



Symbolism

Education Resource

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About this resource

Centring on New Zealand painting from the late 18th century to today, The Fletcher Trust Collection offers a rich resource for learning and inspiration. This unit introduces ākonga to artworks created in and reflecting Aotearoa New Zealand, offering deeper insight into the pieces, the artists behind them, and their broader cultural, historical, and thematic contexts.

Designed for ākonga in Years 11–13 (Curriculum Levels 5–8), the unit explores the theme of **Symbolism** through three artworks from the Collection. It considers how artists use symbolism to express ideas about identity, culture, society, politics and the world around them. Students will engage in observation, discussion, critical thinking, and art-making to explore symbolism as a rich tool to create layers of meaning, or to subvert dominant narratives.

While primarily aligned with the Visual Arts learning area, this resource also supports learning in Art History. It has been designed as an adaptable toolkit, allowing teachers to select and customise materials to suit their classroom needs. Key sections are structured to be easily extractable as handouts for direct student use.

To introduce the theme of **Symbolism**, kaiako might consider the following activities:

Personal Reflection: Invite students to think about and respond to the prompt: “What is an object, colour, animal, or shape that holds special meaning for you or your culture?” Students can write a short reflection explaining their choice, then share with a partner or small group if comfortable.

Collaborative Discussion: Facilitate a class conversation using questions such as: *What is a symbol? How do artists use symbols to communicate ideas, beliefs, or emotions? Can symbols mean different things to different people? How can cultural background affect how a symbol is understood?*

Visual Analysis: Show an artwork that uses symbolic imagery (such as one from this resource). Ask students: *What symbols do you notice? What might they represent? How do colours, materials, or placement affect your interpretation?* Record student responses to highlight how symbols can carry multiple layers of meaning and spark different readings.

Aotearoa New Zealand Curriculum Links Composite of Levels 5–8

This resource offers the opportunity to develop the five key competencies of the New Zealand curriculum: thinking; using language, symbols, and texts; managing self; relating to others; participating and contributing. It is also relevant for a majority of the Levels 5–8 achievement objectives in the New Zealand Curriculum for Visual Arts, as well as presenting opportunities in other learning areas, as outlined below.

Visual Arts: communicating and interpreting, developing ideas and practical knowledge, understanding the visual arts in context, and inspiring curiosity

Art History: communicating and interpreting, developing ideas, understanding the visual arts in context, and inspiring curiosity

Understand Big Ideas

Ākonga can explore visual ideas, and ideas about the theme of **Symbolism** in response to artworks by Michael Illingworth, Alexis Hunter and Tony de Lautour.

This unit also connects to many of the Big Ideas outlined in the Visual Arts NZC, especially *Curiosity, risk taking, and critical thinking are integral to creativity in Visual Arts and Visual artmaking conventions enable artists to create cohesive and fluent artistic forms.*

Explore
Communicating
& Interpreting

Ākonga can think critically about how artists employ Symbolism to create layers of meaning.

- Describe key elements in an artwork using appropriate visual language.
- Analyse how compositional techniques like repetition, layering, contrast, and spatial relationships guide attention and shape meaning.
- Interpret symbolism and metaphor to uncover deeper messages about identity, power, transformation, or social behaviour.
- Explain how cultural or historical context—such as mythology, feminism, or national identity—influences the meaning of an artwork.
- Justify personal opinions about an artwork’s effectiveness using visual evidence and critical thinking.
- Engage in collaborative discussion and inquiry to deepen understanding and explore multiple interpretations.

Create
Developing Ideas &
Practical Knowledge

Ākonga develop practical knowledge as they:

- Investigate how artists use symbolism to represent people, behaviours, myths, or social ideas across time and culture.
- Analyse symbols from stories, society, or personal experience that express deeper meanings about identity, power, or transformation.
- Develop a concept for an artwork using visual symbols to represent a person, character, or emotional state.
- Design an artwork that communicates meaning through symbolic choices in form, setting, or gesture.
- Experiment with materials and techniques—such as layering, exaggeration, or texture—to enhance symbolic meaning.
- Incorporate cultural or invented symbols to explore complex themes.
- Reflect on how effectively their use of symbolism communicates their message and how material choices support it.

