

**Cultural Commentary through Mexican Art
by Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco**
Beverly Berwick—San Diego, California
*Advanced Placement English Language and Composition,
and English Language Arts—Grade 11
Three to Four Class Periods*

This instructional unit can be adapted for each of the above classes to teach them to analyze and interpret visual material in addition to print. It centers on the artwork of Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, early twentieth century muralists who expressed in their paintings the cultural tensions and aspirations of Mexicans throughout history. Through a series of short activities, the students learn to interpret the artists' symbols and analyze their philosophical assumptions and insights. Teachers select strategies from below depending upon the level of the class and time constraints.

To understand the historical context for the art, students read a short essay on Mexico from 1910–1939. The teacher projects two of Diego Rivera's works on a large screen and discusses key elements of art with the students. Pairs analyze another painting by Rivera and share their findings with the class. The same steps are taken with a painting by Orozco. Pairs question each other about the paintings. A Socratic Seminar ensues on the elements of comparison and contrast in theme and technique of the two artists. The students then demonstrate their understanding of the key concepts in these lessons in two ways: They write an essay and they make an oral presentation. Rubrics for both are attached. Follow-up activities include reading essays on the two artists and studying a third important muralist of the period, David Alfaro Siqueiros.

This unit is intended for regular English 11 students and for Advanced Placement students after the AP Exam to expand their visual literacy skills and to promote interdisciplinary connections with World History and Culture and U.S. History. It will also prepare them to consider key political issues in Government in Grade 12. Essential questions, standards, objectives, materials, and strategies are included. Also included are assessment strategies, extended activities, an art analysis chart, two rubrics, photographs of artworks, additional resources, and references. The artwork referenced includes early paintings and limited sections of murals because the historical complexity of some of the murals is beyond the scope of this unit.

Essential Questions

Analysis of Art Techniques

What are the key elements of art and how are they used to convey meaning?

How do Rivera and Orozco use images to suggest ideas?

In what ways is the art of these two masters similar and different?

Interpretation

How does their art inform the viewer and evoke feeling?

What are the recurrent themes in the works?

How are the political and social influences of the period reflected in the works?

Connections

How do artists in the U.S. today convey their understandings and concerns about society in the twenty-first century to a wide audience? Public works? Music?

What issues in Mexican history have parallels in U.S. history?

California Content Standards

Reading Comprehension –

2.5 Analyze an author’s implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject in text and non-text.

Literary Response and Analysis –

3.3 Analyze the way in which tone, mood, and the author’s/artist’s style achieve specific rhetorical and aesthetic purposes.

3.5 Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of the historical period that shaped the work.

Writing Strategies –

1.1 Demonstrate an understanding of the elements of discourse when completing expository writing assignments.

1.4 Enhance meaning by employing rhetorical devices, including the incorporation of visual aids.

Listening and Speaking –

1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image-makers such as artists.

Mexico – A Renaissance of High Hopes Leads to Disappointment

1911–1939

Mexico had been under the control of a harsh dictator, Porfirio Diaz, for over thirty years. Under the leadership of Francisco Madero, the people revolted and expelled him from the country in 1911. For another ten years, they continued to fight a Civil War. Finally in 1917, with the end of the war in sight, Mexican intellectual leaders wrote a far-reaching Constitution. For its time, it was an amazingly forward-thinking document with great promise for the future. For example, it declared that expectant mothers should have six weeks of paid maternity leave both before and after the delivery. It also included equal pay for equal work for both genders and insisted that workers share in the profits of companies. Most significantly, it called for agrarian land reform. Peasants didn't own land in Mexico before this time, and this reform was heralded as the beginning of true equality and prosperity for all.

During the years that followed the Revolution and Civil War, a unique relationship developed between society and three great artists. Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros came to represent a social and artistic renaissance in Mexico. In their paintings, they considered two main themes: the Mexican search for identity and a desire for honest and responsible government. Rivera's early paintings, for example, reveal his unique style and adoration of indigenous people. Each of the artists became powerful muralists, expressing the duality of the Mexican character, the history of oppression in Mexico, and the people's yearning for social and economic equality. Disillusioned by the continuing inequities in society, the three artists leaned toward revolutionary socialism, as did many intellectuals of the 1920's and '30's in both Mexico and the United States.

