



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Ethnic Art: African. Mexican and Caribbean Perspectives

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In the arts we understand culture to be the elements that add beauty and enjoyment to our lives. All the painters, sculptors and other artists from the past and present have given culture to all of us. Most students' artistic culture has been influenced by many sources around them including their own communities.

I was educated in the New Haven Public School system and I currently teach Art in a multicultural Middle School, where cultural differences are present and are voiced strong. Until recently, I did not realize, that in the community where I teach, cultural difference is a major part of students' everyday existence. When students begin to learn about culture in the classroom, it can unfortunately cause conflict. This conflict can be a result of how a student may culturally dress, or how they may speak.

I am a believer that the arts provide one of the vital components in the education of students. The learning about cultural differences in the classroom can be done with an artistic flair. This aspect of learning can also be a great educational experience if students are unaware of the various contributions made by their culture.

The purpose of this unit is to expose students to art from certain parts of the world, which are pertinent to their own ethnic background. The intent is to teach students that in order to understand their own culture, they must learn about persons who influenced it. By presenting this curriculum, I hope to increase their knowledge of what art really is, along with exposing them to cultural differences. I also hope that learning about cultural differences through the media of arts and crafts can help students understand and respect each other for their ethnic differences.

My main focus in this unit will be, first the arts of Africa, and how they reflect Afro American culture. Also, how their arts are in integral part of their everyday life. The idea is that much of African art was developed from religious influences and many abstract symbols. Second, I will focus on the Arts of Mexico, and how their form of art is very unique to particular villages. I will also discuss the arts that preceded the Spanish Conquest, and how these works of art have lost their original purpose. Third, I will explore the arts of the Caribbean Islands. Through this focus I hope to show the arts of the Caribbean have many difference characteristics of many ethnic cultures. These ethnic cultures include Latino, Asian and African American.

This curriculum unit will be designed for art students in seventh and eighth grade who meet approximately three times a week. It can also be adapted to grade seven and eighth Bilingual and Special education programs. This unit will cover an eight to ten week time period.

The main objectives and strategies of this unit are:

- 1.To familiarize students with artistic aspects of their culture.
- 2.To compare ethnic cultures through arts and crafts.
- 3.To inspire students to produce quality works of art from the knowledge that they have gained.
- 4.Help students develop the vocabulary required to verbalize or write from various perspectives of art.

This curriculum unit will be divided into three sections:

Section I—A brief look at some of the textiles of Africa and how African influences have contributed to the work of art.

Section II—A brief look at Mexico, and their development of various arts and crafts preceding the Spanish Conquest.

Section III—A look at the Caribbean arts and how their characteristics are found in other ethnic backgrounds.

SECTION I

When we begin to trace the artistic culture of Africa, we are pulled in many directions. Africa has influenced our American culture in many important ways. When we think of Africa, African masks are the first things that probably come to mind. But, Africa is a large continent with many different ethnic groups that are rich in other arts as well. These arts are things that are made of bronze, gold, ivory, leather and textiles. Other traditional arts of sculpture fabric design, ceramics, and paintings were influenced by African belief in magic and the respect that was held for their ancestors and rulers.

Long ago, many African Artists worked with various abstract forms. Through these forms they wanted to create the idea and concept of people, animals and gods rather than a likeness of these things. More often these abstract forms were used to create an expression of religion because it was an integral part of their everyday life.

Many villagers in West Africa created a traditional art that is called textiles. Textiles are woven fabric that is created in several different ways. The ways of creating include painting, weaving, printing or tie-dyeing the fabric. These fabrics are usually rich in color and have very busy patterns. Each village has its own particular style of creating these fabric designs. They may use a combination of processes for designing the fabric. Today in our American culture this form of textiling is done mostly in factories where a computer creates most of the designs and colors. We wear many of these textiles that are created on the computer. These textiles include design that may be on our jeans, jackets, teeshirts, sneakers, etc.

Another forms of textiling found in Africa is called Adinkra. Adinkra cloth is done mainly in Ghana, and created using decorated stamps. These stamps are carved from a calabash. A calabash is a fruit tree in Africa and the handles are made of strong sticks that are found in the village. The stamps are dipped in a black dye made from the bark of trees. Adinkra, the name of the dye, means “goodbye,” and the cloth is worn on important occasions. These occasions may include funerals or when visitors are departing from the country. Adinkra stamps or symbols can be found on many of today’s cultural things. These things include architecture, motifs, stationary, and T-shirts. Many Adinkra printers are constantly creating many designs for stamps that we incorporate into our own cultures. One symbol that is well known in our society and culture is the symbol of a Mercedes Benz.

