



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1999 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from the Olmec to Modern Times

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## Introduction

The history of the Americas in modern times is history that begins in several places. For most classrooms in the United States, that history begins with Massachusetts in 1620 or in Jamestown a few years earlier. In the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute seminar, Art and Identity in Mexico, from the Olmec to Modern Times, fellows worked together to see alternative strands in American history, and to understand how the question of identity in the past in Mexico relates to identity in the United States today. In particular we looked at other points of departure for the way we understand the history of the Americas: one can also begin with the rise of high civilization in North America, with the Olmec, c. 1200 BC, or with the invasion of the North American mainland by the Spanish in 1519.

Over a three-month period, fellows worked to gain specific understandings of the Mesoamerican past, the Spanish Colonial era, and of modern Mexico. Together, we worked on topics ranging from the development of works we call art from the earliest periods through the rise of numerous high civilizations during the first millennium, especially the Maya and Teotihuacanos, and on to the complexity of thought and art among the Aztec on the eve of the Spanish invasion. We looked at the new imagery that took root in New Spain, particularly of the Virgin Mary in her manifestation as Guadalupe, but also at the preoccupation with race and class that was reflected in the so-called Castas paintings. Finally, we turned to the remarkable artistic production of the twentieth century in Mexico, both among the Muralists and artists who turned to smaller-scale works.

At every point, fellows worked together and cooperatively. First, we worked to enhance the direct reading works of art, here in New Haven at the Yale University Art Gallery and Peabody Museum and to develop skills to use with students of various ages. Second, throughout the course, fellows presented small lesson plans, forcing seminar members to participate as if in a second grade, or perhaps a high school social studies class. Through these endeavors, fellows developed curriculum units that not only apply to a given class but also can easily be adapted to different situations and levels and used in English, Spanish, or ESL classrooms. In every case, the units have been developed to respond to state mandates regarding reading, writing, and mathematics curriculum: what these units show is that such mandates can be met using fresh and imaginative classroom projects.

The resulting units that appear here range from focussed investigations of Maya and Aztec art and culture to new understandings of the works of Frida Kahlo. In every unit, hands-on projects play a key role: students can learn to make a work of modern Mexican folk art or play the rudiments of Mesoamerican music.

Others offer preparation for tackling long-term projects, such as extensive mural-making. Most also incorporate ways of using local resources particularly in terms of museums and WPA mural programs that can easily be adapted to other regions of the U.S. Fellows have provided key step-by-step guides to using

compasses and learning the concepts of mapping, and they have made it possible to prepare a steaming platter of fresh tamales. In at least two units, fellows have written scripts of short plays that can be produced in the classroom. In short, these units provide the grounding for any investigation in school classroom of art and identity in Mexico.

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