



Truman Lowe (American, Ho-Chunk, 1944–2019), [Feather Tree](#), 1990, southern pine, peeled willow sticks, rawhide, Alice DrewsGladfelter Memorial fund purchase, 2020.44.1a-w

## Truman Lowe, *Feather Tree*

### Key Idea

Truman Lowe highlighted the importance of sustainability through his use of natural materials, and careful consideration of how natural resources in the environment should be used.

### Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Closely examine *Feather Tree* by Truman Lowe
2. Consider Truman Lowe's perspective on sustainability
3. Work individually and in groups on a learning activity

### Lesson

1. Choose a close-looking prompt (from the introduction page) to encourage students to study the artwork.
2. Provide background information using the "About the Artist" and "About the Artwork" sections below.
3. Engage the class in conversation using the discussion questions.
4. Follow up the class discussion with a learning activity

## LEARN

### About the Artist

Ho-Chunk sculptor Truman Lowe worked with natural materials and drew inspiration from his childhood along the Black River in the Ho-Chunk nation in Black River Falls, Wisconsin. His sculptures typically incorporate weathered wood, leather, feathers, and found objects. Growing up, Lowe was strongly influenced by his mother's expertise in ribbon applique and basket making and his father's carving. His parents and the Ho-Chunk community instilled in him a strong connection to the natural world and the ethic of only using what resources were needed. Lowe's large artworks refer to the objects and sacred spaces of his Ho-Chunk homeland. Feather trees and wooden sculptures are reminiscent of cradle boards (portable baby carriers) and wigwams (domed dwellings). Lowe's artwork not only connects to his Ho-Chunk heritage and the natural world, it also often identifies concerns for the future of the environment.

### About the Artwork

*Feather Tree* is a memorial to Lowe's grandmother and the land where she lived. One summer, Lowe and his grandparents worked as laborers picking berries. When Lowe became very thirsty, his grandmother led him to a mature birch tree and cut a "V" into the bark and into the grain of the wood from which, as if by magic, a clear, sweet liquid flowed. His grandmother filled a tin cup with the birch water and gave it to her grandson to quench his thirst. "I can taste that water today," the artist would proclaim throughout his life. *Feather Tree* contains many natural materials arranged on a large platform. The tree symbolizes the cycle of life while the river stones and reeds symbolize water. *Feather Tree* is an example of Lowe's connection to the natural world, specifically water, a common theme in many of his artworks.

## DISCUSS

1. How does *Feather Tree* relate to sustainability? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. What natural materials do you notice? Which materials are familiar? Which are unfamiliar?
3. Truman Lowe had a strong connection to his family and Ho-Chunk heritage. His artwork was often based on personal memories connected to nature. What memories do you think about when you think about your environment?

## CONNECT IDEAS

### Observe It!

**Nature Journal**—To connect students to their environment, ask them to create a nature journal and make observations. Even if students do not live in a place that they consider “nature,” discuss how the man-made world and natural world are connected. The journal can include drawings and text.

### Create It!

**Land Art**—To encourage students to think like an artist, ask them to collect natural materials and create a sculpture on the ground. This activity can be done individually or in teams. Ask students to periodically come back to their artwork to see how it changes over time. Encourage students to connect their artistic practice to the work of Truman Lowe.

## GO FURTHER

### Videos

Video reflection from artist Truman Lowe:

<https://wisconsin.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/natam.arts.visarts.truman/native-american-culture-truman-lowe-contemporary-native-american-artist>

### Books

*We are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom

*The Water Walker* by Joanne Robertson

### Teaching Resources and Lesson Plans

Wisconsin Historical Society, “Ho Chunk Nation: A Brief Introduction”

[\[https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4377\]](https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4377)

Wisconsin First Nations: American Indian Studies in Wisconsin, Wisconsin Historical Society “Native People of Wisconsin” [\[https://wisconsinfirstnations.org/native-people-wisconsin/\]](https://wisconsinfirstnations.org/native-people-wisconsin/)

## STANDARDS

### Art and Design

3-5 A.A.Pr.4.i: Develop Meaning: Explore and make connections through comparison of artwork from personal, historical, and contemporary artists.

3-5 A.A.R.8.i: Interpret: Use details, subject matter, and context to interpret an artwork’s mood or meaning.

### Environmental Literacy and Sustainability:

3-5: ELS.EX3.C.i Describe how cultures relate to their environments.