

## City and Cosmos: The Arts of Teotihuacan

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people from around the world travel to central Mexico to visit the three main pyramid complexes and wide central avenue that characterize the ancient city of Teotihuacan, which was established in the Valley of Mexico around 100 BCE. The region's mild climate, fertile soil, and natural resources helped Teotihuacan become the largest urban center in Mesoamerica by 300 CE. At its height, the city covered almost ten square miles and had enough single-story apartment structures to house a multiethnic population of approximately 125,000 inhabitants. Although the city fell into decline after 550 CE, its monumental architecture and exquisite art continue to inspire curiosity and wonder about the spiritual beliefs and everyday lives of the ancient Teotihuacanos.

The following essays highlight artworks featured in the exhibition *City and Cosmos: The Arts of Teotihuacan*. Each essay introduces you and your students to different facets of the ancient city's art and architecture, religion, and daily life. Teotihuacan lies within Mesoamerica, a cultural region that geographically encompasses most of Mexico and northern Central America and includes the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations, among others. Mesoamerican cultures share many religious beliefs, such as the idea that celestial bodies (natural objects located outside of Earth's atmosphere, such as stars and planets), animals, and humans are fundamentally linked to natural systems and bountiful harvests. Like many other Mesoamerican peoples, the Teotihuacanos carefully planned their city in relation to the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west), the movements of celestial bodies, and important features in the natural environment such as mountains, volcanoes, and springs.

Many artworks at Teotihuacan depict deities that also appear in the pantheons of other Mesoamerican cultures. The Storm God and the Feathered Serpent, for example, are two deities of central importance to Mesoamerican spirituality and iconography. They are primarily associated with agriculture, rain, and the creation of humankind. The deities' visual omnipresence at Teotihuacan is a testament to their significance at all levels of society, and they are represented in this curriculum by a mural fragment depicting the Storm God carrying maize (corn), and two sculptural fragments from the Feathered Serpent Pyramid,

which is located at the southern end of the Street of the Dead, Teotihuacan's central axis.

The other artworks discussed in this curriculum are portable objects that would have been traded, used at home, or included in burials. A stucco-painted ceramic vessel depicting a figure hunting birds with a blowgun provides insight into pottery production and cross-cultural trade. The vessel also alludes to both the afterlife and to an important Mesoamerican creation myth. Bird imagery also appears on a clay *incensario* (incense burner) that would have been used during rituals for honoring a deceased community member, possibly a warrior. At Teotihuacan, different warrior orders could be identified by their animal companions, such as eagles, jaguars, and coyotes.

The four artworks explored here—ranging from monumental civic architecture and elaborate murals to handheld objects for personal use—help us better understand what the inhabitants of Teotihuacan thought and believed, and how they interacted with the world around them.

We hope that the following essays, images, discussion prompts, and lesson plans will help you bring the city of Teotihuacan to life in your classrooms. The themes and topics explored here can be applied to the study of other ancient civilizations and world cultures. They can also be incorporated into classroom explorations of mythology, architecture, world religions, symbolism, astronomy, and geography.



Aerial view of Teotihuacan with Sun Pyramid in foreground, photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH



View of Moon Pyramid with Cerro Gordo in distance, Teotihuacan, photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH

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## ***Feathered Serpent Head, (200–250 CE)*** ***Sculpture Fragment, (200–250 CE)***

Three main pyramid complexes line Teotihuacan's central axis, a one-and-a-half-mile-long road running from north to south called the Street of the Dead. The Moon Pyramid stands at the northern end of the Street of the Dead, its architecture mimicking the contours of Cerro Gordo, a sacred mountain to the north of the city. The largest pyramid at Teotihuacan is the Sun Pyramid. It is located south of the Moon Pyramid on the eastern side of the Street of the Dead. It is the third largest pyramid in the world, with a base that is comparable in size to that of the Great Pyramid at Giza, Egypt. At the southern end of the street stands the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, which is located within a large walled courtyard called the Ciudadela (citadel) and decorated with numerous stone serpent heads and headdresses that jut out at each of the pyramid's stepped levels.

The Feathered Serpent Pyramid was built in the *talud-tablero* style, an architectural approach inherited from earlier Mesoamerican civilizations and used in many temples, pyramids, and platforms throughout the region. *Talud-tablero* is a repetitive stepped form that comprises the exterior walls of built structures and consists of a slope (*talud*) topped by a table-like structure with a vertical panel (*tablero*) (see images of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid and the Moon Pyramid Plaza below). The *talud-tablero* style was used throughout the city center to create a powerful, uniform appearance.

The two sculpture fragments pictured here once adorned the Feathered Serpent Pyramid. The first fragment represents the head of the Feathered Serpent and the second fragment represents the headdress that the deity carries on its back. Today, the pyramid still features many carved stone representations of the Feathered Serpent deity, whose body stretches horizontally across the façade and ends in a rattlesnake tail. On the pyramid, the Feathered Serpent's multiple likenesses emerge from feathered mirrors and are surrounded by water symbols. Mirrors were considered portals to another dimension and their presence here suggests that the Feathered Serpent has traveled to the earthly plane from an otherworldly place.

