

CHILDREN OF THE PLUMED SERPENT: THE LEGACY OF QUETZALCOATL IN ANCIENT MEXICO

A RESOURCE
GUIDE
FOR TEACHERS



GOALS OF THIS RESOURCE GUIDE

This guide provides information and suggested activities designed to help teachers prepare students to visit the Los Angeles County Museum of art, where they will participate in a docent-guided tour entitled *Children of the Plumed Serpent*. A second goal of the guide is to help teachers relate aspects of the tours to their schools curriculum.

ABOUT THE TOUR

This 50 minute tour is offered for students in grades 1-12 and meets state content standards for history/ social science for all grades. This tour examines the art style and pictographic writing system shared by distinct groups of people in ancient Mexico. Beginning in the 10th century, diverse populations in southern Mexico (present-day Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tlaxcala) were united in the belief that their kingdoms were founded by Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent. This hero represented the human incarnation of the ancient spirit force of wind and rain that combined the attributes of a serpent with those of the quetzal bird. Residents in this geographic area referred to themselves as the Children of the Plumed Serpent.

Pictographic communication and a common art style was a way for these multilingual peoples to exchange ideas and record the history, genealogy, and mythology of the region. This included accounts of royal marriage, wars, and epic stories. The shared art aesthetic, now known as the International style, was characterized by bright colors and bold symbols that reduced ideas and spoken words to simple icons.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

LACMA is the largest encyclopedic museum in the western United States with more than 100,000 works of art. Through its far-reaching collections, the museum is both a resource to and a reflection of the many cultural communities and heritages in Southern California. The collection includes artworks from various cultures from the prehistoric to the present.



SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

Classroom Discussion Topics:

- 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?

CODEX NUTTALL (DETAIL)

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



ABOUT THE IMAGE :

The ancient Mexican pictorial language appears most prominently in painted books called codices. The Mixtec codices, like this one, are some of the greatest chronicles of Mesoamerican history. Manuscripts were made of animal hide or bark paper, which was covered with a plaster-like foundation upon which artisans painted. They were accordion-folded so that they could either be stored compactly or displayed on the walls of royal palaces for recitation. Episodes are divided by red vertical lines that direct the reader in an up-and-down pattern from right to left.



This manuscript recounts the epic of Lord Eight Deer, a Mixtec conqueror who lived between 1063 and 1115, and claimed to be a direct descendent of the Plumed Serpent. Lord Eight Deer emerged as a cult-hero for the Mixtec people after he united independent kingdoms under the protection of his community and elevated the status of the lineage. This page illustrates one event in Eight Deer's biography in which he travels with companions to seek the counsel of the Mixtec sun god. After, they journey home across a body of water plagued by rough waves. The scene below illustrates Eight Deer (on the right) and a companion making an offering upon their return home.

TURQUOISE-MOSAIC SHIELD

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



ABOUT THE IMAGE:

Intricately composed of tiny pieces of turquoise tiles, this ceremonial shield portrays an origin story important to the Mixtec. The object reveals much about the values of the Mixtec nobility from the exotic materials, fine construction and depiction of pictorial language to the symbolic function of the shield itself as part of a larger system of wealth and visual display.

The scene at the center of the shield depicts a hero descending from the sun to a mountain, where two priests make offerings. Legends like these appear in historical codices that depict the founding of the first kingdoms by sacred ancestors who are miraculously born from trees, rivers and stones.

This shield was carved of wood and inlaid with more than 10,000 pieces of turquoise mosaic. Feathers were once attached to the holes in the rim. Turquoise does not occur naturally in Mesoamerica. Traders imported the stone from the American southwest.

This shield is a symbol of defense that would have been a part of a military costume intended to demonstrate wealth and status. By possessing this shield, on which this origin story is depicted, the carrier would have aligned himself as defender of the lineage of the Children of the Plumed Serpent.

VESSEL

Nayarit, Mexico, AD 1350–1521



ABOUT THE IMAGE :

Painted in a codex-style, this vessel has radiant colors, intricate geometric designs, and delicate imagery. It depicts an origin story whose protagonist wears the red mouth-mask associated with Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the wind god, and a variation of the Plumed Serpent.

