

# MEXICO: ARTS AND CULTURE

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## Purpose/Overview

This unit provides a look at Mexican art, history, and culture through fine art lessons and hands-on art projects. Mexico is rich in music, dance, and folk art, all of which help us better understand Mexico and its interesting history.



## Performance Goals

Students will:

- Gain a greater understanding of Mexico's history and culture
- Create a *nicho*, a 3-dimensional wall hanging
- Gain understanding of pattern and symbolism through study of Mitla
- Create a piece of art using their own patterns
- Create a mask and use it in the "Dance of the Little Old Men"

## Resources

Web Sites:

[www.mexicanmasks.usa](http://www.mexicanmasks.usa)

[www.oaxacaoxaca.com/mitla](http://www.oaxacaoxaca.com/mitla)

[www.advantagemexico.com/oxaca/mitla](http://www.advantagemexico.com/oxaca/mitla)

[www.kalarte.com/latin/tin/tintext](http://www.kalarte.com/latin/tin/tintext)

Video:

"Masks from Many Cultures" (available for loan from LLILAS

Outreach Lending Library:

[www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/llilas/outreach/library/](http://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/llilas/outreach/library/))

Music:

“Maestros del Folkore Michoacano,” Musica Indigena Purepecha  
#5

Photographs:

Personal photographs taken on various trips to Mexico

Books:

Nunley, John W., McCarthy, Cara, Emigh, John, and Ferris, Lesley. *Masks:  
Faces of Culture*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999.

Rothstein, Anya Leigh and Rothstein, Arden. *Mexican Folk Art: from Oaxacan  
Artist Families*. New York: Schiffer Publication Limited, 2002.

# Activity 1: Sacred Spaces or Mexican *Nichos*

## Background

In Mexico there is an old tradition of making tin plate frames, or *nichos*, that dates back to the Spanish colonial period. Traditionally *nichos* were used as shrines for patron saints or pictures of loved ones. Wooden *nichos* are also part of the Latin Heritage. Many Day of the Dead altars include wooden *nichos*—almost like a diorama of loved ones captured in special moments—that are placed in the kitchen, at the barbershop, at a favorite outdoor gathering, etc. The *nicho* is a 3-dimensional recessed shadow box that is protected by a hinged glass door. The small shadow box is surrounded by appendages of wood or tin and often painted with bright colors. The tin is often stamped or punched to create shapes and embossed patterns in the tin. They provide a stage-like setting for an object or a person of great significance. The *nicho* can also be a personal statement incorporating things that are important to the creator.

## Objectives

Students will:

- Use math to create their own sacred space
- Learn traditions of Mexico’s arts and culture
- Explore the meaning of specific art objects within various cultures, times, and places
- Use symbols, themes, or subjects to demonstrate values and knowledge of contexts in art

## Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

### Grade 6-8

- Art
- 1A Illustrate themes from direct observation, personal experience, and traditional events
  - 1B Analyze and form generalizations about the interdependence of art elements.
  - 2A Express a variety of ideas based on personal experiences and direct observations
  - 2B Describe in detail a variety of practical applications for design ideas
  - 2C Demonstrate technical skills effectively, using a variety of art media and materials to produce designs, drawings, paintings, sculptures
- Math
- 3 Demonstrate an understanding of geometry and spatial reasoning
  - 4 Demonstrate an understanding of the concepts and uses of measurement

## Sponge/Mental Warm Up

What is your special treasure or who would you like to honor and build a special place for? Look at examples on the Internet; discuss how ordinary people can become icons. Look at Frida Kahlo's themed *nichos*.

## Vocabulary

*nichos*, height, width, depth, emboss, stamp, pattern, rhythm

## Materials

Cardboard	Masking Tape	Ruler	Scrap material
Pencil	Scissors	Tin	String
Embossing tools	Wire	Model magic	Hot glue gun
Bottle caps	Glitter	Glue stick	
Craft plastic sheets	<i>Loteria</i> Cards	<i>Milagros</i>	

Materials can be found at Sax Arts & Crafts or any Hobby Lobby or Michael's. *Loteria* cards and *milagros* can be found in Mexican specialty shops online or in most towns.