One of the oldest Mesoamerican deities, the Feathered Serpent is associated with a number of creation myths,

which are symbolic narratives about how the world began and people first came to inhabit it. Historians have posited that at Teotihuacan, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid stood in for the sacred mountain that emerged from a primordial, or ancient, sea to mark the beginning of time. Archaeologists have also found evidence that the Teotihuacanos periodically flooded the Ciudadela (the walled courtyard that surrounds the pyramid) by diverting water from the nearby Rio San Juan, transforming it into an embodiment of the primordial sea that predated human existence.

The Feathered Serpent also plays an important role in the passage of time and especially in the agricultural cycle: the deity is connected to the movements of the planet Venus, which appears to us in the morning and returns in the evening. Typically represented by a serpent covered by the lustrous green feathers of the quetzal bird—a luxury item traded throughout Mesoamerica—the Feathered Serpent is related to the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl and the Mayan deity Sovereign Plumed Serpent.

All four sides of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid were once painted in brilliant greens and reds, and scholars believe that sacrifices and other rituals were carried out by priests and rulers atop the pyramid for thousands of people to watch from below. In fact, the Ciudadela's large plaza could have held more than one hundred thousand spectators during a ceremony (thousands more than the Rose Bowl can hold). Priests and rulers likely performed rituals at the Feathered Serpent Pyramid to mark important dates related to rainfall and the agricultural cycle and to demonstrate their own special status via association with the powerful deity. The ancient Mesoamerican calendar was conceptualized as cyclical, and rituals brought forth cosmic regeneration and renewal.



## Discussion Prompts

1. Study *Sculpture Fragment*, which represents the headdress that the Feathered Serpent carries on its back. Can you imagine what the rest might have looked like?
2. Look closely at the photographs of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid. What details do you notice? Can you guess where *Feathered Serpent Head* would have been placed? Can you guess what some of the other stone sculptures might represent and/or symbolize?
3. Throughout history, political and religious leaders have communicated their power visually through clothing, portraits, architecture, and other objects of material culture. What are some examples from other time periods and cultures? How did rulers and other elite people demonstrate their power and status through these objects?
4. Study your city or neighborhood on a map. How is it laid out and where are the largest or most important buildings located? What are some of the tools that city planners might have used to prepare for its construction?



View of Moon Pyramid Plaza with Sun Pyramid in background, Teotihuacan, photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH





Feathered Serpent Head, 200–250 CE, stone, stucco, and pigment, 27½ × 27½ × 78¾ in. (70 × 70 × 200 cm), Zona de Monumentos Arqueológicos de Teotihuacán/ INAH [Museo de la Cultura Teotihuacana] (10-411074), photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH





*Sculpture Fragment, 200–250 CE, andesite, 32% x 57 x 44 1/8 in. (82 x 145 x 112 cm), Zona de Monumentos Arqueológicos de Teotihuacán/INAH [Museo de la Cultura Teotihuacana], photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH*





Detail of facade of Feathered Serpent Pyramid, Teotihuacan, photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH



Detail of facade of Feathered Serpent Pyramid, with mosaic headdress carried by Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacan, photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH



## ***Mural Fragment with Storm God Impersonator, (350–550 CE)***

Among the deities revered by Teotihuacanos, the Storm God is one of the most frequently depicted in artwork throughout the city. In mural paintings, ceramic sculptures, and carved stone objects, the Storm God appears in a range of guises that shed light on the different aspects of his character. One of the most prominent is the deity's association with water, fertility, and agricultural productivity; another is his ability to make fire, create lightning, and cause destruction.

The Storm God's most easily identifiable traits are his ringed or goggled eyes, large round earspools (short, cylindrical pieces of jewelry typically worn in larger-gauge body piercings), curled upper lip, and fangs. In some depictions of the deity, water flows from his mouth as if from a mountain cave, with his fangs taking on associations to stalactites. Teotihuacan experts often consider the Storm God a predecessor of Tlaalok (Tlaloc), the Aztec rain deity. Like the Storm God, Tlaalok has goggled eyes and fangs: the Aztecs believed he was part jaguar and created thunder when he roared. Rain deities were revered by many Mesoamerican peoples, including the Maya, the Zapotec, and the Mixtec.

Color is also important to the Storm God's various personalities. When colored black, the deity carries torches, likely symbolizing fire. When red, he usually holds a lightning bolt and a vessel with water pouring from it, alluding to violent storms. The white Storm God is portrayed with a shield and lightning bolts or darts, indicating his destructive, warlike characteristics. Finally, the green Storm God is benevolent and carries plants, especially maize (corn), which symbolize the deity's agricultural importance.

