

*Children of the Plumed Serpent:
The Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico*



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About the Exhibition

LACMA presents *Children of the Plumed Serpent: The Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico*, the first large-scale exploration of the ancient kingdoms of southern Mexico and their patron deity, Quetzalcoatl, the human incarnation of the Plumed Serpent. On view from April 1 through July 1, 2012, this groundbreaking exhibition features more than two hundred objects—including painted codices, turquoise mosaics, gold, and textiles—from Mexico, Europe, and the United States. These rare artworks trace the development of an extensive trade network that resulted in a period of cultural innovation that spread across ancient Mexico, the American Southwest, and Central America during the Postclassic (AD 900–1521) and early colonial periods.

About this Resource

This resource examines some of the history and traditions of Mesoamerica, a cultural region encompassing most of Mexico and northern Central America (see the map on the following page), which can be traced through a pictorial language, or writing system. Introduced around AD 950, it became widely adopted by 1300 throughout Southern Mexico. This shared art style and writing system was used to record and preserve the history, genealogy, and mythology of the region. It documents systems of trade and migration, royal marriage, wars, and records epic stories that continue to be passed on through a pictorial and oral tradition today.

This pictorial language was composed of highly conventionalized symbols characterized by an almost geometric precision of line. It was manifested in polychrome (brightly painted) ceramic objects, codices (illustrated manuscripts), and other small-scale, portable works of art in bone, wood, shell, precious metal, and stone. Artisans used vivid colors, and the imagery on artworks shared many attributes of contemporary cartoons, particularly an exaggerated emphasis on the head and hands. Often depicting figures and animals, the style was employed primarily to convey historical or ritual narrative. Certain symbols were reduced to simple icons that could signify either an idea or a spoken word and facilitated communication for a multilingual population.

Share the enclosed images with your students. Use or adapt the following discussion questions and activities to your students' diverse needs and learning styles.

- Why do people record and preserve their history and belief systems? What are the ways in which they do so?
- How do we use stories (oral, written, and pictorial) to communicate our identity and beliefs?
- How do we record our family histories and rituals?
- How do beliefs and ideas circulate today? What are the systems that support the exchange of goods and ideas?



Turquoise-mosaic Shield

Mexico, Puebla, Acatlan, Mixtec, AD 1100–1521

Wood, stone, tree resin, and turquoise

$12^{13/16} \times 12^{3/4} \times 1^{13/16}$ in.

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C. (108708.000)

Photo © National Museum of the American Indian
Smithsonian Institution

Turquoise-mosaic Shield

(AD 1100–1521)

Mexico, Puebla, Acatlan

Wood, stone, tree resin, and turquoise

$12^{13/16} \times 12^{3/4} \times 1^{13/16}$ in.

National Museum of the American Indian

Intricately composed of tiny pieces of turquoise tesserae, or tiles, these ceremonial shields would have been a part of a military costume intended to demonstrate wealth and power. See the essay for more information.



Turquoise-mosaic Disk
(AD 900–1200), Mexico, Yucatán, Chichén Itzá
Wood and turquoise, 9⁷/₈ x 3/4 in. (diam.)
Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City
Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA, by Jorge Pérez de Lara

Known as *tetzcuapilli*, this disk with a plumed serpent design formed part of Toltec military costume and was recovered from the Castillo pyramid at Chichen Itza.



Tunic (Coraza de Tula)

Mexico, Hidalgo, Tula, Pyramid B, Toltec, AD 900–1200

Spondylus and olivella shell, 49 x 16½ in.

Centro INAH Hidalgo (10-5689940/2)

Photo © CNCA-INAH Museo Nacional de Antropología

Mexico City, by Ignacio Hernandez Guevara

In addition to the ceremonial shields on the previous pages, evidence of other military costume appears in the form of shell tunics made of spiny oyster, or *Spondylus*, like the one pictured above.



Codex Nuttall (detail)

Mexico, Western Oaxaca, Mixtec, 15th–16th century

Deerskin, gesso, and pigments, 44¹/₁₆ x 7¹/₂ x 9¹/₄ in.

Trustees of the British Museum, London (MSS 39671)

Photo © Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, NY

The ancient Mexican pictorial language appears most prominently in painted books called codices. The Mixtec codices, like the Codex Nuttall above, are some of the greatest chronicles of tenth- to sixteenth-century Mesoamerica, providing the longest continuous record of an indigenous civilization in the Americas. The codices record heroic stories and royal genealogies. See the lesson plan included in this curriculum for more information on how to read a codex.