Our culture of today has been many influences from African art. But, it has influenced our culture in two other important ways. First, it has influenced our culture through two well known European artists. These European artist are Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Picasso and Matisse both studied the African mask during the twentieth century. Because of their study, they began to change their way of working. The style, expression, and the idealization and design of the mask, caused these artist to begin painting with flat planes that showed no representation of what the subject was. Through their studies of the art of Africans and of masks, Cubism was born. Cubism, is a style in which geometric shapes are used to represent objects.

Secondly, black artists in our culture today, through their own works, have demonstrated the sufferings, frustrations, and desires of their people for many years. Through their cultural heritage that has been influenced by African art, artists have communicated through their paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints, that they have said something about their culture as well as their role as an artist.

SECTION II

In Mexico the Native Indians developed architecture and various arts and crafts during the centuries that preceded the Spanish Conquest. The Spanish Conquest occurred with the coming of Europeans into Mexico. Their presence caused great confusion and disorder in the lives of the people and their art. Large stone temples that had very detailed designs and construction were designed and painted by the Mayan, Toltec, Aztec, and Incan civilizations. But most of their works at art were destroyed during the conquest or deteriorated. We can, however, have an appreciation for the art that remains because it was created using clay, gold, silver, feathers, and other materials that were available. The large pyramids were built, and temples were placed on top of them. Clay was formed and made into bowls, plates, and fine sculpture. Stones were carved with different stones, and jewelry was made from gold. Some of the surviving examples of arts and crafts were inspired by religious requirements and beliefs, funeral practices and the adornment of nobility.

Spanish influences are seen in the contemporary arts of Mexico. The arts and crafts are done in a contemporary way, and continue to be handed down to the next generation in a traditional manner. Because many of their arts are unique to particular villages, they are resistant to outside influences. An example of a contemporary art that is done in Mexico is the Huichol yarn paintings. These are very colorful yarn designs that are created by the Indians who live in the mountains. The yarn paintings are created to serve two purposes: as a religious purpose and others to be sold in the local markets. This art is traditional, and is done following certain rules depending on the intended use.

Another contemporary art that is done in Mexico, is called Amate paper. This art made by the Otomi Indians of San Pablito in the Sierra de Puebla. This art has unusual beauty that seems to convey some of the magic for which it was created. The paper is made from the bark of amate trees, and is strong, crisp and has a nice surface that shows the texture of the tree bark. The designs frequently use human forms that sometimes represent spirits or other elements of nature that are important to the Otomi culture. Many of the figures are not realistic but have a symbolic ornamentation.

One common traditional motif that is used by the Otomi culture is the two or four-headed bird of the Mountain which protected the home.

Amate paper is an ancient art coming from pre-conquest times when paper was used for clothing and later for keeping records. The Amate paper is now used primarily for making symmetrical cutouts for magical

SECTION III

The Caribbean Islands show a mixture of arts and crafts that pertains to various ethnic cultures. These cultures include Puerto Rican, African, Indians, and American. The Puerto Rican people are proud of their island and their roots. Perhaps the most well-known art of Puerto Ricans or Latinos' is the carved wooden santos. Santos means the saints. The Spaniards brought this to the island and it has been made in this culture for some 300 years, and handed down from generation to generation. The santos might be the village or family patron saint or the one that brought special healing powers to the family. The santos were originally colored using natural pigments. But by the nineteenth century, santos were painted in many vibrant colors and wood or metal were sometimes included. Many of these santos or sculptures are recognized for their unique beauty, and most of them are in museum collections.

The African heritage in the Caribbean Islands is perhaps most clear in its many contributions to the music of the island. This contribution is made mostly during the annual Fiesta de Santiago Apostle (Festival of St. James the Apostle) that is held in the villages. The villages where these festivals are held are predominantly African descent. The festival is famous for its feathers and horned mask, that are carved from coconuts and made only in this area. Singing of ballads and dancing the African bomba, the people of the village are trying to convey and depict the history of their people. This history represents many aspects of the Indian, African, and Spanish heritage of Puerto Rico.

