

Lesson Title: Art of Mesoamerica

Grade Level: K – 5

**Connections: Social Studies, Science, Language Arts,
Visual Arts**

Students examine Mesoamerican artifacts and learn about the history and culture ancient Americans students develop map-reading skills, experience a simulated archaeological excavation, and create a clay vessel using symbolism. Through a creative writing assignment, they will construct meaning from the art and history they have studied.

National Standards:

National History Standards -

Students should understand selected attributes and historical developments of societies in such places as Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe

National Science Standards –

Chooses and uses appropriate means for making observations, gathering evidence, presenting the evidence in appropriate formats, performing analyses, drawing inferences, and formulating conclusions

National Language Arts Standards –

Develop and use an expanding knowledge base and essential processes for effective communication through reading, writing, listening, viewing, and speaking

Construct meaning and apply critical and analytical thinking strategies when engaged in reading, writing, listening, speaking, or viewing

Imagine and value worlds other than their own

National Visual Arts Standards –

Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes

Chooses and evaluates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Reflects upon and assesses the characteristics and merits of their work and others

Makes connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Performance Objectives:

Students will understand some attributes of Mesoamerican cultures.

Students will understand the process of archaeological thinking and procedures.

Students will understand the use of symbolism in art.

Students will understand the importance of studying the art and history of other cultures.

Works of Art:

***Figure of a Water Bearer*, Colima, Mexico, 200 B.C.-A.D. 100, Burnished Terracotta**

***Standing Dog*, Pre-Columbian, Colima, Late Preclassic, ca. 200 B.C.-A.D. 200, Painted clay, 10 3/8 in.**

Vocabulary:

Archeologists – experts who study past life through the objects left by ancient peoples

Ceramics – clay objects that have been fired

Fired – to treat with great heat in a special oven called a kiln.

Funerary – having to do with burial

Hieroglyphs – characters in a picture-writing system found in many ancient cultures

Mesoamerica – the countries we now call Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador

Missionary – a person sent by a church to spread the beliefs of the church

Myth – a story created to explain something about life that is not understood

Pre-Columbian art – art that was made before the period of 1492 when Columbus and the other explorers who followed came to the New World

Vessels – hollow objects; containers

Questions for Looking Together:

During the time Mesoamerican civilizations flourished, Mexico was not called Mexico and it was not one united country. Rather, the land was inhabited by different groups of Native Americans. The groups were related to each other and had traditions and artistic styles that were similar in some ways and very different in other ways. The Native American people lived centuries ago in parts of the countries we now call Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Another name for this area is Mesoamerica.

Figure of a Water Bearer

Most of the objects from ancient Mexico are made from clay that has been fired to make it hard. Of course, if these objects were dropped or bumped they would break. **Can you think of a reason why these ceramics made hundreds, even thousands of years ago, could have survived?** They survived because they were buried with someone who had died and were left undisturbed for centuries. They are called funerary art. **Why do you think it was so important to these people to be buried with many ceramic figures, containers, and other objects?** To ancient Americans, death was a continuation of life. The clay gods and goddesses, warriors, family members, pets, and containers for liquids and food were buried with the dead for use in the afterlife. This clay figure of a water bearer represents someone who traveled throughout the countryside selling water. **Why do think a water bearer was included in a person's tomb?**

Standing Dog

Because many, many clay dogs have been found in West Mexican tombs, anthropologists believe that dogs were very important to the people. One myth about dogs was believed to have been handed down orally through many generations and finally recorded by a Spanish missionary.

The myth that the missionaries recorded says that in the early days of the world, there was a great flood. In order to escape the flood, the people followed the trail of a dog which led to a high mountain. Meanwhile, the dog beat a drum, causing the water to swell up in waves. The people waited on the mountain for the water to calm down.

Many of them died of starvation, but those who survived became the ancestors of all people.

Another myth describes dogs as guardians of the underworld, where souls of the dead lived. Another relates the belief that dogs carry the dead across a wide river to the land of the dead in the underworld.

Can you think of any other reasons dogs might have been important to these ancient people? Perhaps, the dogs were pets or perhaps they were used as guards. Dogs also served as a source of food. Look at this dog from the West Mexican state of Colima. Compare it to dogs you have seen. **How is it similar?** ears, nose, paws **How is it different?** Look closely at its teeth. **How are they different from teeth of a real dog?** This dog seems to have flat teeth like those of humans.

Activities:

1. Mesoamerica was an area where Native American people lived centuries ago in parts of the country we now call Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Identify and mark these countries on a world map.
2. Research the subject of archeology. An excellent internet site to use is: <http://spirit.lib.uconn.edu/archnet/archnet.html>. Topics to research are the role of an archeologist, tools required for a dig, and useful terms.
3. Archaeological Thinking. After researching archeology, learn more about archaeological thinking by using “artifacts” from the school trash and recycling bins! Choose several areas in your school with which students are familiar such as your classroom, the cafeteria, and the library. Divide the class into groups, and observe each location, noting what students commonly do there (e.g., study, eat, and socialize). During class, examine the trash and recycle bins and floors for evidence of those student activities. Select several artifacts (e.g., candy wrappers, pencils, portions of student papers) that can help to tell the story of each site. Place each site’s artifacts in separately numbered plastic bags. Teams should then switch bags of artifacts and examine objects that they did not collect. Have the teams of archaeological “experts” carefully examine each object and consider what each object is made of and how it may have been used. Speculate where these objects may have been found. Conclude by having a representative from each group explain its interpretation of the objects.
4. Research cultural and religious traditions of Mesoamerican cultures such as the Olmec, West Mexicans of Colima, or the Mayans. Have students report findings to the class. Create a chart on the blackboard to compare these cultures. Categories for comparison might include language, foods, food production, trade, etc.

5. Make a clay vessel. While completing research for Activity #4, collect pictures of vessels created by these ancient cultures. How were they made? What are similarities in the vessels? You'll probably notice that many make use of formal balance or symmetry, and are decorated with geometric patterns and symbolic pictures. Have students brainstorm their own personal symbols. Sketch designs for a vessel. It could be made in the form of the symbol or decorated with the symbols. Make the vessel in clay. Glaze or paint the fired piece.
6. I am an Artist. Have students pretend they are an ancient American who has created a clay vessel, animal, or figure. Students complete the writing activity independently. Ask students to consider the following questions in their writing. Describe how you start your day. What are your materials? Where do you find them? How do the materials feel in your hands? As you work, what is important to your design? Are you inspired by landscape around you? Describe it. Your religious values? What are they? Do you consider colors? Texture? Weight? Balance? What is important to you as you bring your work to completion? What might others say about your work as they touch a finished piece, examine it?
7. Imagine you are touring areas of present-day Mesoamerica. Have students write a letter to a friend back home expressing their reactions to the art of ancient peoples of the region.



Figure of a Water Bearer, Colima, Mexico, 200 B.C.-A.D. 100, Burnished Terracotta



***Standing Dog*, Pre-Columbian, Colima, Late Preclassic, ca. 200 B.C.-A.D. 200, Painted clay, 10 3/8 in.**