Codex Nuttall (detail)

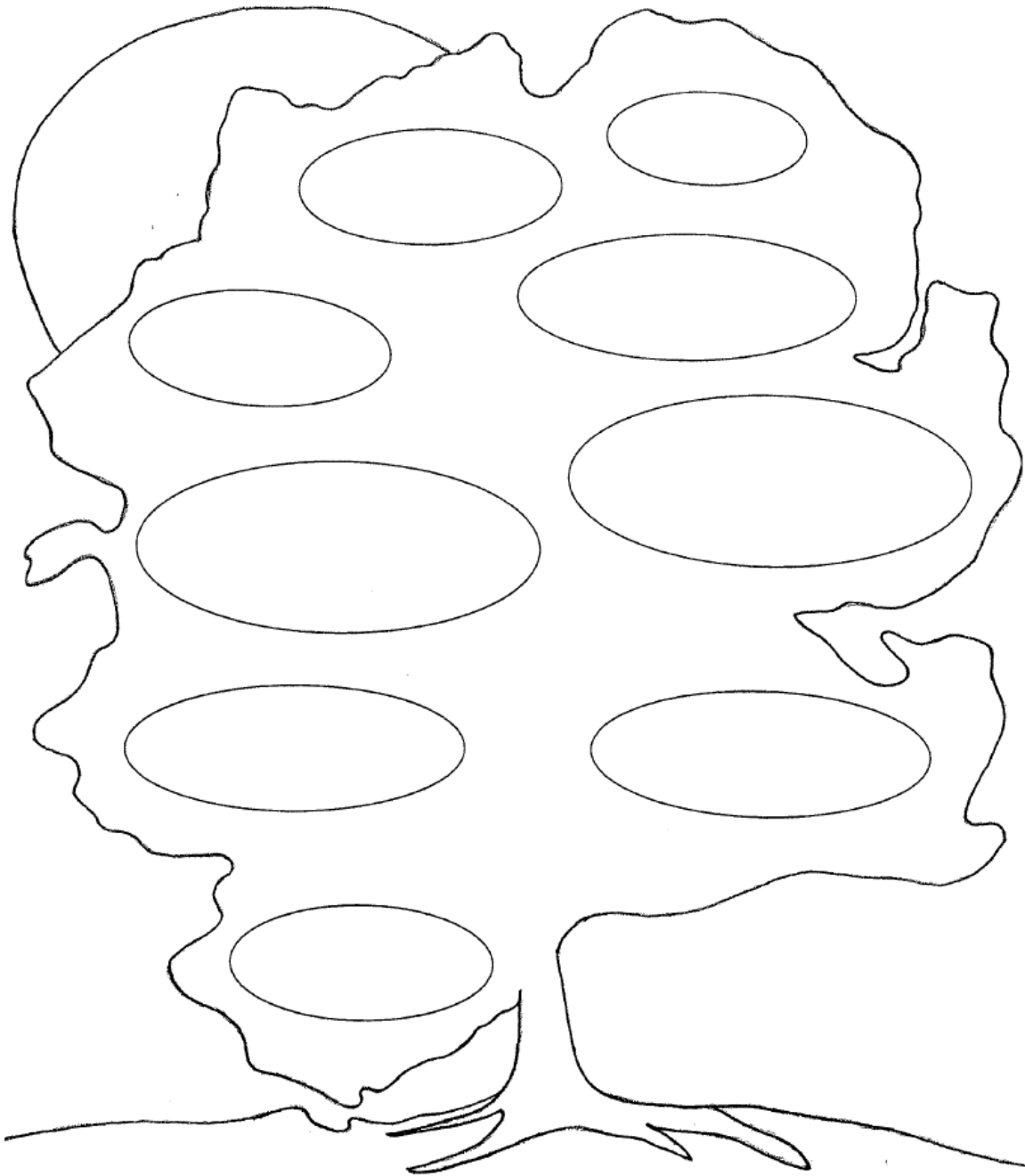
Mexico, Western Oaxaca, Mixtec, 15th–16th century

Deerskin, gesso, and pigments, 44¹¹/₁₆ x 7¹/₂ x 9¹/₄ in.

Trustees of the British Museum, London (MSS 39671)

Photo © Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, NY

Record your Family Tree – What important memories do you have of your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents? If you never had a chance to meet these people, interview family members or family friends about your ancestors. Make a chronological list of names and events, then find a picture of a tree that you can use as a template (or see the following page). Record your familial history starting with the roots. Document successive generations as you move up the trunk. Use branches and leaves to draw scenes of special people, places, and events.