The narrative begins with an event in which two birds descend from the neck of the vessel through a red vertical band to a small structure. The protagonist is born, baptized in a water ritual, named, and raised. Thirty-six individuals, both human and supernatural, enact a series of mythic rituals to provide children with water blessings.

This vessel comes from the state of Nayarit on the northwest coast of Mexico, several hundred miles from where similar vessels were made. The prominence of the red mouth-masked character suggests a West Mexican narrative associated with the Plumed Serpent.

RELACIÓN GEOGRÁFICA MAPA DE TEOZACOALCO

Mexico, Oaxaca, AD 1580



ABOUT THE IMAGE:

This map was produced by the inhabitants of the community of Teozacoalco (present-day Oaxaca) to identify their geographic boundaries and provide the community's dynastic history. It also reveals the longevity of the pictographic system of communication and shared art style.

The map represents a fusion of Mesoamerican and European styles. Nahua-Mixteca figures wearing jaguar helmets are juxtaposed with Romanesque Gothic churches. On the right, Teozacoalco's topography is drawn with a circular format and dotted with rivers and hills. On the left, paired figures record the significant marriages of the ruling families of Teozacoalco and Tilantongo, two regions united by inter-dynastic marriage. These families traced their royal lineage to the eleventh century ruler Lord Eight Deer, who traced his lineage to the Plumed Serpent. Documents like this map served to validate a community's lineage and boundaries. Many of these histories were substitutes for memory and constructed identity through documentation.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