Maize played a fundamental role in the development of Mesoamerican civilizations because it could be prepared and eaten in a number of ways, easily stored, and used to make practical objects, such as baskets. In the mural fragment shown here, the Storm God is presented as his green, benevolent self. He holds a yellow maize stalk with a large blue cob in his right hand and multicolored cobs peek out over the edge of the woven sack he carries on his back. A long, curved speech scroll in blue and green emanates from the deity's mouth, indicating that he is in the act of speaking. The elaborate headdress he wears,

part of which has been lost, likely consists of eye motifs with descending water drops, possibly symbolizing rain.

*Mural Fragment with Storm God Impersonator* belongs to a group of nearly two dozen visually similar murals that were discovered on the interior walls of Zacuala, a relatively wealthy residential compound near the city center. The murals were painted on the walls of four separate rooms located at the corners of the compound's central interior patio. These rooms had a transitional or connective function, somewhat like hallways in homes today. According to one scholar, the rooms' location, combined with the presence of murals on their walls showing the Storm God carrying maize and speaking, suggests that when actual maize was brought into the compound from the fields, it was first carried to the central patio and then distributed to household members in each of the four corner rooms. While this interpretation is speculative, it demonstrates the Storm God's centrality in everyday life. Teotihuacanos associated him with numerous important events, from the life-giving rains at the beginning of the agricultural cycle to the distribution of the harvest in homes across the city.

### **Discussion Prompts**

1. *Mural Fragment with Storm God Impersonator* decorated an interior wall in a home. What are some of the ways we decorate the insides of our homes today?
2. Maize was an important staple food for ancient Mesoamerican peoples. What is a staple food? What are some examples of staple foods that people around the world eat today? Where did these foods originate?
3. The Storm God has many different characteristics or traits. Write a short story or poem that describes some of your personal traits. Then, illustrate your story or poem with symbols of each trait, incorporating colors that also carry personal, symbolic meaning.





*Mural Fragment with Storm God Impersonator, 350–550 CE, earthen aggregate, stucco, and mineral pigments, 18<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 37 × 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (48 × 94 × 4 cm), Museo Nacional de Antropología/INAH (10-221996), Archivo Digital de la Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología/INAH-CANON*

## ***Tripod Vessel Depicting Blowgun Hunter, (400–650 CE)***

Many cultural groups throughout ancient Mesoamerica produced and traded stucco-painted, cylindrical clay vessels with tripod legs. The vessels' intricate, colorful surfaces often depict a range of subjects that includes warriors, deities, and mythological scenes. *Tripod Vessel Depicting Blowgun Hunter* features a combination of these subjects, although historians are not yet entirely certain what the vessel's imagery means or how the object was used in everyday life at Teotihuacan. However, much is known about how stucco-painted tripod vessels were made in the city.

At Teotihuacan, artists often lived and worked in separate apartment compounds devoted to their crafts (i.e., making obsidian blades, assembling greenstone and shell ornaments, or weaving baskets). Evidence suggests that some pottery specialists may have lived on the southern periphery of the city, where the best clays are still located and harvested by artisans today.

Ancient artists formed ceramic vessels by hand using the coiling method, then baked them in pit fires before any decorations were added. Once a vessel had been fired, an artist applied a white stucco base layer made of calcite, clay, or a combination of both. After the stucco had dried, some artists painted directly onto a vessel's surface with colored pigments. Others etched images and designs into the white stucco with a sharp stylus first. Many different pigments were available to artists: iron oxides such as hematite and limonite made red and yellow; copper carbonates like malachite and azurite made green and blue; and cinnabar could be used to create red, orange-red, and pink. Each pigment was applied in separate sections that were later outlined in black.

At Teotihuacan, stucco-painted vessels have been found in offerings and burials associated with a wide range of socioeconomic levels, and some vessels show signs of wear and use. Mural images showing vessels being carried and presented indicate that these objects were also used for the purposes of gift-giving and diplomatic exchange. In addition, stucco-painted vessels were part of a large trade network. Tripods similar in appearance to those produced at Teotihuacan have been found in other regions of Mesoamerica, such as areas of present-day Guatemala where the Maya lived. Plain ceramic vessels were also imported into Teotihuacan from Puebla and the Gulf Coast, and then stuccoed and painted by local artists.

*Tripod Vessel Depicting Blowgun Hunter* depicts two identical scenes, one on each side, of an elaborately

dressed figure hunting birds with a blowgun. Each hunter wears a green helmet adorned with a white star and a butterfly proboscis (the insect's long, tube-like tongue) that extends out of the top of the helmet. Each hunter also grips a long blowgun with one hand and aims it at green birds flying among white, upside-down-T shaped elements that may represent flowers. The hunters may be warriors, who were often associated with butterfly attributes.

The vessel's imagery may reference a belief known from the Aztecs in which deceased warriors returned to earth reincarnated as butterflies or hummingbirds. Scholars also speculate that the vessel's bird and flower symbolism may relate to a creation myth that is depicted in numerous murals and on other tripod vessels found at Teotihuacan. The myth tells the story of an enormous bird who was shot down by supernatural beings armed with blowguns. Killing the creature allowed the blowgunners to acquire the bird's riches and thus prepare the world for human creation. Similar creation myths found across Mesoamerica connect Teotihuacanos to an important lineage of stories about how humankind began; one parallel example of note can be found in the Maya narrative the Popol Vuh.