FAMILY TREE



Codex Selden (detail)

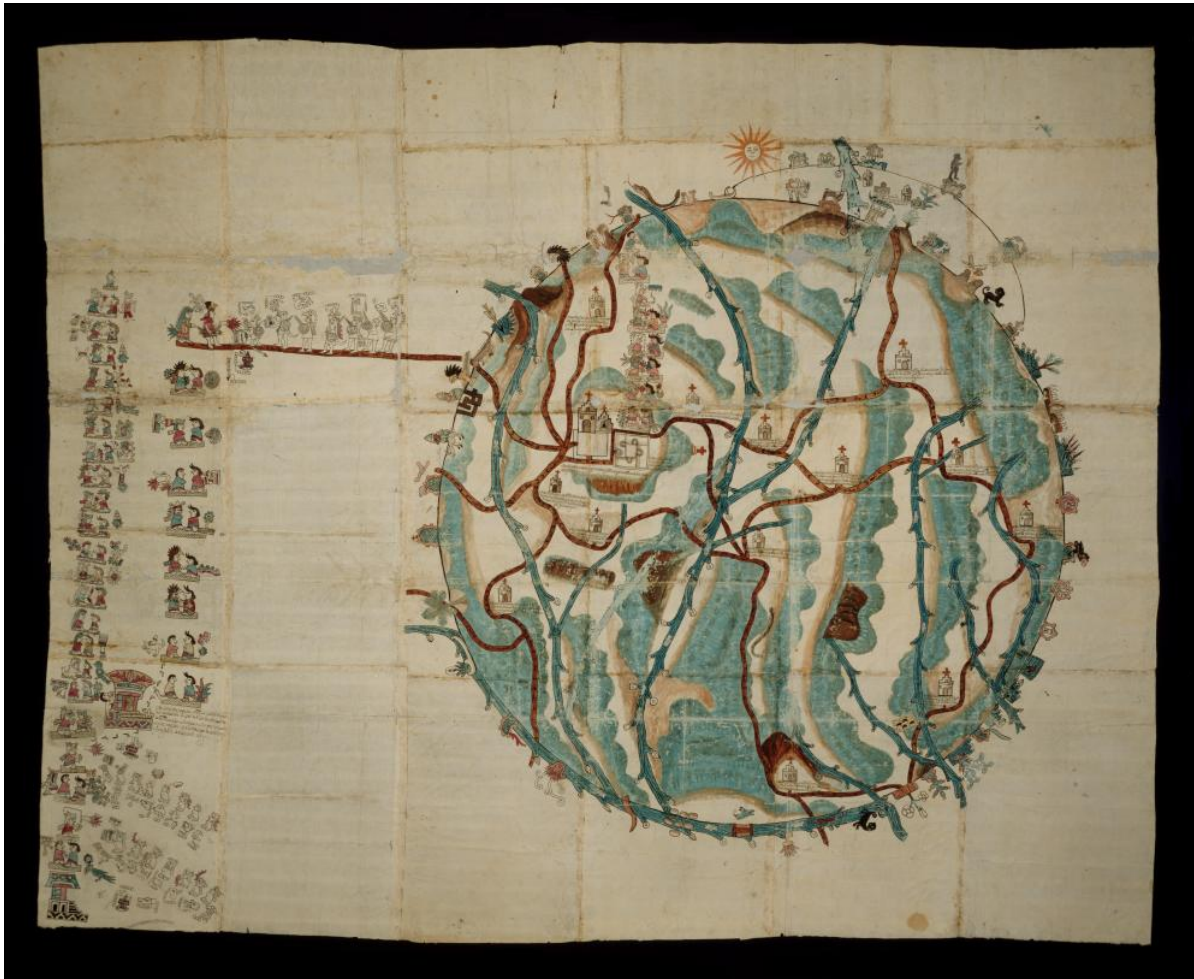
Mexico, Western Oaxaca (AD 1556–1560)

Deerskin, gesso and pigments, 20 leaves: 10⁷/₈ x 10⁷/₈ in. each

Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Photo © The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Imagine yourself as the hero of a twenty-first-century epic. What choices will you make in your life to bring change to your people, school, or community? Document your historical contribution in a codex that recounts important events in your life. Consider how you will depict yourself and other important characters as well as how you will represent the passage of time from one scene to the next in a storyboard narrative.



Relación Geográfica Mapa de Tezacoalco
Mexico, Oaxaca, AD 1580, Paper, 56 x 69¹¹/₁₆ in.
Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection
University of Texas Libraries (JGI xxv-3)

Photo © Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin

This map from 1580 was produced by the inhabitants of the community of Tezacoalco, in the modern state of Oaxaca, Mexico. It serves as a map, identifying the community's boundaries and providing the dynastic history of the community with an emphasis on the importance of marriages. See the lesson plan included in this curriculum for a mapping project.

