

Shapes of Australia

TEACHERS NOTES

Written and illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft

Published by Little Hare in July 2017

SYNOPSIS

From boulders to bee hives, from mountains to coral, Bronwyn Bancroft explores the shapes that form our land.

Bronwyn Bancroft is Australia's foremost Indigenous illustrator. Inspired by her deep love of country, she is a master craftswoman of vibrant, visual narratives, and her way of capturing the beauty of Australia is unparalleled.

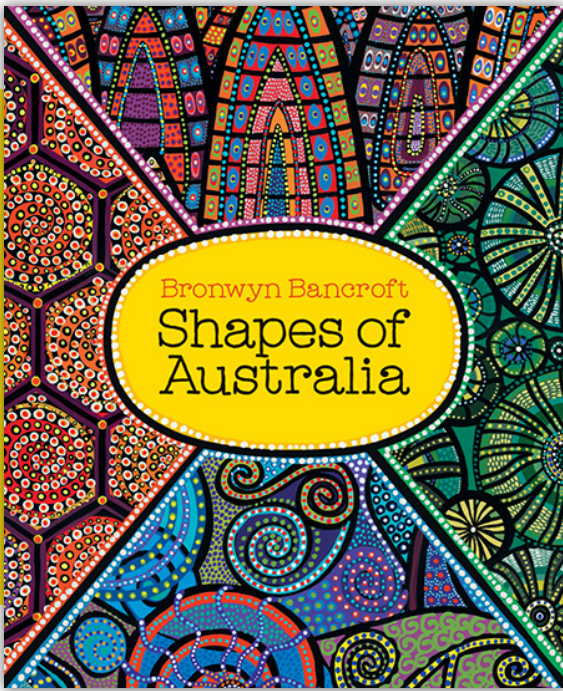
THEMES

Shapes of Australia is a companion to Bronwyn Bancroft's *Colours of Australia* (Little Hare, 2016); each book is a colourful fusion of textual and visual poetry. *Shapes of Australia*, like many of Bronwyn's works, is testament to her deep love of country. Here she explores the shapes that make up our world, extracting the fundamental forms that underpin objects in the Australian natural and built landscapes. From the circular shapes of trees seen from above, to the ovate tendencies of river rocks and the rectangular shapes of skyscrapers, *Shapes of Australia* alerts us not just to the fundamental forms of specific objects, but to the presence of these forms everywhere in the world around us.

WRITING STYLE

Bronwyn Bancroft is a poet as well as an illustrator, a painter and a designer. When writing nature poetry, Bronwyn expresses herself in blank verse. Her minimalistic style has been compared to Japanese koans or haiku; despite its brevity, it is graphic and vivid in both action and imagery.

In *Shapes of Australia*, Bronwyn deliberately avoids spelling out the shapes she is describing. Rather, she either hints at the shapes (for example, the treetops are described as circling one another), or she leaves it entirely up to readers to explore the images and find the shapes for themselves. Thus, triangles are simply 'mountains', and cones are presented as 'termite nests'. Sometimes Bronwyn uses simile to further suggest the relevant shapes she is exploring (for example, 'like crystal shards'), and sometimes uses metaphor as a hint ('a quilt of nature's comfort'). Her natural objects are often depicted as agents of action: they 'withstand', 'circle each other in a wild bush dance', 'rise', 'merge', 'frolic', 'create' and 'nurture'.



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ILLUSTRATION STYLE

As mentioned above, Bronwyn avoids stating the specific names of the forms she signifies in *Shapes of Australia*. This approach is extended into the pictures. Individual geometric shapes are not made obvious, so that once again it is up to the reader to examine the illustrations in conjunction with the text to understand which shape is the focus of the page. Bronwyn's highly decorative style adds to her understated approach to the theme, luring the viewer into admiring details of colour, pattern and contrasting elements – just as details of landscapes can lure us into missing the essential building-blocks of the world around us. In *Shapes of Australia*, Bronwyn Bancroft invites us to enjoy both the intricacies of pattern and the fundamentals of form.