SYMBOLISM

ASSESSMENT LINKS

These resources may support learning towards the following NCEA standards:

Visual Arts Level 1

- AS91913 1.2 Produce a significant resolved artwork appropriate to established art making conventions
- AS91914 1.3 Explore Visual Arts processes and conventions to inform own art making
- AS91915 1.4 Create a sustained body of related artworks in response to an art making proposition

Visual Arts Level 2

- AS91306 2.1 Demonstrate an understanding of methods and ideas from established practice appropriate to painting
- AS91321 2.4 Produce a systematic body of work that shows understanding of art making conventions and ideas within painting (external)

Visual Arts Level 3

- AS91441 3.1 Analyse methods and ideas from established painting practice
- AS91456 3.4 Produce a systematic body of work that integrates conventions and regenerates ideas within painting practice (external)
- AS91460 3.5 Produce a resolved work that demonstrates purposeful control of skills appropriate to a visual arts cultural context

Art History Level 2

- AS91183 2.4 Examine how media are used to create effects in art works
- AS91184 2.5 Communicate understanding of an art history topic
- AS91185 2.6 Communicate a considered personal response to art works
- AS91181 2.2 Examine the meanings conveyed by art works (external)

Art History Level 3

- AS91487 3.6 Examine the different values placed on art works
- AS91485 3.4 Examine the impact of media and processes on art works
- AS91489 3.8 Analyse texts about art
- AS91482 3.1 Demonstrate understanding of style in art works (external)
- AS91483 3.2 Examine how meanings are communicated through art works (external)

Michael Illingworth

The Gallery Goers



Michael Illingworth
b. 1932, Yorkshire,
England

The Gallery Goers c.1970
Oil on canvas
610 x 715mm

Michael Illingworth is a New Zealand artist known for his bold, imaginative paintings that often used symbolism to explore big ideas about life, identity, and society. Born in 1930, Illingworth developed a distinctive style that mixed surreal landscapes with cartoon-like figures, drawing attention to issues such as human vulnerability, power, and the pressure to conform.

One of his most famous symbols is the “Everyman” figure—a simplified, faceless male body often shown naked and alone. This character represents ordinary people and how they are shaped (or trapped) by the world around them. Illingworth also used rich colours, strange creatures, and dreamlike settings to encourage viewers to question authority, challenge social norms, and think about what it means to be free and human in modern society.

The Gallery Goers looks specifically at the art world, showing a gallery space filled with versions of Illingworth’s own paintings—a technique called *mise en abyme*, or a painting within a painting. This clever trick makes us think not just about what we’re looking at, but whether we’re also part of the scene—and if we are, what does that say about us?

The visitors in the gallery aren’t realistic people—they’re strange, robot-like figures with no arms or legs. Their bodies resemble Victorian cage-like skirts or Daleks, the emotionless, rule-following alien villains from the TV show *Doctor Who*. These figures symbolise people in the art world who blindly follow trends or act with no individuality. Illingworth is using humour and exaggeration to question how people behave around art, and perhaps suggest the way they lose their ability to think for themselves.

Even though the painting is humorous, Illingworth includes himself in the joke. He’s not just criticising others, he’s also reflecting on his own fame and success: Illingworth made local art history when in 1967, he sold out an entire exhibition of paintings during the opening, something that had never happened before in Aotearoa. *The Gallery Goers* is both a joke and a serious comment, using symbolism to explore success, conformity, and how we experience art today.

What do you see?

What kinds of figures, shapes, and objects do you notice first? How would you describe them without naming what they might represent?

What is happening in this scene? What clues suggest it's a gallery space?

What do the viewers think of the art on display—and what do you think?

How is it arranged?

How does Illingworth use repetition (of shapes, figures, or paintings) in the composition? What effect does this have on your experience of the painting?

Look at how space is used—foreground vs background, figure vs setting. What might the placement of elements suggest about power or attention?

How do colour and texture shape the mood of the work? Do they soften the critique or make it feel more intense?

What does it mean?

The gallery visitors look more like machines than people—what do you think Illingworth is saying about people who visit galleries or collect art?

How does the 'painting within a painting' idea (mise en abyme) change how we think about who is being looked at, and who is doing the looking?

What do the strange, faceless bodies suggest about identity, individuality, or conformity?

What do you think?

Do you think the painting's satire* is effective? Why or why not?

Does the humour in the image make the critique more powerful, or does it soften the message? What do you think Illingworth wants us to take away?

*Satire is a way of using humour, irony, or exaggeration to criticise or draw attention to people, ideas, or parts of society—often to make us think or encourage change.

Inspired by Illingworth's use of stylised, faceless figures representing people shaped by society, power, or conformity, your task is to design your own figure that symbolises a type of person or social behaviour in today's world—for example, a critic, influencer, authority figure, consumer, or follower.

Use exaggeration, simplification, and symbolism to explore the character's personality or role.

You can work in any medium you like: painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, or digital art.

Step 1:
Brainstorm

Start by brainstorming the kind of person your artwork will be about. Consider the questions below:

- What kind of person or behaviour do you want to explore?
- How can you simplify or exaggerate their features to make a point?
- What symbols or details can you include to show what they care about, fear, or represent?

Step 2:
Design

In your chosen medium, design your figure.

