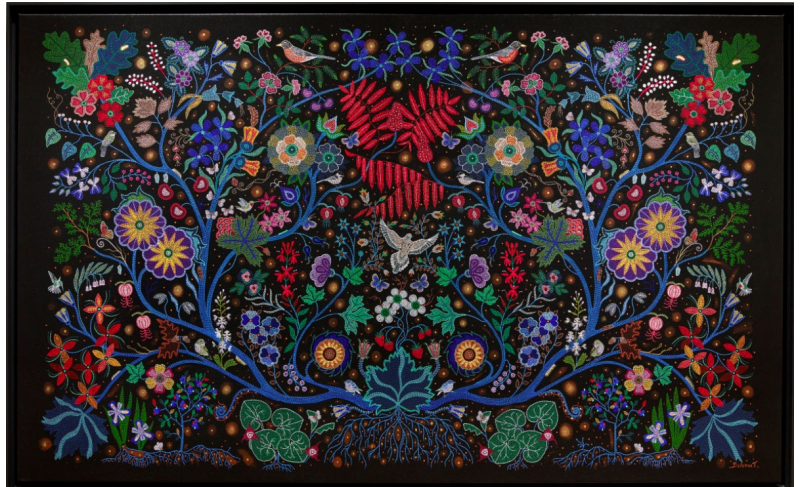


## Study Guide: “The Wisdom of the Universe” (2014) by Christi Belcourt

**About the artwork:** *The Wisdom of the Universe* (2014) was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). This large work (roughly 6 x 9 ft) depicts species of plants and animals listed as threatened, endangered, or extinct in Ontario. The image has a striking symmetry, which the centreline disrupts. There we see a bird that appears to be flying. The symmetry shows us something about the way the world exists — balanced, centered, and patterned as a whole design, not in separate bits and pieces. You can find surprising details upon close viewing. Belcourt's signature dots - of which there are an estimated 250,000 - bring the artwork to life. She uses the bead, an object insignificant in size and simple in design, as the foundation of her art. Through the bead Belcourt connects with her Métis heritage and its artistic traditions. She simulates the appearance of beads by dipping the end of a paintbrush or a knitting needle into paint to create the tiny dots. Belcourt encourages viewers to notice details, objects, and events whose worth and importance are often overlooked. For Belcourt, all living things connect by lines symbolizing heritage, and the viewer is included and implicated in this network.



**About the artist:** Christi Belcourt (b. 1966) is a Michif (Métis) artist, author and activist who has become best known for large-scale acrylic paintings featuring thousands of painted dots emulating Métis Beadwork. Her Métis ancestry originates from the historic Métis community of Manitou Sakhahigan (Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta.) Belcourt grew up in Ontario and is currently based in northeastern Ontario. She began painting at age 15 and became a full-time painter around 2000. Her journey as an artist has pushed her to uncover the tradition of beadwork and the gifts of plants further, helping her to understand what people meant when they said, 'We are all connected.' Much of her recent work speaks to revitalizing Indigenous culture, language and land-based knowledge, as well as drawing attention to the urgent situation facing the planet as a

result of resource extraction and climate change. She is a lead organizer for the Onaman Collective, which focuses on the resurgence of language and land-based practices. She is also the lead coordinator for Walking with Our Sisters, a community-driven project which collects and displays ornamented moccasin vamp (tops) to honour murdered or missing Indigenous women.

**Please preview the short film and then share it with your students. Select one or two guiding questions that reflect your curriculum and can guide student research and inquiry connected to the artwork, artists, and the socio-cultural context in which it was created.**

**Guiding Questions:**

- How has Belcourt centered Indigenous perspectives and challenged colonization and climate justice?
- How does Belcourt explore concepts of interconnectivity in her artwork?
- How can art making and artworks promote renewal and healing in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities as well as reconciliation and dialogue with non-Indigenous communities?
- Is it significant that Belcourt uses both Métis and Western artmaking techniques? Or that it is often exhibited in traditional galleries but has also appeared in government institutions and European runways?
- The work is symmetrical - almost. Upon close viewing, how do disruptions of symmetry communicate meaning?
- In what ways is Canadian identity tied to our relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities? To the land? To our non-human relations?
- How does Christi Belcourt uphold or push the role of artist?
- How might you represent your relationship to land through an artwork, dance composition, dramatic scene, or original song?
- How might you represent the relationship between several plants and/or animals (ecosystem) through an artwork, dance composition, dramatic scene, or original song?
- This painting reflects Belcourt's worldview. How does that contrast with your own worldview? Can you use an artwork, dance composition, dramatic scene, poem, or original song to represent your world view?
- Create an artwork, dance composition, dramatic scene, poem, or original song to represent the concept of *Interconnectivity*.