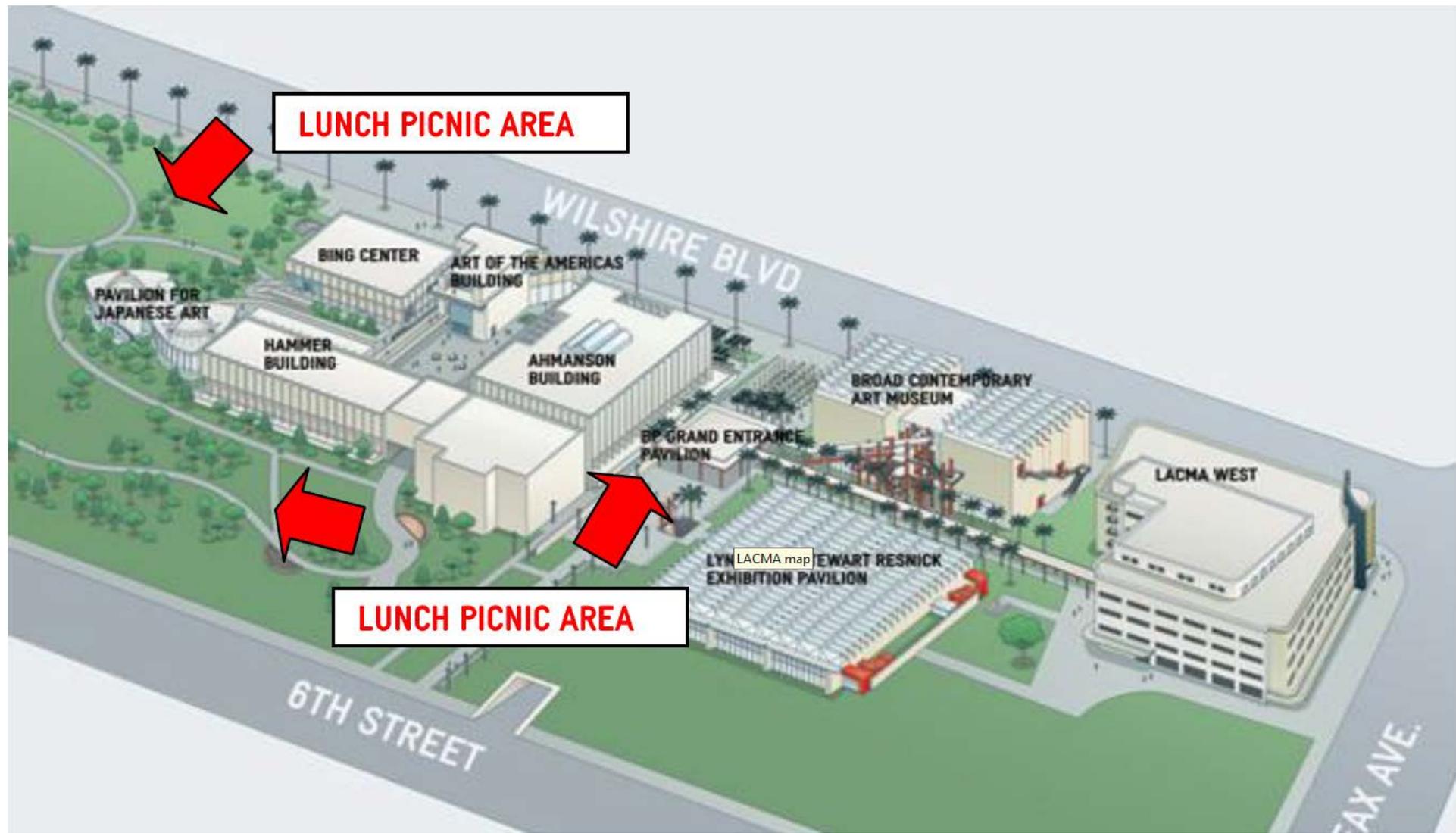
After the museum visit

Ask students to make a list of epic/mythical heroes with which they are familiar. Discuss the sources of these stories (Greek and Roman history, Mesoamerican history) and the means by which they have and will pass from one generation to the next.

Ask students to imagine themselves as a future hero who brought about change for the community. Students can document their historical contribution in a codex. Discuss how students will depict themselves and other characters, as well as represent the passage of time from one scene to the next.

Ask students to conduct interviews with family members about their ancestors. After making a chronological list of names and events, students can draw their familial history in the form of a tree. Branches and leaves can be used to draw scenes of special people, places, and events.

Ask students to draw a map of their neighborhood. Discuss how they can utilize symbols to illustrate landmarks, as well as a legend to define the icons.



LUNCH PICNIC AREA

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LACMA GENERAL INFORMATION

Please review these regulations with students before arriving at the museum.

MUSEUM RULES

- No touching works of art including outdoor sculpture. Viewers must not come closer than 24 inches to any work of art.
- No touching walls or any parts of installations. No sitting on platforms in the galleries or gardens.
- No eating, drinking, smoking, gum-chewing, excess noise, or running in the galleries.
- All groups must comply with instructions or requests from docents, gallery attendants or security staff.
- Teachers and chaperones must stay with the students at all times and are responsible for student behavior.
- Student assignments that require note taking are not permitted during a docent tour.

ARRIVING AT THE MUSEUM

- Plan to arrive at the museum at least 15 minutes before the tour is scheduled to begin.
- The museum is located at 5905 Wilshire Boulevard where buses should arrive for students to disembark.
- Enter the museum at the BP Grand Entrance on Wilshire Boulevard in front of *Urban Light*. A docent will meet your bus when it arrives.
- Buses should park on 6th Street, which is one block north of Wilshire Boulevard.
- Cars may park on surrounding streets or in the pay parking lot at 6th Street.

LUNCH

- Picnicking is permitted at the tables outside the Ahmanson Building, the BP Grand Entrance or in the park, and students are welcome to bring sack lunches. Seating is not permitted in the Café or the surrounding patio. Box lunches may be purchased from the Café. Orders must be placed one week before your arrival. Please contact the Plaza Café (323) 857-6197.

MUSEUM REENTRY

- If you are planning to visit the galleries after your guided tour please present a copy of your confirmation letter at the Welcome Center on the BP Grand Entrance, or the Los Angeles Times Central Court, to receive free admission tickets. Your group may not enter the galleries until 12 noon when the museum opens to the public.

ENJOY YOUR VISIT