There are many different arts that exist from many cultures in the Caribbean. An example of one art that is popular in the Caribbean is the seed necklace. The necklaces are made from native seeds and beans. They have shiny, pearly gray seeds with a natural hole just right for stringing that are found along the river in the marshy ground. The most common seeds that are used in making necklaces are the camandulas and the zarcilla. The camandulas and zarcilla seeds are small, brown, striped oval seeds from the ear pod tree.

The necklaces that are made speak about the land in which they come that most tourist do not see.

Another art that is very common in the Caribbean Islands is the making of Island Maracas. The maracas are made from hollow bottle gourd that has lines incised on it. When the lines of a metal fork are scraped over the ridges, it makes a rasping sound. Maracas are used by the Indians throughout the islands and in Mexico. They are made of hollow gourds or the large, hard shelled fruit of the calabas tree. Small seeds are put in the

gourds and a handle is attached. Sometimes island scenes are painted on the maracas, and sometimes designs are carved into the surface while it is still green. Maracas are usually used in pairs and are shaken to the rhythm of a dance or song.

Each island has its own particular heritage that is a result of different styles and culture. Whether it is Latino, Puerto Rican, African, Indian or American, we all are tied together through our own individual cultures.

Suggested Lessons

Three lessons that I have chosen for this unit will show the different types of art and how they might be integrated into any curriculums.

Lesson One—Positive and Negative Adinkra Designs

Vocabulary: Adinkra, dye, design, calabash, stamp, repetition;

Objective: To develop an appreciation for Adinkra art. To create a positive and negative design using the concept of Adinkra art.

Materials: Pencils, black and white construction paper, glue and scissors.

Procedure: The teacher will discuss with the students the art of West Africa. The teacher will show examples of Adinkra art and symbols(available in text form). Students will be given the opportunity to discuss and examine the examples of art. Students will then create their own Adinkra design using construction paper.

Symbol for Safety and Security

(figure available in print form)

Symbol of Strength

(figure available in print form)

Lesson Two—Amate Paper Cutouts:

Vocabulary: amate paper, motif, geometric design, symmetrical design.

Objective: To develop an appreciation for the arts Mexico. To create a amate paper design.

Material: scissors, brown wrapping paper or brown craft paper, waxpaper, newspaper. (Tissue can be used for bright colors)

Motivation: Teacher will demonstrate and show examples of positive and negative space. Teacher will use black and white paper to show this demonstration.

Example of Positive and Negative Space:

(available in text form)

Example of a Symmetrical cutout:

(available in text form)

Example of Amate paper cutouts:

(available in text form)

Teacher will explain and discuss with students the arts of Mexico. Teacher will show examples of Amate and Symmetrical cutout designs. Students will create their own Amate paper designs by first folding paper in half; using the fold as a center line, drawn in the design on a bird, person, animal, or shape. (Designs should be non-realistic) After design is drawn on folded paper, cut design out. (Do not cut on the fold) Open up design and crumble design and then open the design up again. Place design between two pieces of wax paper and iron it. Design can now be mounted on white paper.

Lesson Three—Mexican Fruit Banks

Vocabulary: texture, form, surface.

Objective: Student will sketch fruit forms and use them in designing individual banks.

Materials: Balloons (various shapes), modeling clay, household tools (toothpicks, forks, pencils, drawing paper, scissors, acrylic paints, brushes, rubber bands, wax paper, rolling pin or dowel.)

Procedure: Teacher will discuss with students the fruits of Mexico and show examples of Mexican artificial fruit banks. Students will then draw examples of fruits on paper. Students will then select a balloon one that is similar in shape to the fruit form that was drawn. Inflate balloon, and use rubber bands to modify the shape by wrapping it around the balloon. Then roll out modeling clay between wax paper with a rolling pin. Smooth pieces of modeling clay over balloons and blend with slightly dampened fingers. Cut a large coin slot with scissors, make a coil rope base to keep bank upright. Allow 24 hours drying time. Once bank is dry use scissors to puncture balloon through corn slot. Remove broken balloon. Paint bank using acrylic paints.

Conclusion: Students will display banks along with written information about the different fruits of Mexican culture.

Example of Fruit Bank Drawing

(figure available in print form)

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