Classroom Activities

- Draw a map of your neighborhood using your school as a point of reference. What kinds of symbols will you use to illustrate the boundaries that surround your school? What other important locations, such as your home, local library, or park, will you include in your map? Create an accompanying legend that defines the symbols that you used so that others are able to decipher the map. Compare your map with those of your classmates. Notice where the maps overlap and intersect.
- Combine all of the students' neighborhood maps and make a list of the most commonly referenced landmarks. Use these landmarks as the boundaries for creating a three-dimensional map of the community, using the school as the central reference point. Lay a grid of local streets on the floor using colored or masking tape. Ask each student to create a structure out of construction paper or cardboard that signifies their place on the map. The structure can represent an existing site or a dream for a site that fulfills a community need. Ask students to reflect on their choice by writing a description of the site's importance and/or what it contributes to the history or legacy of the community.



MESOAMERICAN ART AT LACMA



Vessel

Nayarit, Mexico, AD 1350–1521

Slip-painted ceramic, 13¼ x 7½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost (M.2000.86)

Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/ LACMA

This vessel is painted like a codex, with radiant colors, intricate geometric designs, and delicate figurative imagery. It depicts more than thirty figures, both human and supernatural, engaged in mythic and historic actions. The scenes resemble those found in painted books, which recorded dynastic and mythological events of importance to the Children of the Plumed Serpent.



Pipe with Hummingbird

Mexico, Western Oaxaca or Puebla, 1100–1400

Ceramic with postfire application of Maya blue pigment, Length: 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Gift of the Art Museum Council in honor of the museum's 25th anniversary (M.90.168.30)

Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/ LACMA



Vessel with Hummingbird Rattle

Mexico, Oaxaca, Zapotec, 1300–1500

Slip-painted ceramic with postfire application of Maya blue pigment, 4 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Gift of the 2003 Collectors Committee (M.2003.44)

Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/ LACMA



Skull with Turquoise Mosaic

Mexico, Western Oaxaca or Puebla, 1400-1521

Human skull with turquoise, jadeite and shell

6 ½ x 6 x 8 in.

Gift of Constance McCormick Fearing

Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA

Skulls of Mixtec ancestors, preserved in shrines, were sometimes adorned with a mosaic of turquoise, shell, and other rare minerals. The turquoise, signifying the wealth of the palace to which the ancestor belonged, also testifies to long-distance exchange up the west coast of Mexico and into New Mexico, where turquoise was mined and distributed.



Labret in the Form of an Eagle Head
Mexico, Western Oaxaca or Puebla, 1200–1500
Gold, $\frac{3}{4}$ x 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Gift of Constance McCormick Fearing (AC1992.134.29)
Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/ LACMA

Objects made of gold and silver were worn by the elite in public ceremonies. This ornament in the shape of an eagle head was worn pierced through the lower lip or in the skin just below the lower lip. It was not mere jewelry, but confirmed the wearer's rank of nobility and power.

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS



Enrique Chagoya (Mexico, b. 1953)

Tales of the Conquest – Codex II (Historias de la conquista – Códice II) (details), 1992

Mixed media on handmade paper, Framed: 16½ x 117¼ x 4 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Gift of Ann and Aaron Nisenson in memory of Michael Nisenson (AC1995.183.10a–e)

© Enrique Chagoya, Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/ LACMA

Contemporary artist Enrique Chagoya combines American popular culture elements, like Superman, with historic images from Pre-Columbian mythology. Notice the detail of the Codex Nuttall included in the top right image and lower left.



Enrique Chagoya (Mexico, b. 1953)
Uprising of the Spirit (Elevación del espíritu), 1994
Acrylic and oil on paper, 48 x 72 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Gift of Ann and Aaron Nisenson in memory of Michael Nisenson (AC1995.183.9)
© Enrique Chagoya, Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/ LACMA

In scenes from painted manuscripts like the Codex Nuttall (pages 6 and 7), epic heroes are portrayed in elaborate costumes carrying armor, including shields. Here, artist Enrique Chagoya features Nezahualcoyotl, a ruler of the Mexican city-state Texcoco, from the 16th century *Ixtlilxochitl Codex*. When placed together, Chagoya's compositions reference the codices created in pre-colonial Mexico.

Cover: *Codex Nuttall*
Mexico, Western Oaxaca, 15th–16th c.
The British Museum Library, London
Photo © Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY

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