**Note to Teachers:**

*Cultural appropriation is harmful. A definition of cultural appropriation is: "using or borrowing elements of a marginalized culture without the permission of that culture. Cultural appropriation is harmful, diminishes the elements of the culture that are appropriated, and continues the oppression of the marginalized group." (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, 2019, page 285). When engaging in arts making practices with your learners, refrain from asking them to reproduce the artist's style. Rather, allow them to respond to big themes, ideas, and concepts using their own artistic voice. Students should be encouraged to communicate their learning in multiple ways. In addition to artmaking, presentations, videos, podcasts, journals, portfolios, etc., are just some of the ways that students might show what they know and are able to do.*

**Supporting Links:**

- [Artist Statement](#)
- [Mukluks](#)
- [Onaman Collective](#)

## **Ontario Secondary Curriculum Connections**

### **The Arts- Visual Arts**

B1. The Critical Analysis Process: demonstrate an understanding of the critical analysis process by examining, interpreting, evaluating, and reflecting on various art works;

B2. Art, Society, and Values: demonstrate an understanding of how art works reflect the society in which they were created, and of how they can affect personal values;

C1. Terminology: demonstrate an understanding of, and use correct terminology when referring to, elements, principles, and other components related to visual arts;

C2. Conventions and Techniques: demonstrate an understanding of conventions and techniques used in the creation of visual art works;

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C2. Conventions and Techniques: demonstrate an understanding of conventions and techniques used in the creation of visual art works;

A1. The Creative Process: apply the creative process to create a variety of art works, individually and/or collaboratively;

A2. The Elements and Principles of Design: apply elements and principles of design to create art works for the purpose of self-expression and to communicate ideas, information, and/or messages;

### **The Arts - Media Arts**

B1. The Critical Analysis Process: demonstrate an understanding of the critical analysis process by using it to monitor the creative process, and by examining, interpreting, assessing, and reflecting on media art works;

B2. Identity and Values: demonstrate an understanding of how media art works reflect personal and cultural identity, and affect personal,

cultural, and community values and their awareness of those values;

C2. Contexts and Influences: demonstrate an understanding of the sociocultural and historical contexts of media arts;

### **The Arts - Dance**

A1. The Creative Process: use the creative process, the elements of dance, and a variety of sources to develop movement vocabulary;

A2. Choreography and Composition: combine the elements of dance in a variety of ways in composing individual and ensemble dance creations;

### **The Arts - Drama**

A1. The Creative Process: use the creative process and a variety of sources and forms, both individually and collaboratively, to design and develop drama works;

A2. Elements and Conventions: use the elements and conventions of drama effectively in creating individual and ensemble drama works, including works based on a variety of sources; .

### **The Arts - Music**

A1. The Creative Process: apply the stages of the creative process when performing notated and/or improvised music and composing and/or arranging music;

A2. The Elements of Music: apply elements of music when performing notated and improvised music and composing and/or arranging music;

### **Expressions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Cultures (NAC101)**

C3. Conventions and Responsible Practices: demonstrate an understanding of conventions and responsible practices associated with various arts disciplines, and with art making within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and apply these practices when experiencing, analyzing, creating, and presenting art works/productions;

C4. The Critical Analysis Process: demonstrate an understanding of the critical analysis process by applying it to the study of art works/productions from various arts disciplines, including their own works, the works of their peers, and works by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists.

D1. Art Forms and Society: demonstrate an understanding of how past and present First Nations, Métis, and Inuit art forms reflect the societies and periods in which they were created;

D2. Promoting Renewal, Healing, Reconciliation, and Dialogue: demonstrate an understanding of how art making and art works can promote renewal and healing in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and reconciliation and dialogue with non-Indigenous communities;

**History:**

A1. Historical Inquiry: use the historical inquiry process and the concepts of historical thinking when investigating aspects of Canadian history, with a focus on the development of identity and culture (CHI4U)

B2. Significant Interactions: analyze the impact of significant interactions, including interactions with the environment, on the selected ethnic group's country or region of origin

**Geography:**

A1. Geographic Inquiry: use the geographic inquiry process and the concepts of geographic thinking when investigating issues relating to Canadian geography

B1. The Physical Environment and Human Activities: analyze various interactions between physical processes, phenomena, and events and human activities in Canada

**English (2023):**

A3. Applications, Connections, and Contributions: apply language and literacy skills in cross-curricular and integrated learning, and demonstrate an understanding of, and make connections to, diverse voices, experiences, perspectives, histories, and contributions, including those of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals, communities, groups, and nations

D2. Creating Texts

apply knowledge and understanding of various text forms and genres to create, revise, edit, and proofread their own texts, using a variety of media, tools, and strategies, and reflect critically on created texts

**Writer's Craft (2007):**

- produce writing for a range of purposes and audiences with an emphasis on well-developed content and the effective use of appropriate forms, techniques, diction, voice, and styles