

Ancient Mesoamerican Manuscript Painting

Target Grade Levels: Any. This exercise can be as simple or complex an activity as the teacher would like to make it. We are aiming for somewhere in between here. Feel free to use the resources listed below to include more or less technical linguistic information about the painted manuscripts, depending on your class.

Background: From as early as the Classic Period (250 AD) in ancient Mesoamerica (present day Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador) Maya, Aztec, and Mixtec (*Meesh-tek*) communities painted and carved their world on ceramics, paper, and stone. This form of writing, known as pictorial or iconographic writing, is best represented in the ancient manuscript paintings, called codices (*co-duh-tees*), that were produced by scribes and collected in bound volumes like books. The Maya cultures used phonetic and syllabic writing--glyphs that stand for sounds heard in speech--in combination with pictorial writing (pictures that represent a concept or object similar to the image drawn).

The Mixtecs and Aztecs painting during the 1300-1400s used primarily pictorial representation in combination with ideograms, or images that represent concepts or objects that are unportrayable pictorially. These ideograms were conventional symbols that did not always look like what they represented, but were understood by everyone in the community and always used to represent the same thing. An example of pictorial representation in our culture would be the instructions on paper towel dispensers that show hands pulling the paper in a downward motion. An example of an ideogram would be the universal symbol for "no", namely a red circle with a slash through it. When this symbol is used in combination with an object or action, it means that the object or action is not allowed. The Aztecs and Mixtecs used manuscripts to record the histories and dynasties (or lineages) of their most important communities, known as *alteptl* (*al-tay-petul*) in Nahuatl (*nah-wau-tul*), which was the language of the Aztecs. They also drew maps to record the extent of the territory pertaining to particular alteptl and events happening in different places at the same time. These documents were very important to the community since they were one way, in addition to oral stories, that peoples' history and culture was passed on to later generations.

Unfortunately, many of the ancient painted manuscripts in Mesoamerica were destroyed by priests during the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century because they contained images that were seen by the Spanish as representing indigenous religions then considered heretical. The good news is that some of the ancient texts did survive, including many that were painted by indigenous scribes who continued their work during the Colonial Period. The original manuscripts can be seen in libraries museum collections in both Europe and Latin America, and most have been published in volumes devoted to their interpretation. Many of these volumes are available at the Tulane University

Latin American Library, and teachers who do this activity should take a look at these images and their interpretations in order to answer questions that students may have about what they mean and when they were painted.

Objectives: The students will:

1. See and identify images in ancient Mesoamerican codices.
2. Draw or paint his or her own personal migration histories, family histories, and/or maps, communicating their personal stories pictorially.
3. Share their stories with others in the classroom community, demonstrating the ability to interpret the pictorial stories of others.

Teacher Preparation:

Compile color copies or scanned reproductions of ancient codices from the Internet or your local research institution (e.g., Tulane University-Latin American Library). Do not attempt to copy any original documents that you may have access to, but rather, draw from already compiled volumes or websites that have images available to the public. Read some of the brief interpretations of the activities, people, and places represented in the manuscripts so you are able to answer questions your students may have. If you have time and are interested, check out some of the additional resources listed below that provide introductions to the history and interpretation of ancient codices.

Materials/Supplies

- Sketch pad of white paper or light colored construction paper
- Watercolor paints
- Colored pencils and regular pencils

Procedure:

1. Provide students with some background information about the history of ancient Mesoamerican codices in connection with the Maya, Aztec, and Mixtec cultures.
2. Show students a number of reproductions of pictorial manuscripts and have them identify some characteristics:
 - What kinds of objects are painted in the manuscripts?
 - What are the people wearing? Who are they?
 - Are there any animals represented in the manuscripts? If so, what are they and what are they doing? Do they have human traits?
 - Are there signs and symbols that you can't read? What might they mean?
 - Are the images of people interacting with each other or doing something? What are they doing?
 - Are the pictorial manuscripts you see using phonetic writing, pictorial representation, ideograms, or a combination to tell the story?