### **Discussion Prompts**

1. Historians are not yet sure what *Tripod Vessel Depicting Blowgun Hunter* was used for, but we can hypothesize. Based on what you know about the vessel's exterior decoration as well as other uses for tripod vessels, what do you think it might have held inside? How might it have been displayed or stored?
2. A creation myth is a narrative about how the world began and people came to inhabit it. What are some other creation myths you know about? How are they similar to or different from the myth mentioned above?
3. In the creation myth described above, supernatural beings shoot a winged creature from the sky to get the riches it is hoarding and prepare the world for humans. These riches may have consisted of resources that could help make the earth livable for humankind. What are some of the basic resources humans need to live?
4. The Teotihuacanos traded extensively with people both near and far, and historians believe that stucco-painted vessels were sometimes presented as gifts. What types of gifts do family and friends exchange? What kinds of gifts are exchanged between different cultures and countries?





*Tripod Vessel Depicting Blowgun Hunter*, 400–650 CE, stuccoed ceramic with postfire applied pigments, 5 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 5 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (13.65 × 14.61 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Constance McCormick Fearing (AC1998.209.15), photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

## ***Incensario*, (200–350 CE)**

The vessel forms that are perhaps the most representative and characteristic of artwork created at Teotihuacan are large *incensarios*, or incense burners. They are usually composed of an hourglass-shaped base that serves as a combustion chamber, an inverted vessel serving as a lid, and a chimney that allows for the exit of smoke. Incense burners are made of multiple interlocking parts and feature human faces at their centers. They also include an array of plaques and other mold-made ceramic elements layered on top of one another, called *adornos* (adornments). *Adornos* often depict birds, butterflies, temples, or feathered disks.

The incense burner pictured here features an elaborately dressed human figure atop a throne or temple wearing a necklace, double ear ornaments, a nose plaque, and a tunic. A bird head with an open beak emerges from the figure's chest and likely served as a secondary outlet for smoke. Large circular disks on the left and right sides of the incense burner may have once contained mica or pyrite, highly reflective minerals that were frequently used to make mirrors. Mirrors appear in many artworks at Teotihuacan and often symbolize gateways to a supernatural dimension.

In its current state, the incense burner appears to be covered with a thin layer of white paint. When archaeologists discovered it, they found charcoal remains from pinewood, Mexican oak, maize, and bean seeds in the burner's base. Pine and oak produce a pleasant smell when burned, and the maize and beans may have been intended as offerings to the deceased. Many incense burners—including this one—have been excavated from burial sites within apartment compounds, indicating that rites for the dead were often performed at home. The incorporation of human faces, mirror-like substances such as mica or pyrite, and animal-shaped smoke holes tells us that the activation of participants' senses, especially sight and smell, was an important feature of ritual activities.

Details observed on incense burners have led scholars to conclude that the Teotihuacan belief system included ceremonial honoring of fallen warriors. On this particular incense burner, the relationship between the human figure (possibly a deceased warrior) and the bird emerging from his chest may be one of transformation that refers

both to warfare and to the afterlife. Teotihuacan warriors dressed as animals and supernatural entities in order to adopt the characteristics of those beings. The Aztec and the Maya also believed that the act of transformation from human into animal allowed certain people to become supernatural, which could enhance their performance on the battlefield or lend them spiritual protection.

Transformation could also empower humans to travel in magical ways to the world of their ancestors. Perhaps the bird head on this incense burner indicates a fallen warrior's membership in a particular military group. It might also be the case that the bird, animated by smoke during a ritual, was able to communicate with the spirit of the deceased or secure his passage to the paradise afterlife.

### **Discussion Prompts**

1. Look closely at *Incensario*. Describe some of the *adornos* you see.
2. Do you have a special connection with a particular type of animal? Describe the connection and why it is special to you.
3. A ritual is a formal ceremony or series of actions done in a particular situation and in the same way each time. What are some special rituals in which you have participated? What kinds of rituals do you perform daily?
4. The ancient Teotihuacanos used incense burners to honor people after they died. What are some rituals that we perform to honor people who have passed away (with our families, as a society, etc.)?