Objectives

Students will learn:

- to analyze the art of two great Mexican artists.
- to recognize the power of art, particularly public art, in communicating an artist's ideas to society.
- to demonstrate effectively in writing and oral presentations an understanding of the culture and history of Mexico and the way in which artists have represented it.
- to compare Mexican cultural history to that of the U.S.

Materials

Transparencies or a CD with art works on it, such as: **Rivera** – The Embrace, Exit from the Mine, Wall Street Banquet, Night of the Rich, Distribution of the Arms, The Agitator, The Exploiters, Revolution – Germination, and The History of Mexico. **Orozco** – American Civilization, The Spanish Conquest of Mexico, and Modern Human Sacrifice.

Overhead projector or a computer with a video projector

Large screen

Writing and Communication rubrics (included here)

Teaching Strategies

The Big Picture –

Students read the essay “Mexico – A Renaissance of High Hopes Leads to Disappointment” and meet in pairs to highlight key points. Class discussion.

A Close Look –

1. The teacher projects a Rivera painting, e.g., The Embrace. Basics elements of art are discussed: color, form, line, shape, space, texture, and value.

Students observe the painting to discover the effect of the elements and fill in their charts.

Key points:

- a. Curved lines and colors of the landscape are mirrored in the peasants—
We see the peasants' continuity with the land.

- b. The gentle embrace of the two men suggests their love and respect for one another. The hat resembles a halo. The viewer respects them.

2. The teacher projects a second Rivera painting, e.g., *Exit from the Mine*.

The class examines it for basic elements and suggested meaning and notes their findings.

Key points:

- a. Lines guide the viewer's eye to the figure on the scaffold.
- b. His white outfit calls attention to him.
- c. The main figure recalls Jesus on the crucifix, as two miners search him. Again, we sympathize with and adore the workers.

Inquiring Minds –

1. A third Rivera painting is projected, e.g., *Wall Street Banquet*.
2. Individual students write three questions about the painting.
3. Student Socratic Pairs meet to pose their questions to each other and converse about the painting.
4. Random pairs come to the screen and explain their findings.
5. Students fill in their charts.
6. An Orozco painting is projected, e.g., from *American Civilization*,

The Departure of Quetzalcoatl. The teacher explains that Quetzalcoatl is the God of the Winged Serpent, which represents the Indian world. Pairs are encouraged to observe line, colors, and images, to guess about the meaning, and to suggest differences between this painting and the previous ones by Rivera. Random pairs come to the front to discuss their findings.

Key Points:

- a. Intense colors contrast with dark ones, suggesting passion, violence.
- b. Lines move the action in opposite directions, creating strong tension.
- c. The cowering Indian figures contrast with the large, dominant white man.

7. A second Orozco painting is projected, e.g. from *American Civilization* – *The Prophecy*, and the above steps are repeated,

8. Pairs consult their charts and confer on the differences and similarities they observe between the two artists, noting examples from the art works they've seen. They write three questions about the possible differences and similarities.

9. Eight random students sit on chairs in the center of the room and conduct a Socratic Seminar comparing the two artists. The rules are the following:

- a. The teacher says nothing, but keeps track of who has spoken.
- b. Each student must ask at least two questions and answer at least two questions. They may not exceed two of each until EVERY student in the circle has fulfilled his/her requirement.
- c. The observing students follow along and may make comments and ask questions at the end. The teacher may call on any one at the end to repeat, question, or qualify any of the comments made in the Socratic Seminar.

10. The teacher tacks poster paper around the room with the following headings: Economics, Health Care, Government, Security/Safety, Labor, Morals, Freedom. Pairs draw upon their knowledge of U.S. history in the early twentieth century to list issues in each category that Americans had at that time. Volunteers from each pair rotate to the "carousel" of posters, noting their ideas in each category. Two students lead a discussion on the ways that artists expressed their concerns about society to the masses in that era and how artists express concerns about social ills today.

Assessment of understanding and demonstration of writing and speaking skills.

Essay Assignment

Choose one of the prompts below and respond to it in a clear, cogent, well-organized essay, using effective sentence variety, diction, and other rhetorical strategies. Your answer should be stated in a concise thesis statement and well-supported with analysis of art works by both Rivera and Orozco.

1. Choose two works of both Rivera and Orozco. Explain how the artists *differ* from each other in both content and technique. (Two of your examples may be from class. The other two are ones we have not discussed in class.)