## Procedure

1. Have students use rulers to draw sketches of their boxes to scale, not to exceed 3" x 4" inside the box. Have students draw out a plan for the theme and the inside space of their *nicho*. Cut box pieces out of cardboard; measure height, width, and depth. Build box with tape. Make sure to tape inside and outside edges.
2. Now students will work on the outside appendages that surround the 3-dimensional boxes. They can be any shape; traditional Mexican shapes come in the form of a cross, scared heart, or flames. The appendages should relate to the theme. The appendages will be cut out of cardboard or tin. Cut the center of the tin or cardboard the exact size of the box so the box can fit through it like a window.
3. Students will paint and decorate the inside of the boxes with their theme. They will also decorate the appendages with this theme. Glitter, scrap material, bottle caps, *milagros* or *loteria* cards can be used to decorate the inside of the box. Then set box aside to dry.
4. The students will make the character or object to place inside the box. This can be created from wire and model magic, then dressed with scrap materials or painted.
5. Measure the size of the box exactly and add ¼" on each side. Using these measurements, cut the hard plastic to go over the opening of the box to create the window. Use hot glue to glue the plastic sheet over the window. Now glue the appendage to the box.

See photos 1-3 for examples of *nichos*.

## Activity 2: Mitla and Geometric Patterns

### Background

Just outside of central Oaxaca City is the archaeological site of Mitla, known for its geometric patterns. Mitla was established as early as 900 BC and was inhabited from 750 AD until 1512 AD. It was built and inhabited by the Zapotecs and was known to be the palace of the high priest. The outside walls are covered with unique patterns that can still be found in tapestry, jewelry, and sculpture from this region of Mexico today. These patterns represent things that were important to the people of the time, such as rain, lightning, thunder, and waves.

### Objectives

Students will:

- Learn that pattern is anything that repeats itself
- Learn the history of the Mitla patterns and relate them to modern Zapotec patterns
- Learn proportional relationships and special reasoning
- Create patterns that have meaning to the student
- Create a piece of art with their own patterns

### Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

#### Grade 6-8

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|------|--|
| Art  | 1A Illustrate themes from direct observation, personal experience, and traditional events<br>1B Analyze and form generalizations about the interdependence of art elements.<br>2C Demonstrate technical skills effectively, using a variety of art media and materials to produce designs, drawings, paintings, sculptures<br>3B Compare specific art works from a variety of cultures |
| Math | 2 Demonstrate understanding of patterns, relationships and reasoning.  |

### Sponge/Mental Warm Up

Show students photos of Mitla. Discuss the history and the symbolism of these patterns. Show photos of tapestries made at the weaving village of Teotitlan del Valle. Discuss how these patterns are repeated throughout history and still today.

### Vocabulary

Line, shape, pattern, repetition, rhythm, vertical, horizontal, symbolism

**Materials**

Photos from Mexico

Paper 8 1/2" x 11"

Art paper 9" x 12"

Pencils

Elmo (projection device)

Rulers

Colored Pencils

Black marker

**Procedure**

1. Use 8 1/2" x 11" paper and fold in half horizontal, then fold in half vertical, and fold in half again horizontal. This should divide the paper into eight equal boxes. Students will create a different pattern in each box. Students should create patterns that are relevant to them, with some importance in their lives. Anything can be repeated.
2. Students will now use 9" x 12" art paper. Students will draw one straight line, one curvy line, and one zigzag lines to divide the paper into eight sections or spaces. The spaces should be outlined with a black marker. Students will fill the spaces with their patterns. Students cannot repeat the same pattern twice. Students should then use colored pencils to completely fill in the spaces.

See photos 4-11 for images of Mitla, textiles, and student work.