*Incensario*, 200–350 CE, ceramic, 28 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 13 in. (72.6 × 35 × 33.1 cm), Zona de Monumentos Arqueológicos de Teotihuacán/INAH [Ceramoteca], photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara Elías © INAH

# Classroom Activity

## Symmetry in Architecture

<b>Essential Questions</b>	What is bilateral symmetry? How can we create drawings of buildings that are symmetrical?
<b>Grades</b>	PK–3 and SDC
<b>Time</b>	One class period
<b>Art Concepts</b>	Bilateral symmetry, lines, shapes, vertical, folding, tracing, reverse, rubbing/printing, pyramid, architecture
<b>Materials</b>	White drawing paper, cardboard rectangles in two sizes (3 × 4 in. and 3 × 5 in.), black oil pastels, large round kindergarten pencils, colored oil pastels, watercolor paints, cups, water, brushes, paper towels
<b>Talking About Art</b>	<p>Teotihuacan is an ancient city in central Mexico that is renowned for its monumental pyramids, some of which are as big as the pyramids in Egypt. Let's look at photographs of buildings at Teotihuacan together. What kinds of shapes and lines do you see? What are some words you would use to describe the buildings? Do the buildings have windows? What do you think the buildings are made out of?</p> <p>The buildings at Teotihuacan are examples of <b>bilateral symmetry</b>. Have you heard the word “symmetry” before? What does it make you think of? Bilateral symmetry means that something is the same on both sides (right and left). There are many examples of bilateral symmetry in nature. Can you think of anything in nature that is symmetrical? I am thinking of a very colorful insect with wings (butterflies and/or dragonflies). If we were to draw a <b>vertical</b> (positioned up and down rather than from side to side) line down the middle of a butterfly, for example, we would see that both sides of the insect match/are symmetrical to one another.</p> <p>Look at the image of <i>Feathered Serpent Head</i> (included in the curriculum packet). Is the head symmetrical? What do you think the serpent's body might look like? What features of the serpent's head stand out to you the most? Can you find serpent heads on the Feathered Serpent Pyramid (see image in curriculum packet)? Why do you think the pyramid is decorated with serpents?</p>
<b>Making Art</b>	<p>We are going to create our own symmetrical pyramids using paper, cardboard, and oil pastels.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Fold a sheet of paper in half horizontally. Keep it folded for now.</li><li>2. Line up two cardboard rectangles on your paper:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. The wide, bottom edge of the larger rectangle (3 x 5 inches) should be lined up with the bottom edge of the paper.</li><li>b. One of the short sides of the rectangle should be lined up with the folded edge of the paper (see image A below).</li><li>c. Place the smaller rectangle (3 x 4 inches) on top of the larger rectangle. Line up one of the short sides of the rectangle with the folded edge of the paper (see image).</li></ol></li><li>3. Trace the outside edges of the cardboard rectangles on your paper with a black oil pastel, then remove the cardboard.</li></ol>



## Making Art (cont.)

4. Next, we are going to draw serpents inside the black lines (see image B). You can use the serpent head we looked at earlier as inspiration or make up your own.
5. When you are finished, put your oil pastel down and unfold your paper. Then, re-fold the paper so that the drawing is on the inside.
6. Rub the folded paper with a pencil turned on its side like a rolling pin.
7. Unfold the paper again. Did the black lines of your drawing transfer to the other side of the paper?
8. Go over the transferred lines with a black oil pastel so that all the lines are equally black.
9. Now you can color in your building and the serpents. Try to make them match on both sides (e.g. if your serpent's eyes are green on the left side of the drawing, they should also be green on the right side).

### Tips

Advanced students can be given a greater number of rectangles in different sizes to make the assignment more challenging. They can also practice drawing the pyramid's different levels using a ruler and/or find the total area of their pyramid using multiplication.

### Reflection

Are all or some parts of your drawing symmetrical? Can you show or explain how the individual parts are symmetrical?

### Curriculum Connections

Preschool Learning Foundations: Mathematics, Geometry  
1.1 Identify simple two-dimensional shapes, such as a circle and square. 1.2 Combine different shapes to create a picture or design.

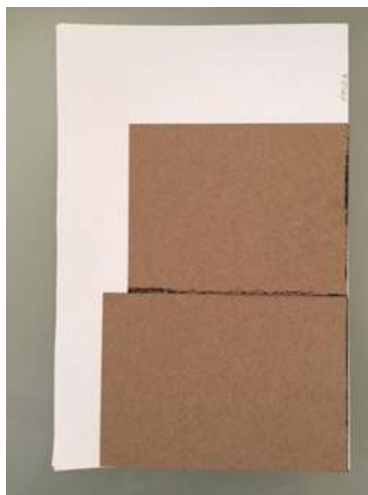
CCSS.MATH.GEOMETRY.K

K.G.1 Describe objects in the environment using names of shapes. K.G.2 Correctly name shapes regardless of their orientations or overall size.

CCSS.MATH.OPERATIONS AND ALGEBRAIC THINKING.3

3.OA.7 Fluently multiply and divide within 100, using strategies such as the relationship between multiplication and division. By the end of Grade 3, know from memory all products of two one-digit numbers.