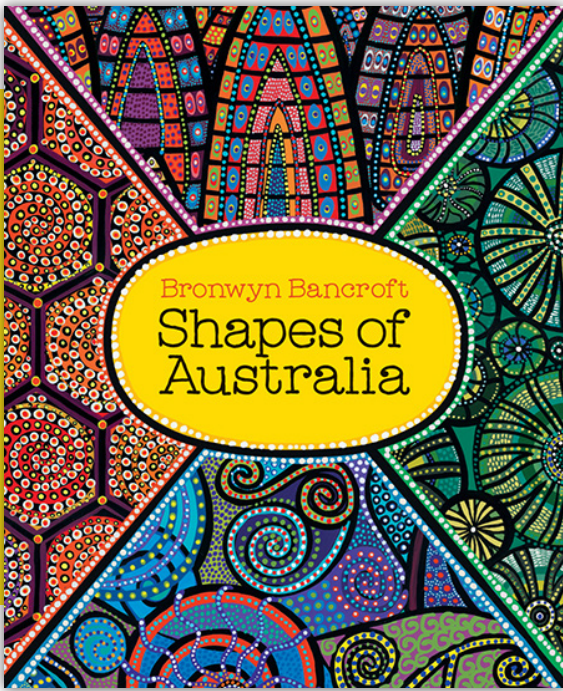
AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR'S BACKGROUND

Bronwyn Bancroft is a Djanbun clan member of the Bundjalung Nation. In a career spanning over three decades, Bronwyn has participated in hundreds of exhibitions, both solo and group, within Australia and overseas.

Bronwyn has worked as a volunteer at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative for the past eight years as curator/business planner and senior strategist. Bronwyn currently holds Board positions with Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Commonwealth Bank RAP Committee, Arts Law and Copyright Agency.

Bronwyn has a Diploma of Visual Arts; two Masters degrees from the University of Sydney, one in Studio Practice and the other in Visual Art; and she is currently a Doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney.





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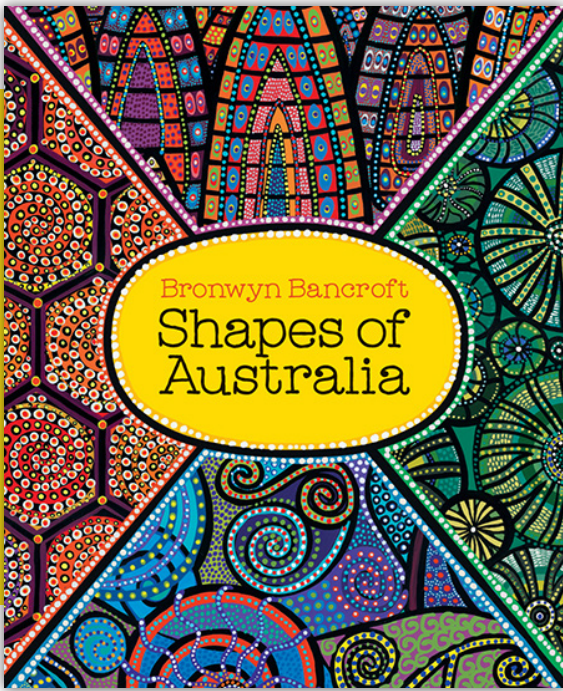
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STUDY NOTES

1. Bronwyn Bancroft has deliberately avoided naming the geometric forms she explores in *Shapes of Australia*. How effectively does she describe them in words and images? What do you think are the positives and negatives of this ambiguous approach?
2. Each spread is dedicated to a single geometric form. Each spread is also decorated and enhanced by contrasting visual elements, some more than others. How might this complexity enhance, rather than inhibit, our appreciation and understanding of our natural and built environments?
3. Some images are more abstract than others. Identify the forms for each image and consider whether Bronwyn has used abstract allusion or a more realistic approach for each. For example, the spiral forms within the honeycomb (hexagonal) shapes are not found inside the individual cells in nature, but spirals are the form in which native bees construct their hives (see **picture** below). This spread, then, uses real forms in an abstract manner.



4. How do you think Bronwyn's use of active verbs when describing insentient objects might affect a reader's experience of her images and their understanding of nature/built environments?
5. The word 'shapes' in the title of *Shapes of Australia* suggests early concepts. *Shapes of Australia* is in fact a highly complex book intended for slightly older readers, as opposed to toddlers learning first concepts. What does Bronwyn's use of simple concepts in combination with complex representations and ideas tell you about her attitude to the environment?



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ACTIVITIES

1. As a class, discuss the use of shapes and patterns in Australian Indigenous art. You may want to use a spread from *Shapes of Australia* to start the discussion, such as Bronwyn's use of circles to represent treetops or triangles to represent mountains. How do these shapes and patterns enhance story-telling?
2. Take your class outside and encourage them to explore the unique nature and beauty of the Australian landscape. What shapes can they see in nature? How would they describe the clouds, the trees and any other plants they can see?
3. Following on from the above activity, have your class illustrate some of the "shapes" they saw outside. Ask them to explain their choice of shapes and colours to the rest of the class.