2. Choose two works of both Rivera and Orozco. Explain how the artists are *similar* to each other in both content and technique. (Two of your examples may be from class. The other two are ones we have not discussed in class.)

*Teachers may refer students to the books and Internet resources noted at the end of this unit and/or may provide them with photos or transparencies of the following suggested paintings: **Rivera** – *Distribution of the Arms, The Agitator, The Exploiters, Revolution – Germination, The History of Mexico – details.* **Orozco** – *American Civilization details, Anglo – America, Latin America, Sacrifice.**

Oral Presentation

Present your findings on Rivera and Orozco in a 3-minute multimedia presentation. Include visuals (CD, video, or transparencies) plus one of the following: music (live or commercial CD), original poem, tableau (frozen, human depiction of a painting), or original artwork expressing your own concerns about society today.

Follow-up Activities

David Alfaro Siqueiros

1. Read selected passages about Siqueiros from one of the attached resources and do one of the following:

Make a 3-minute presentation to the class on his works, making claims about the unique style and power of his work compared to the other two great muralists. Examples of each artist's work should be well-referenced and displayed for the viewers.

2. Write an essay of 350–400 words about Siqueiros, making claims about the unique style and power of his work compared to the other two great muralists.

3. Read selected passages about Rivera and Orozco and write summaries of each.

Contemporary Connections

Create your own artwork imitating the style of one of the great muralists we've studied in class. Your work should reflect your concerns about issues in the United States.

References

Paz, Octavio. *Essays on Mexican Art*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993.

Rochfort, Desmond. *Mexican Muralists*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998.

Zacarias, Marela Trejo. "A Visual Biography of Diego Rivera."

<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Mll/Spanish/Projects/Trejo-Zacarias/english.htm>.

Additional Resources

Books

Pellicer, Carlos. *Mural Painting and the Mexican Revolution*. Mexico City: Impresora Formal, 1995.

Rodriguez, Antonio. *Rivera Mural Painting*. Mexico City: Impresora Formal, 1991.

Internet

Mark Harden's Artchive, <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/>

Artyclopedia, <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/>

Art Analysis Chart

Elements of art to consider: Color, Form, Line, Shape, Space, Texture, Value and Symbols

Consider at least three of the above elements and analyze each one's effect in the painting. Then consider the combined effect of these elements in your interpretation of the painting.

