

Classroom Activity

Pictorial Language: Mesoamerican Reading and Writing

Enduring Understanding The basic unit of pictorial language is the pictogram, a graphic symbol that represents an idea or concept. Pictorial language, although an ancient tradition, is still employed in colloquialisms today.

Grades K–12

Time One class period

Visual Art Concepts Symbol, meaning, representation, communication,

Materials Paper and pencils. Optional: colored pencils

Talking about Art



Lord Eight Deer

Pictorial language, or an ideographic writing system is a method of communication based on the ideogram/pictogram. An ideogram is a symbol that represents an idea or concept, while a pictogram conveys meaning through realistic resemblance. These symbols, unique to every ancient civilization, formed a hieroglyphic dictionary for Mesoamerican scribes.

Much of the history of Mesoamerica can be traced through their pictorial language, independently developed around 950 and widely adopted throughout southern Mexico by 1300. It was used to record and preserve the history, genealogy, and mythology of Mixtec, Nahuatl, and Zapotec cultures and appears most prominently in painted books called codices. (For more information about codices and for tips on how to create one, see the accompanying lesson plan *Create Your Own Codex*.)

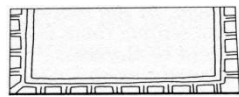
View and discuss the *Codex Nuttall*, Mexico, Western Oaxaca, 15th–16th century. What is going on here? Who are the characters? What is the setting? What action is taking place? How did the scribe or artist use line, shape, space, color, and composition to tell the story?

This codex tells the story of Lord Eight Deer, an epic Mixtec conqueror and cult hero who lived between 1063 and 1115. This plate, or page of the codex, recounts one of the final events in Eight Deer's famous journey.

Can you find the main character? You can identify him, and other characters, based on what they are wearing. As seen at left, Eight Deer often wears a deer's headdress and is accompanied by eight colored dots, both of which signify his birthday.

Start reading this plate from right to left. These scenes recount Eight Deer's journey home to Tilantongo, Oaxaca after he and his companion, Four Jaguar, visited Lord One Death, the Mixtec Sun God. The first scene begins with Eight Deer and Four Jaguar's travels through the Yuta River, represented by a rectangle lined with squares. The *ollin*, or wrench-like shape at the bottom of the river symbolizes movement and describes the waters as rough and the journey treacherous. In the second scene below the river crossing, Eight Deer and Four Jaguar make an offering to mark their return at the Yuhua Ballcourt.

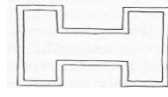
The vertical red line at the center of the plate represents the transition to a new scene. What do you think might happen next? What symbols for people, actions, and places will be repeated?



Yuta River*



Movement*



Yuhua Ballcourt*

Art Activity

Although these literary devices were created in antiquity, the ideogram and pictogram remain very pertinent to contemporary methods of communication. What symbols do you see, read, and use to communicate with others? Consider everything from restroom and wayfinding signage to the emoticon. What tools do we use to communicate these messages? What advantages do these symbols and methods offer that the written word does not? Disadvantages? The Mesoamerican writing system facilitated communication among people who spoke as many as twelve different languages. Of the symbols that you brainstormed, which can be considered almost universal? Consider the hexagonal shapes pictured below—an international ideogram individualized with regional text.

Create a shared pictorial language with your class by drafting a list of frequently used national, cultural, religious, or commercial symbols. Divide students into pairs or small groups, assigning each a symbol or set of symbols to define and draw with colored pencils.



USA



China



Iran

Reflection

Collect all definitions and drawings to create a hieroglyphic alphabet that will serve as the class' pictorial language dictionary. Draft a writing prompt that allows students to utilize the dictionary as a reference text.

Evenings for Educators, *Ancient Mexico: The Legacy of the Plumed Serpent*. April 2012.

Prepared by Stephanie Lozano with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Education Department.

*Adapted from Byland, Bruce E. and John M.D. Pohl. *The Archaeology of the Mixtec Codices: In the Realm of Eight Deer*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.