## **Activity 3A: “Dance of the Little Old Men” or “Baile de los Viejitos”**

### **Background**

In Mexico, there is a long tradition of dance. Since colonial times there has been a tradition of very humorous dance called “Baile de los Viejitos” (Dance of the Little Old Men) performed by Indians in the area of Patzcuaro, State of Michoacán. The dance was meant to make fun of the government officials sent to the area by the Spaniards. The dance portrays the Spaniards as feeble old men dressed as peasants with canes. Masks are worn that portray an old man with pale pink skin, a hooked nose, and a white beard or mustache. The dancers act feeble then spring into unrehearsed clog or tap dancing. The Dance of the Little Old Men can be seen in most *zócalos* (town squares) throughout the state of Michoacán to this day.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- Learn traditions of Mexican art, dance, and culture
- Create a mask symbolizing “little old men”

### **Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills**

#### **Grades 6-8**

- Art
- 1A Illustrate themes from direct observation, personal experience, and traditional events
  - 1B Analyze and form generalizations about the interdependence of art elements
  - 2A Express a variety of ideas based on personal experiences and direct observations
  - 2B Describe in detail a variety of practical applications for design idea
  - 2C Demonstrate technical skills effectively, using a variety of art media and materials to produce designs, drawings, paintings, sculptures
  - 3A Identify in artworks the influence of historical and poetical events
  - 3B Compare specific artworks from a variety of different cultures
- Social Studies
- 3 Demonstrate an understanding of political influences on historical issues and events

### **Sponge/Mental Warm Up**

Show students pictures from Mexico of the “Dance of the Little Old Men.” Play students the CD and have them imagine what the dances look like. Show video, “Masks from Many Cultures.”

## **Vocabulary**

Masks, tradition, papier mache, three-dimensional, encasing

## **Materials**

Sharpies	Exacto knife	Scissors
Ross paste	Newspaper	Milk jug (gallon)
Gesso	Paint brushes	Paint (tempra or acrylic)
Wigs or scrap fur	Hot glue gun	

## **Preparation**

- Cover tables with newspaper or plastic bags
- Mix papier mache (ross paste) the day before. This will give paste a smooth consistency. Cover with trash bag. Can be stored for up to three weeks.
- Cut newspaper into strips.

## **Procedure**

1. Students cut milk jug in half with scissors, cutting parallel to the handle. Students choose flat side or handle side to make the mask. Using a sharpie, draw eyes and mouth on the mask. Teacher uses exacto to start holes and, if student is using handle side, cuts off handle.
2. Students add any 3D appendages or details using plastic, pipe cleaners, cardboard, or tape.
3. Students layer plastic with newspaper dipped into papier mache. A full layer should encase the plastic so that no plastic is showing. Six layers of newspaper is the average to make the mask stiff. Mask is ready when it will not bend. Let dry for a full 24 hours.
4. Have students write names on inside of mask with sharpie, then prime front of mask with a layer of gesso.
5. Students should then map out in pencil the way the mask is to be painted. (Remember light pink skin with hook nose, black eyes, haggard teeth, white hair, and beard or mustache)
6. If painting mask with tempra, remember that tempra mixes, so do not layer paints on top of each other. If using acrylic, paint as usual.
7. Glue on details, hair, etc. using hot glue gun.

See photos 12-14 for images of little old men.

## Activity 3B: Dance of the Little Old Men

### Background

This humorous dance pokes fun at the Spaniards who occupied Mexico during colonial times. It is not rehearsed but lyrical and carefree. Dancers act as if they are old and feeble and have a hard time just walking, then break into dance with clogging or tapping their feet. Dancers attach wood to the bottom of their sandals to increase the noise of their taps—as they increase their dance, the crowd roars with laughter.

### Objectives

Students will:

- Create and perform the Dance of the Little Old Men

### Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

#### Grades 6-8

Art	1C Identify in artworks the influence of historical and political events
Music	5D Relate the other fine arts to music concepts
Theater	1F Create environments, characters and actions 2C Select movements to appropriately portray an imaginative character drawn from heritage or history 5B Compare and contrast ideas and emotions depicted in art, dance, music and theatre and demonstrate uses of movement, music or visual elements to enhance classroom dramatization

### Procedure

- Have the students create their own dance that portrays the Dance of the Little Old Men.
- Have students perform their dance in front of an audience to round out the experience.