Once you have decided on their appearance, you may like to place your figure in a setting (like a gallery, public space, or imagined landscape) that adds to the meaning, as Illingworth did with *The Gallery Goers*.

Alexis Hunter Daphne

Alexis Hunter
b. 1948, Tāmaki
Makaurau, Aotearoa

Daphne 1992
Oil on canvas
975 x 710mm



Despite spending most of her career in London, Alexis Hunter is considered one of Aotearoa's most important feminist artists. Although best known for her radical 1970s photo-narratives which challenged male-dominated image culture, Hunter's oeuvre also includes fantastical, expressionist oil paintings exploring female sexuality and creativity through mythological figures like witches, sirens, Medusa, amazons, and harpies.

This painting shows Daphne, a beautiful nymph from Greek mythology who was pursued relentlessly by the god Apollo. Desperate to escape him, Daphne prayed to her father, the river god Peneus, who transformed her into a laurel tree to keep her safe. Here, Hunter shows Daphne half-transformed, still human except for her hair, which has turned into twisting branches of laurel, amidst which perches a brown bird, possibly a dove, a hen, or perhaps even a weka.

Rather than simply a mythological portrait, this painting can be read as a feminist commentary on transformation, control, and resistance. In the myth, Daphne escapes Apollo's pursuit by turning into a laurel tree—a moment often romanticised in classical art. But here, Hunter paints her *during* the transformation: rooted, still human, yet no longer free. The branches grow from her head like antlers or a crown, and the bird perches within, a symbol that can be read in many different ways, perhaps suggesting watchfulness, burden, or intrusion.

Hunter may be asking, what happens to Daphne after the escape? Is she safe—or just contained in a different way? Who benefits from her transformation? While the meaning is left open, this painting might be read as a feminist reimagining of the myth that critiques how women's autonomy is often overwritten, even when they resist.

What do you see?

What details in the painting suggest that Daphne is in the middle of transforming—not yet fully human or fully tree? What parts of her body, her surroundings or Hunter’s paint application show this change?

How do Daphne’s facial expression or body language help tell the story of her experience? What emotion do you read in her pose or gesture?

How is it made?

Look at the way Daphne’s hair becomes branches. How does this visual transformation express ideas about power, control, or loss of autonomy?

Why do you think Hunter chose to include a bird in the branches? What could the bird symbolise in this context?

What does it mean?

Do you think Daphne’s transformation into a tree is a form of freedom or entrapment? Why? What might the artist be suggesting?

How does Hunter’s depiction of Daphne differ from traditional or classical images of mythological figures? (you may want to research other depictions of this myth, or others concerning women). What effect does this shift have on how we see the story?

What might the painting be saying about women’s choices—especially when those choices are made under pressure or fear?

Why does it matter?

How does knowing that Alexis Hunter was a feminist artist affect the way you understand this painting? Does it change the way you interpret Daphne’s transformation?

What do you think the artwork is challenging or critiquing? Is it responding to mythology, society, gender roles—or all of these?

Do you think this painting still feels relevant today? Why or why not?

Choose a mythological or legendary character (from any culture) and create a symbolic portrait. Instead of illustrating the most famous moment from the story, try exploring a lesser-known scene, an emotional turning point, or imagine what happens after the myth ends.

Your artwork should incorporate at least two symbolic elements from nature—for example, trees, animals, weather, or landscapes—to express deeper themes such as transformation, freedom, resistance, or identity. These symbols can be metaphorical, surreal, or emotional.

Research:

Choose a character and explore their story. What aspects feel relevant to the world today, or to you? Think about the deeper message or lesson in the story. What does it say about, for example, power, freedom, gender, control, nature, or human behaviour?

Sketch & Plan:

Brainstorm symbolic elements that express parts of the character's journey.

Create:

Produce a portrait of your chosen character and their symbolic world.

Reflect:

Add a short written reflection (5–10 sentences) explaining the symbols used and the ideas behind your work. You could think about:

- What message does the story send about the world?
- Who has power in the story, and who doesn't?
- How could this story connect to real life today?

Tony de Lautour Instant Inventory



Tony de Lautour
b. 1965, Melbourne,
Australia

Instant Inventory 1996
Oil on canvas
1370 x 1825mm

Today considered one of Aotearoa’s leading painters, Tony de Lautour is still best known for his early work, made when he was part of a group of artists dubbed the “Pencil Case Painters”. The name came from the style of their work, which looked like the kind of rough, rebellious drawings someone might scribble on a school pencil case. De Lautour’s paintings had a raw, gritty energy and were filled with symbols from street life, post-punk music, comic books, and amateur tattoos—things like skulls, spiders’ webs, teardrops, guns, knives, lightning bolts and drug paraphernalia.