### Images



# Classroom Activity

## Storytelling Vessels

<b>Essential Questions</b>	How can we make clay vessels/containers that tell stories through images and colors?
<b>Grades</b>	PK–3 and SDC
<b>Time</b>	1–2 class periods
<b>Art Concepts</b>	Clay, vessel, tripod, hand-building, shapes, structure, base/foundation, storytelling
<b>Materials</b>	Red self-hardening clay, pieces of cardboard (to use as bases), tools for embossing (straws, bottle caps, plastic forks, etc.), acrylic paints, small and medium sized paintbrushes, water bowls, cups for paint
<b>Talking About Art</b>	<p>We can study clay <b>tripod</b> vessels/containers (tripods are objects that stand or rest on three legs) made by artists at Teotihuacan, an ancient city in present-day Mexico, to learn about how they were made, decorated, and used. <i>Tripod Vessel Depicting Blowgun Hunter</i> (400–650 CE), included in the curriculum packet, was made almost 2,000 years ago. Tripod vessels like this one were often given as gifts or traded with other people.</p> <p>What shape is this clay container? How many legs does it have? Look closely at the artwork painted on it. What do you see? What colors did the artist use? Can you find a human face on the vessel? Can you find the rest of the person’s body? What do you think the figure painted on the vessel is doing? What is the figure wearing and holding? Why do you think the artist painted this particular picture?</p> <p>Some people believe that the painting on <i>Tripod Vessel</i> depicts a story that was important to the people who lived in Teotihuacan because it described the creation of humankind. The story is about a huge, magical bird that lived in the sky before humans existed.</p>
<b>Making Art</b>	<p>We are going to create our own containers out of clay and decorate them with stories. What will your vessel look like? What story do you want to paint on its surface? What colors will you use? Would you like to give your vessel to someone you know as a gift? Who will you give it to?</p> <p>Begin with a slab of self-hardening clay on a piece of cardboard. There are many different ways to form a container with clay:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You can push and pinch the sides up with your fingers</li><li>• You can roll your clay into a ball and push in the center</li></ul> <p>After you have created your container, you can decorate it with paint. You can also use a pencil to carve drawings into the clay.</p> <p><b>Tips for PK and Special Education Classes</b> Students can roll clay balls to make legs or omit the legs altogether. Instead of painting, containers can be decorated by embossing with the ends of straws or markers, a dull pencil, spoons, forks, plastic lids, etc.</p>



**Making Art** (cont.)

Teachers, you can also provide students with a flat, rectangular piece of clay to decorate, then help them stand it up and connect the two short edges (scoring them first) to form a cylinder. A circular clay base can also be added by scoring. Scoring involves making crisscross marks with a toothpick or other small tool on the two pieces of clay you want to stick together, then pressing the two pieces together with your hands.

**Reflection**

Display your sculptures around the room and discuss them together. How did you build your container? How did you decorate it? What story did you represent?

**Curriculum Connections**

NCAS. Visual Arts.K-2

CR.1.K Engage in exploration and imaginative play with materials.

CR.2.2 Experiment with various materials and tools to explore personal interests in a work of art or design.

Preschool Learning Foundations: Language and Literacy

Language Use and Conventions 1.4 Use language to construct short narratives that are real or fictional.

Vocabulary 2.1 Understand and use accepted words for objects, actions, and attributes encountered frequently in both real and symbolic contexts.

# Classroom Activity

## Art, Symbols, and Nature

**Essential Questions** How can you use symbols to make connections between art and nature?

**Grades** 3–8

**Time** 1–2 class periods

**Art Concepts** Drawing, painting, symbols, color, line, imagination, nature, environment

**Materials** Watercolor paper, watercolor paints, pencils, black markers in varying thicknesses, cups, water, brushes, paper towels

**Talking About Art** Frequently depicted in artwork at the ancient Mexican city of Teotihuacan, the Storm God was an important deity related to rainfall and agriculture. In *Mural Fragment with Storm God Impersonator*, some of the Storm God’s personality traits are represented using **symbols**. In art, a symbol is usually a recognizable thing (such as an animal, a plant, or an object) that stands for, or represents, something else. Symbols often represent something abstract, like a force of nature or a big idea.<sup>1</sup>

What do you notice about the Storm God in this artwork? What colors were used to paint him? What is he carrying? What do you think each of these different elements might symbolize? How do the deity’s different symbolic attributes or traits relate to his name? Let’s work together to identify other elements and forces of nature. For example, I really like trees and wind. Can we list some more? (brainstorm, chart answers).

Now, explore an element or force of nature with the person sitting next to you (you can choose something from our brainstorm if you wish). How could you use symbols to represent your chosen element or force? Think about sights, sounds, animals, plants, colors, shapes, and personal associations. For example, with “trees” I might begin with the colors green and brown, fruit, roots, and birds. “Wind” causes me to think of the color gray, scarves, and seeds being carried to new places.

**Making Art** Choose a natural feature (it can be the one you just discussed with your partner, or one from the list we created together, or a different one). Come up with a few symbols that represent how you see or experience it. Then draw the symbols in pencil on your paper. Next, trace over your drawing with a black marker. Finally, paint your drawing, choosing colors that also have symbolic importance.