Classroom Activity

Music and Dance of the Plumed Serpent

Enduring Understanding	Music and dance are expressions of humanity. They articulate and preserve cultural history, mythology, and tradition.
Grades	K–12
Time	One to three class periods
Visual and Performing Art Concepts	Music and sound, dance and movement, ritual, cooperative and collaborative teamwork, and multimodal teaching and learning
Materials	Feathers, string, rice, paper or cardstock, cardboard circles and cylinders, and glue or tape.
Talking about Art	<p>The ancient music and dance traditions of the Mesoamerican peoples evolved concurrently with other arts disciplines. Materials, motifs, and designs spanned the visual and performing arts and were employed by artists, dancers, and musicians alike. Take, for instance, the conch shell, which artists used as both a palette for storing paint and as a source material for mosaics. Musicians played the conch as a trumpet while dancers wore them as jewelry and in tunics, woven from cut shells and string. The image of the conch is even incorporated into the Mesoamerican writing system as an ideogram, exemplifying the material's importance to Mesoamerican culture and ideology.</p> <p>View and discuss the <i>Turquoise-Mosaic Shield</i>, Mexico, Puebla, AD 1100–1521. This shield is a mosaic, or collage inlaid with stone pieces, made not of conch but of more than 10,000 pieces of turquoise! Feathers were once attached to the holes in the rim, which allowed the artwork to be mounted and used for ceremonial purposes.</p> <p>If you were a dancer who had the honor of dancing with this shield, what might it convey about your role in the performance and in the story being told? Imagine that the dance is accompanied by musicians playing rattles, drums, and trumpets. Can you feel the sound align with the rhythm of your heartbeat?</p> <p>Shields were important to two performances called the dance <i>chimali</i> (shield) and the dance of the <i>guerreros</i> (warriors). These complementary dances highlight the shield and how it's used in a battle between two warriors. Traditional dances such as these have been passed down through generations and are still practiced by dance troupes today.</p>

Art and Performance Activity

Create your own shield and rattle out of simple materials, which you will use while you practice a few basic Mesoamerican dance moves. Use a cardboard circle or cake pad as the foundation for the shield. Adorn it with faux Quetzal feathers using glue or tape and adhere a sturdy piece of string to the back to serve as a strap. To make a rattle, fill a cylinder, such as a cardboard toilet paper insert, with rice and tape circular pieces of paper or cardstock to both ends.

Before the dance begins, experiment with the rattle to produce sounds of varying frequency, volume, and quality, from fast, loud, rough sounds to slow, quiet, soft sounds. Ask a partner to clap a rhythm for you to mimic with your rattle. Join another pair of partners to form a troupe. Can you and your partner add onto their rhythm to create a song?

Incorporate dance by practicing the basic steps of the "permission" dance. This dance serves as the introduction to many Mesoamerican rituals, where dancers ask the ancestors for permission to dance on the underworld. Start by taking four steps forward, then four steps back. Now spin in a circle to your left, to mark the creation of the earth. Next, spin to the right, to mark life's destruction. Practice these four basic steps with your partner. When you're ready, try the dance as a troupe.

Supplement your dance with the sound that you and your troupe created. First, assign two members to the roles of musicians and two as dancers. Talk as a troupe about the vision or inspiration for your ritual. What story will you tell in your performance and how? Practice the music and dance parts separately, incorporating the rattle or shield into your score or choreography. Once each member of the troupe has mastered their individual role, combine all components to create your ritual performance.

Reflection

Rearrange the classroom as a stage and ask students to perform with their troupes. Leave some time after each performance for troupes to talk with the class about the vision and stories that inspired the performances. After the classroom ceremony, ask students to reflect on the collaborative process by answering the following questions with their group members:

What was the troupe's vision?

What steps did the troupe take to realize that vision?

What cooperative role did you play in the process (a leader, an idea-generator, the devil's advocate, etc.)?

What role did your troupe members play?

How did the different roles work together?

Did the troupe's final performance match the original vision?

What problems arose in the process?

How did you solve those problems?

If you were to try the process again, what would you change or do differently?

Classroom Activity

Create Your Own Codex

Enduring Understanding	Civilizations throughout the world and all periods of time document their culture to mark their place in history.
Grades	3–12
Time	Two class periods
Visual Art Concepts	Storytelling, pictorial language, composition, paper sculpting and bookmaking, oil pastel techniques (blending, layering, mixing)
Materials	Brown paper grocery or lunch bags, scissors, hole punches, pencils, oil pastels. Optional: yarn and gold beads
Talking about Art	<p>What tools do civilizations use to document their achievements? How do local communities and people record their histories? How do you and your family or friends mark memories?</p> <p>All cultures create methods and materials to document their worldview, historic achievements, and great leaders. The ancient Mesoamericans used codices to record heroic stories and royal genealogies. A codex is a painted book or manuscript made of animal hide or tree bark that was folded for easy storage and later displayed on the walls of royal palaces for ceremonial use. The Mixtec codices are some of the greatest chronicles of the 10th- to 16th-century, providing the longest continuous record of an indigenous civilization in the Americas.</p> <p>View and discuss the <i>Codex Nuttall</i>, Mexico, Western Oaxaca, 15th–16th century. What’s going on here? Who are the characters? What is the setting? What action is taking place? How did the artist use line, shape, space, color, and composition to tell this story?</p> <p>This codex tells the story of Lord Eight Deer, an epic Mixtec conqueror and hero who lived nearly a thousand years ago. (For more information about the story, see the curriculum essay and accompanying lesson plan <i>Pictorial Language: Mesoamerican Reading and Writing</i>.)</p> <p>How did the artist distinguish one scene from the next? How did s/he direct your eye to the next part of the story? Who do you think is the main character? What do you see that makes you say that? How is this character differentiated from others? What do you think happened before this scene and what might happen next? Document your version of the story in writing to accompany this page.</p>