Name of artist _____

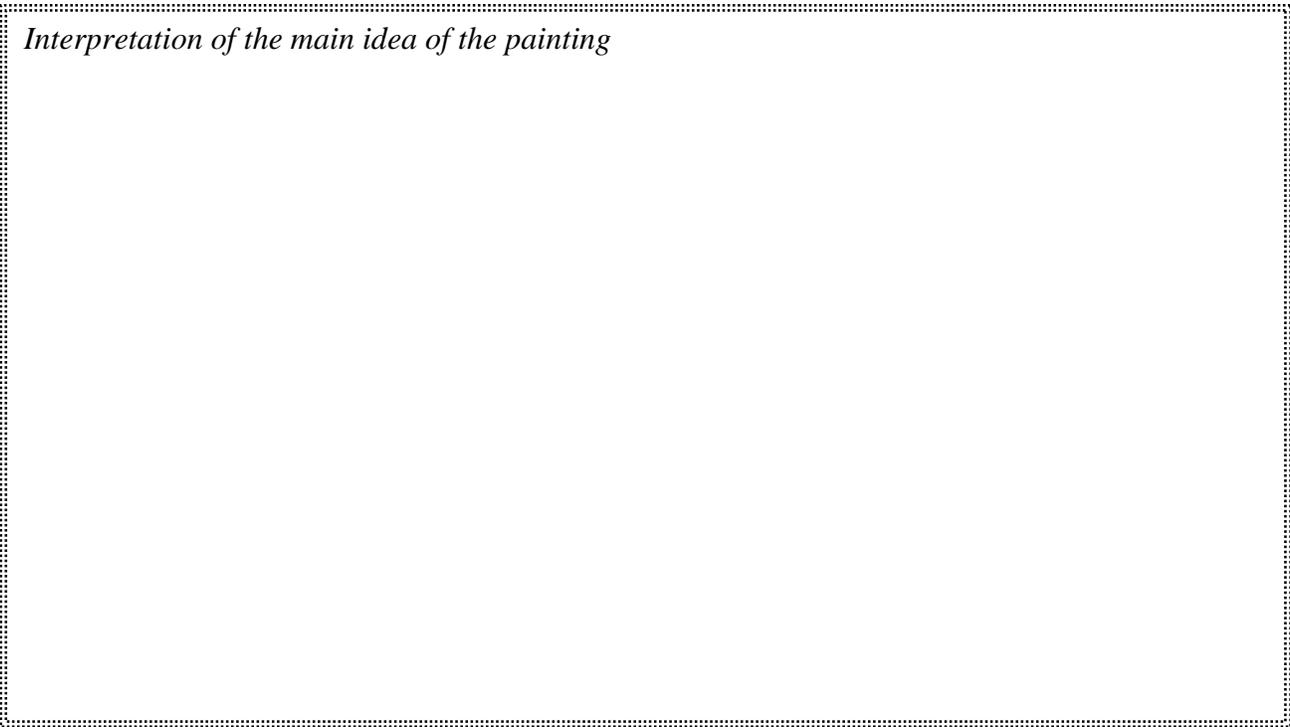
Name of painting _____

Year painting was created _____

Element _____

Effect _____

Interpretation of the main idea of the painting



Scoring Rubric Art Analysis Essays

	6 Exceptional	5 Effective	4 Basic	1 Unacceptable
organization: control, logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * total control * logical connections * original observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *clearly moves from point to point * avoids formula essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * main idea slightly weak or unclear * mostly listing of ideas * illogical claims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * lack of control and logical inconsistency interfere with reader's understanding
completeness and correctness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * all ideas discussed in depth * specifics from the paintings are used very effectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * the main idea is supported with some examples and explanation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * ideas are mentioned and supported with limited evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * few ideas with little or no explanation and evidence
use of language, style, voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * distinctive style * formal without being stilted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * measured style with awareness of audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * repetitious, awkward * simplistic or inappropriate word choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * confusing * vague
grammar conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * few if any errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * few if any errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * some errors that do not interfere greatly with the reader's understanding of the essay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * many errors dominate the essay

Communications Rubric for Mexican Art Presentations

Scoring Criteria	Excellent	Commendable	Competent/ Meets standard	Limited/Does not meet standard	Unsatisfactory
Organization and Content	Intro. includes strong attention getter, clear thesis, and dynamic overview. Main ideas developed with masterful use of details from art works. Conclusion leaves a final thought.	Intro. includes strong attention getter, clear thesis, and overview. Main ideas supported effectively with details from the art works. Conclusion leaves a final thought.	Intro. includes effective lead-in, thesis, and overview. Clear organization with several details from the art works used as support. Conclusion leaves a final thought.	Intro. includes thesis and may include overview. Main points not fully supported with evidence from the art works. Conclusion is undeveloped.	No apparent thesis or overview. Main points missing or unclear. Conclusion is missing or undeveloped.
Language	Uses formal speaking skills with skillful use of language	Uses formal speaking skills and well-chosen words	Uses formal speaking skills and clearly conveys meaning	Alternates between formal and informal speaking skills. Meaning is occasionally vague.	Uses informal and unclear language.
Physical and Vocal Expression	Makes strong eye contact with audience Uses voice and physical gestures masterfully.	Makes fairly consistent eye contact with the audience. Uses voice and physical gestures very effectively.	Makes eye contact with the audience; occasionally uses notes. Speaks clearly with variety in voice and gestures.	Relies heavily on notes. Lacks vocal variety and gestures.	Has no eye contact with audience. Difficult to understand or hear.

Index of Art Works – Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco

Rivera

- 1 The Embrace
- 2 Exit from the Mine
- 3 Wall Street Banquet
- 4 Night of the Rich
- 5 Distribution of the Arms
- 6 -7 The Agitator
- 8 The Exploiters
- 9 Revolution – Germination
- 10 History of Mexico
- 11- 19 Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park
- 20 -21 Man at the Crossroads

Orozco

- 1 Hidalgo
- 2 Carnival of the Ideologies
- 3 The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – Franciscan
- 4 American Civilization – The Departure of Quetzalcoatl
- 5 American Civilization – Prophecy
- 6 American Civilization – Latin America
- 7 American Civilization – Anglo-America