### Tips

Older students can choose to create a character (like the Storm God) that embodies their chosen natural force or feature. 7th grade students can study this artwork while learning about Mesoamerican artistic achievements and agricultural systems.

**Reflection** Leave your artwork on the tables and we will have a gallery walk. Then, reflect on the art-making experience and respond to the following questions in oral form: How did you use art to communicate about nature and the environment today? How was

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<sup>1</sup> “Symbols in Art,” Smithsonian Education, <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/idealabs/myths/symbolsinart/>.



**Reflection** (cont.) this experience different from or similar to writing and/or talking about nature? If you were to do this assignment again, what element or force of nature would you be interested in exploring?

**Curriculum  
Connections**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.4-5.4

3.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language. 4.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g., Herculean). 5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools

7.7 Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Meso-American and Andean civilizations. 7.7.4. Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations. 7.7.5. Describe the Meso-American achievements in astronomy and mathematics, including the development of the calendar and the Meso-American knowledge of seasonal changes to the civilizations' agricultural systems.

## **Classroom Activity**

### ***El Templo Mágico (The Magical Temple)***

<b>Essential Questions</b>	What is a ritual? What kinds of rituals do you participate in? How did the Teotihuacanos create special artworks to use during rituals?
<b>Grades</b>	3–12
<b>Time</b>	One class period
<b>Art Concepts</b>	<i>Incensarios</i> , <i>adornos</i> , symbolism, ritual, pattern, balance, line, relief, symmetry, asymmetry, complementary colors, composition, deity, ceramics
<b>Materials</b>	8 ½ × 11 in. multi-colored and white cardstock paper, cardstock scrapbooking papers in assorted patterns, black markers, scissors, pencils, Elmer’s glue, glue sticks, motif templates
<b>Talking About Art</b>	<p>Ceramic <b><i>incensarios</i></b> (incense burners) were often used in religious rituals during Teotihuacan’s Classic period (200–650 C.E.). A ritual is a formal ceremony or series of acts done in a particular situation and in the same way each time.</p> <p>Incense burners typically consist of an elaborate conical lid, chimney, hourglass-shaped base, and temple-like armature. Mold-made clay <b><i>adornos</i></b> (adornments) decorate the surfaces of incense burners and represent objects such as fruits, circular ear flares, shells, butterflies, and quatrefoil flowers.</p> <p>The central figure on the <i>Incensario</i> included in the curriculum packet might represent a warrior (warriors were highly celebrated at Teotihuacan), as suggested by the butterfly nose plaque, which was a typical element of military costumes. Butterflies were important to the Teotihuacanos and could symbolize transformation, renewal, death, war, and fire.</p> <p>Describe the human figure represented at the center of the incense burner. How would you describe the shapes or objects surrounding the figure? What shapes or objects do you recognize?</p> <p>What type of ritual or ceremony do you think the incense burner was used for? How do you think it was used? How might participants in a ritual involving this incense burner have related to the figure at the center? How can the burner’s size, shape, and adornments help you to discover its function and meaning? Are there any animals in your community (like butterflies at Teotihuacan) that are symbolic? For example, dogs are often associated with loyalty.</p>
<b>Making Art</b>	<p>Think about different rituals in which you participate (family, community, religious, etc.). Respond to the following questions to prompt reflection and elicit memories: What types of rituals do you perform daily? What kinds of objects do you use while you perform or partake in these rituals? How do daily rituals differ from those performed for special occasions or ceremonies (birthdays, weddings, graduation)? How do special props, clothing, stage sets, foods, scents, or music affect the meaning, feeling, and actions of rituals?</p> <p>Merging ancient Teotihuacan iconography with contemporary paper sculpting techniques, you will create a 3D <i>incensario</i> using motifs inspired by the example in the curriculum packet.</p>



## Making Art (cont.)

### Tips for Teachers

Demonstrate a range of paper-sculpting techniques before students begin the art-making activity (paper crimping, cones, fringe, pop-out, folding, spirals, cylinders, controlled tearing, crumpling). Then, set standards for the students' paper *incensarios* and distribute materials to each table.

1. Select a warrior template and trace it with a pencil onto a solid color or patterned sheet of cardstock.
  - a. You can choose to glue the figure flat onto a white sheet of cardstock or experiment with a paper sculpting technique before gluing (e.g. fold the figure in half and create a pop-out form).
2. Select an animal figure template to add to your composition and trace it onto a piece of colored cardstock.
  - a. You can use the animal figure once if you want to place it in the center of the composition to achieve a symmetrical effect (see Sample A and Sample B below). You can also make multiple copies if you want to create an asymmetrical effect (see Sample C below).
3. Use a paper-sculpting technique to transform the animal figure/s (e.g. folding, pop out, fringe).
4. Glue the animal figures onto the warrior or onto the background paper.
5. Select at least two more colored papers for the *adornos* that will surround the warrior. For best results, choose complementary colors: red/green, yellow/purple, and blue/orange.
6. To create multiple *adornos*, fold a sheet of paper in half, then trace the shape and cut through both layers of paper.
7. Experiment with the paper-sculpting techniques that you learned at the beginning of the lesson. Be creative!
8. Arrange the *adornos* around your central figure and glue them down.