Instant Inventory is a typical example of de Lautour’s work from the mid-1990s: huge, thickly-worked impasto paintings with symbols scratched into the surface, much like graffiti scratched into the back of a bathroom door. Even though they often look naive or humorous, de Lautour used these symbols and styles to explore serious questions around the cultural identity of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In this painting, we see bird-like heads—like a kiwi cartoon character—repeated over and over across the canvas. This kiwi character appeared often in de Lautour’s work, sometimes drawn with devil horns, holding a weapon, making rude gestures, or stomping

across the land like a feathered Godzilla. Even though the kiwi looks silly and comic, it can also be seen as a symbol of our national identity gone wrong, something familiar that’s been corrupted.

With so many bird emblems scattered across the canvas—mixed in with Xs, love hearts, lightning bolts, and random words or phrases (often taken from songs he was listening to at the time), all painted in the faded blue of an old tattoo—de Lautour’s message isn’t immediately clear. There’s no single image that stands out. Instead, we’re encouraged to get up close and notice which symbols keep recurring, as well as how many words and images have been painted over with thick white layers, partly or completely hiding them.

Then there’s the title to think about: does *Instant Inventory* mean the artist is quickly taking stock of the symbols and ideas he’s been using? If so, the title is ironic—there’s nothing instant about this painting. De Lautour has worked in layers, sometimes completely covering what came before, other times letting earlier images peek through.

Another repeated motif in this work is the number 2000, four years in the future from the time of painting.

What do you see?

What do you notice first when you look at *Instant Inventory*? List the different elements you see (e.g. objects, symbols, colours, textures, shapes). Avoid guessing what they mean for now—just describe.

How is it made?

How are the different parts of the painting arranged? Do you notice repetition, layering, or contrast? How does the artist use colour, line, or space to create movement or focus?

How does de Lautour use layering and covering in the painting? What do the areas that have been painted over suggest about the process or the meaning?

What does it mean?

Many symbols appear in *Instant Inventory*, like skulls, lightning bolts, and the kiwi cartoon. Choose one symbol and suggest what it might represent. How does this symbol help express a message or feeling?

The kiwi character is described as both humorous and disturbing—like a corrupted symbol of New Zealand identity. What do you think this says about how de Lautour views national identity or culture?

What do you think?

What mood or feeling does this artwork give you? Is that feeling created more by the subject matter, the style, or both?

Do you think *Instant Inventory* is an effective artwork? Explain your opinion using specific details from the painting.

In this activity, you will create a layered painting or mixed-media artwork that explores the relationship between what is seen and what is hidden, using experimental techniques inspired by graffiti and de Lautour's painting process.

Materials you could use:

- Heavy cartridge paper, cardboard, or canvas board
- Acrylic paint, house paint, and/or gesso
- Pens, markers, pencils, crayons, pastels
- Collage materials (newspapers, photocopies, labels, fabric, etc.)
- Tools for scratching and scraping (toothpicks, palette knives, sandpaper, scissors)
- Optional: glue, masking tape, stencils

**Base Layer –
Personal Voice:**

Begin by filling the surface with spontaneous text, images, and symbols. These could be drawn, painted, or collaged—inspired by music, identity, memories, or everyday surroundings. Overlapping and messiness are encouraged.

**Middle Layer –
Obscure and Disrupt:**

Apply a semi-covering layer using thick paint (or gesso), letting parts of the base show through. You may also want to try masking off certain areas using tape or stencil shapes, or loosely brush over areas to create tension between visible and hidden content.

**Top Layer –
Scratch and Reveal:**

While the top layer is still wet or semi-dry, experiment with scraping, sanding, or scratching back into the surface using chosen tools, revealing parts of the layers underneath. Focus on physical engagement with the materials.

**Final Details –
Add or Remove:**

Add finishing touches such as bold marks, new symbols, or deliberate smudging. Alternatively, you might choose to remove areas entirely or collage over them again, creating a conversation between addition and erasure.

Reflection:

Write a short reflection (5–10 sentences) explaining the ideas behind your work. You could think about the following questions:

What did you choose to hide or reveal, and why?

How did experimenting with materials help you express your ideas?

How does covering or revealing change what the artwork communicates?

SYMBOLISM

REFERENCES | FURTHER READING

Michael Illingworth

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Alexis Hunter

Alexis Hunter Trust [website](#)

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Alexis Hunter is represented by [Richard Saltoun](#).

Tony de Lautour

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Robert Leonard, "Valley of DB," 7.

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Matthew Galloway and Tony de Lautour, "[Graphic Language: Tony de Lautour](#)," *The Silver Bulletin*, 2012

The Arts Foundation Te Tumu Toi: [Tony de Lautour](#)

Tony de Lautour is represented by [Nadene Milne Gallery](#) and [Ivan Anthony](#).