Making Art

Create your own codex using brown paper grocery or lunch bags. Cut the bags into long strips, 5–8 inches wide. Fold the strip like an accordion to create a book. Punch a hole on one side of the stack of pages, which will serve as the binding.

Before you begin drawing, brainstorm an inspiration for your story. You can recount a major event in U.S. history or imagine yourself as the hero of a 21st-century epic. Consider how you will depict yourself and other important characters, using style of dress and accessories. How will you depict the setting in the background and story's action in the foreground and middle ground? Lastly, think about how you will represent the passage of time and how you will guide the reader's eye.

Use these details to write a paragraph-version of your story in English. Divide your story into 4–5 scenes that capture its essence. Now it's time to translate the story into your own pictorial language!

Open up the book and decide how you will storyboard your narrative. Mesoamerican authors did not write in the linear fashion that we write sentences today; instead, their stories followed the shape of a wave with peaks and valleys. Lay out your narrative by drawing either a geometric (straight, angular) or organic (curvy, wiggly) line along the length of the paper strip. Next, consider how you will transition from one scene to the next. Episodes in the codices are often divided by red vertical lines that direct the reader in an up-and-down pattern from right to left. Divide the page into 4–5 sections and draft your 4–5 corresponding scenes in pencil first. Next, add color by blending, layering, and mixing different oil pastels together. When you're finished, collapse the book into an accordion again and loop a piece of yarn or faux leather, through the punched hole. Tie gold beads on either end as decorative toggles.

Reflection

In royal Mesoamerican ceremonies, codices hung on palace walls while poets recited their epic stories. Transform your classroom into a palace by displaying students' codices on bulletin boards. Invite students to read their paragraph in front of their codex to share with classmates.

Classroom Activity

Mapping Your Community

Enduring Understanding	Maps survey the geographic details of a town or city. They can also document residential population and community history.
Grades	3–12
Time	One to two class periods
Visual Art Concepts	Geography, cartography, topography, recording, painting techniques
Materials	Brushes, sets of paint (such as tempera cakes), paper. Optional: black India ink, classroom map or old Thomas Guides, Google map
Talking about Art	<p>View and discuss <i>Relación Geográfica Mapa de Teozacoalco</i>, Mexico, Oaxaca, 1580. (See the accompanying Selected Resources page for a link to a high-resolution image.) What do you see? The shrubbery, roads, and waterways identify this artwork as a map. Compare this map with one in the classroom. What features do the maps have in common? How are they different?</p> <p>Most maps include topographical information that describes a landscape such as streets, plazas, rivers, ports, coastlines, and, sometimes, inhabitants. Where do you see people represented on this map?</p> <p>The Mixtec cartographers who painted this map created it in response to a government survey. In 1560, Spanish officials asked the town leaders of Teozacoalco, in the modern state of Oaxaca, to describe who they were and where they were from. This painted map is what they chose to submit and identifies both the community's physical boundaries (everything encompassed within the circle) and its dynastic history (notice the marriages represented on the right).</p> <p>What contemporary surveys ask people to identify themselves, their family, and where they live? Who administers these surveys and why? What methods do they use to record this information? In what form do they record it? Brainstorm a list of surveys, such as the census or the school roster, and compare and contrast what types of information are gathered and how.</p>

Making Art

Students can create painted maps of their communities using the same methods employed by the Mixtec. First, set boundaries for the maps by asking students to research a Google map or find an old printed map of the neighborhood. Next, draft a list of landmarks that fall within these boundaries, including libraries, stores, restaurants, bridges, freeways, parks, or other identifying places and topographic features. Lastly, compose and sketch city streets on the page in pencil that will serve as the foundation for the map.

Before you start painting the map, paint a few brushstrokes on a sheet of scratch paper as a warm-up. Use the brush to create a variety of marks of different lengths and widths, varying the amount of pressure you use with your hand. Use this set of marks as reference for painting both city streets and landmarks after you have had enough time to experiment with the paint.