### Reflection

Participate in an in-class discussion to reflect on the art-making experience. Respond to the following prompts in oral form:

Describe your *incensario's* different elements (shapes, colors, textures, composition, *adornos*, animals) and your reasons for selecting/creating each one. What personal meanings does your *incensario* have? How would you like to display or use it at home or in the classroom? How is your *incensario* similar to the example we viewed from Teotihuacan?

### Lesson Add-On

Ask students to sit in a circle before beginning the art-making activity. Turn down the lights and play recordings of pre-Hispanic songs out loud. Ask students to imagine they are in the ancient city of Teotihuacan and to visualize what it might look like, what kinds of people might live there, and what type of ceremony could be taking place during the time the music is playing (5–10 minutes). Invite volunteers to share their impressions.

### Curriculum Connections

CCSS.VAPA.3-5

3.1.5 Identify and describe elements of art in works of art, emphasizing line, color, shape/form, texture, space, and value.

4.1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (e.g., color, shape/form, line, texture, space, value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment. 4.2.3 Use additive and subtractive processes in making simple sculptural forms. 4.2.8 Use complementary colors in an original composition to show contrast and emphasis. 4.3.1 Describe how art plays a role in reflecting life. 4.4.3

**Curriculum Connections**  
(cont.)

Develop and use specific criteria as individuals and in groups to assess works of art.  
5.3.1 View selected works of art from a major culture and observe changes in materials and styles over a period of time.

**Images**



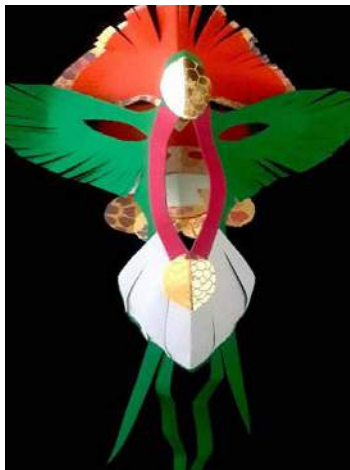
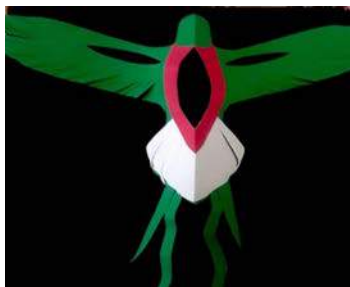
Paper-sculpting Techniques



Sample A



Sample C



Sample B



## Resources

### Books for Students

#### ***Corn Is Maize: The Gift of the Indians***

Aliki

This book tells the story of how Native American farmers thousands of years ago found and nourished a wild grass plant and made corn an important part of their lives. Grades K–3

#### ***Descifrar el Cielo: La Astronomía en Mesoamérica***

Federico Guzmán

This Spanish-language book describes how the Native communities of Mexico and Central America used their observations of the sky to develop agriculture, a precise calendar system, and advanced civilizations. Grades 6–12

#### ***Here Is My Kingdom: Hispanic-American Literature and Art for Young People***

Edited by Charles Sullivan

Explore the multifaceted Hispanic-American/Latino experience in this colorful anthology of poems, prose, and visual art. Grades K–12

### Books for Teachers

#### ***An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya***

Mary Ellen Miller and Karl Taube

Containing nearly 300 entries, this illustrated dictionary describes the mythology and religion of Mesoamerican cultures.

#### ***Legends of the Plumed Serpent: Biography of a Mexican God***

Neil Baldwin

Following one Mesoamerican deity (known variably as the Feathered Serpent, the Plumed Serpent, and Quetzalcóatl) through the centuries, Baldwin explores the figure's lasting significance for Mexican and Central American cultures.

#### ***Teotihuacan: City of Water, City of Fire***

Edited by Matthew H. Robb

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *City and Cosmos: The Arts of Teotihuacan* and explores art and architecture's importance to Teotihuacan's diverse citizens.

### Online Resources

#### **Art of the Ancient Americas at LACMA**

Browse LACMA's diverse collection of artwork from the ancient Americas by time period or object type. [collections.lacma.org](http://collections.lacma.org) (Curatorial area/Art of the Ancient Americas)

#### **Digital Stories—Teotihuacan: City of Water, City of Fire**

The de Young Museum in San Francisco created an online introduction to Teotihuacan that includes numerous images and maps of the city. <https://digitalstories.famsf.org/teo#start>

### Related Curriculum Materials

*Evenings for Educators* resources include illustrated essays, discussion prompts for the classroom, and lesson plans for art-making activities. Browse selected online curriculum at [lacma.org/students-teachers/teacher-resources](http://lacma.org/students-teachers/teacher-resources).

Relevant curriculum materials include:

- *Ancient Mexico: The Legacy of the Plumed Serpent*
- *Olmec: Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*