Codices can be read in many different ways, but usually there are subtle hints that indicate in what order and in what direction manuscripts should be read. For example, some codices have footprints that tell the reader what route in the story to follow; others picture people all facing the same direction that the story follows.

-In what direction should the codices you are looking at be read? Why?

3. Explain and display (overhead projector or hard copy) three different types of pictorial manuscripts:

- *Migration histories*: show the travels of a family or community group over time as they move from home to home. They also show any important events in the lives of a family or community and mark that event with a date glyph (a symbol that stands for a day or year in the calendar).
- *Maps*: also known as *lienzos*, these large painted texts show several events happening at the same time, but in different places. These emphasize the distance between places and what space lies between communities and people as they interact.
- *Lineages or dynastic histories*: are like family trees that show how important people are related to each other through family links going back generations.

4. Pass out pencils, watercolors, and paper to the students. Have each student draw and/or paint:

- a migration history that tells the story of his/her family's travels, the places they've lived, and/or the major events that have impacted his/her life.

-OR-

- a map, or lienzo, that shows where different members of his/her family live and events that occurred in different places at the same given period of time. Perhaps a student's parents are divorced and so s/he has a birthday celebration with Mom one day and a birthday celebration with Dad the next day. These events could be depicted at different places in relatively the same period of time, all relating to the main birthday event.

-OR-

- a Dynastic/lineage history, which shows the student's family history going back at least 3 generations (i.e., the student's generation, the parents' generation, and the grandparents' generation). The student should show how different relatives are related to each other and to what generation they belong. Include "names" without using letters or words, only pictorial symbols that indicate a person's name or relationship.

5. Make students aware of the "rules" or conventions of pictorial manuscript painting. Remember, the use of letters or words is not allowed. Students must use images that either depict the event or object pictorially, or use

symbols that fellow classmates will understand to indicate ideogramatical concepts.

6. If you wish, carefully use a hotplate or other hot surface to slightly burn the edges of the paper giving the appearance of an ancient codex.

7. When the painted manuscripts are completed and dried, have students exchange with a neighbor. Since ancient codices often served as visual cues for oral storytelling, have each student stand up and read (interpret) orally their neighbor's story in the most complete way possible.

8. At the conclusion of the exercise, compile the manuscripts produced by the class into a community codex named after the class *alteptl*.

Discussion Topics:

Was it easy to read and interpret your neighbor's manuscript? Why or why not?

Was your interpretation close to what the scribe's original intention was?

What was the most difficult part of painting your history? What was the easiest part?

What kind of information do the ancient pictorial manuscripts tell us about the people that made them?

Vocabulary:

Altepetl - A word in Nahuatl referring to a community, chiefdom, or kingdom.

Codex - an ancient book or a collection of unbound sheets in a manuscript.

Dynastic history - a family tree that shows how members of the same family are related to each other over time.

Ideogram - single images that represent other ideas, concepts, or things that cannot be portrayed pictorially

Lienzo - a type of painted manuscript, usually a map, painted on a large, foldout surface

Mesoamerica - a culture region that stretches from north central Mexico through the present day countries of Belize, Guatemala, and parts of El Salvador and Honduras.

Migration history - a painted manuscript that depicts a series of events over time in the life of a community or family group

Phonetic writing - writing that uses symbols that represent speech

Pictorial writing - writing that uses images that represent visually similar people or things

Additional Resources:

Boone, Elizabeth Hill

2000 *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Robertson, Donald

1994 *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Pasztory, Esther

1983 *Aztec Art*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Websites:

Latin American Library, Tulane University:

<http://www.tulane.edu/~latinlib/lalhome.html>

Tulane University Department of Art, Mesoamerican Codices Database

<http://oraweb.tulane.edu:8887/mexdocs/>

FAMSI—Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc

www.famsi.org

Search here for descriptions and examples of the codices.