Paint different geometric and organic shapes on the grid to represent various landmarks. Try blending and placing different warm and cool colors next to each other. (Be advised that tempera appears opaque.) Next, add details such as people, plants, and animals that live in the neighborhood. Lastly, supplement the picture with writing, by creating a legend that defines the symbols that you used so that viewers can decipher the map.

Reflection

Ask students to compare maps with a classmate. Notice if and where the maps overlap and intersect. Combine all of the maps and facilitate a classroom gallery walk. Regroup and compile a list of commonly reference landmarks. Extend the lesson by using 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 that signifies their place on the map out of construction paper or cardboard. 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.

Math Connection

Integrate this art lesson with math by requiring students to draw a number and letter grid or an x and y axis as the map structure. Students can practice their math skills with each other by choosing coordinates and identifying the accompanying landmarks.

Ancient Mexico: The Legacy of the Plumed Serpent

Selected Resources

Related Curriculum Materials

Evenings for Educators resources include an illustrated essay, color images or overhead transparencies, classroom activities, and related resources. Printed curriculum is available for purchase through LACMA's Education Department or browse selected curricula online at www.lacma.org (Programs /Education/Evenings for Educators).

Cross-Cultural Exchange
February 2011

Olmec: Masterworks of Ancient Mexico
October 2010

Artistic Heritage: Latin American and Chicano Art
September 2008

Telling a Story: Narratives and Symbols in Art
November 2007

The Arts of Latin America, 1492–1820
October 2007

History, Identity, and Community in Art
October 2006

World Views: Exploring Maps in Art
March 2001

Ancestors: Art and the Afterlife
November 1998

Online Resources

Art of the Ancient Americas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

<http://www.lacma.org/art/collection/art-ancient-americas>

Browse LACMA's rich array of objects from the major civilizations of ancient Mexico. Recently reinstalled in galleries designed by contemporary artist Jorge Pardo, the collection features material culture from Western Mexico, the Gulf Coast, Peru, and more.

John Pohl's Mesoamerica

Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

<http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl>

A chronology of Mesoamerican art, writing, and books from researcher John Pohl, including printable codices and photographs of major archaeological sites.

Classroom Resources

Mesolore

<http://www.mesolore.net/classroom>

Syllabi, lesson plans, and lectures on ancient to contemporary Mesoamerican culture. Check out the Nahua tutorials, featuring translations of glyphs and visual poetry.

Relaciones Geográficas Collection

The Benson Latin American Collection

The University of Texas at Austin

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/rg>

A digitized collection of original responses to the Spanish Crown's 1577 census, created by indigenous communities throughout the Americas. Highlights include high-resolution images of two maps featured in the exhibition.

The Indigenous Movement in Mexico Today

Onda Latina: The Mexican American Experience

The Benson Latin American Collection

The University of Texas at Austin

http://www.laits.utexas.edu/onda_latina

Search "The Indigenous Movement in Mexico Today" for access to the Spanish-language interview with Andres Segura, captain of the Confederación de Concheros, where he discusses traditions and beliefs that thrive in contemporary native communities.

Books for Teachers

- Brotherston, Gordon. *Painted Books from Mexico*. London: British Museum, 1995. Selections from The British Museum's collection of Mesoamerican codices and other painted books.
- Fields, Virginia M., John M.D. Pohl, and Victoria I. Lyall. *Children of the Plumed Serpent: The Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico*. Los Angeles: LACMA, 2012.* Catalogue for the LACMA exhibition, featuring high-resolution color reproductions of featured artworks.
- Fuentes, Carlos. "A New Time for Mexico" in *Legends of the Plumed Serpent: Biography of a Mexican God*, ed. Neil Baldwin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. A biography of Mesoamerican mythology surrounding the 5,000-year legacy of Quetzacoatl.
- Pohl, John M.D. *Narrative Mixtec Ceramics of Ancient Mexico*. Princeton: The Princeton University Program in Latin American Studies, 2007. A series of monographs published by the Latin American Studies Program and the University Art Museum at Princeton University.

* Books available in the Museum Shop

Books for Students

- Pohl, John M.D. *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. A storybook retelling of Lord Eight Deer's adventures in the *Codex Nuttall*, the epic saga of the Mixtec people.
- Sullivan, Charles (Ed.). *Here is My Kingdom: Hispanic-American Literature and Art for Young People*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994. Explore the multi-faceted Hispanic-American experience in this colorful anthology of poems, prose, and art.