

# HISTORY OF MOSAICS IN LATIN AMERICA

Roger Whiting 2010  
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## PART ONE: POWERPOINT DISCUSSION (45 MIN)

Students will:

- Take notes about the development of mosaic art in Latin America
- Compare and contrast art from different periods in Latin American history

## PART TWO: ART PROJECT (45 MIN)

Students will:

- Create a mosaic inspired by Latin American art

**Materials needed:**

- Construction paper (or magazines)
- Glue sticks
- Scissors

**Process:**

Show the picture of the Aztec calendar, and let the students know that each of them will be creating a mosaic about themselves using the design of the Aztec calendar as a starting point. Explain to the students that they will first draw a picture using only large outlines (no shading or fine detail), and then they will be cutting different colored pieces of paper to assemble a mosaic out of paper on top of their sketch.

First the students will draw a picture of themselves to be placed in the middle of the calendar. This can be just their head, or it can be their whole body. Since they are working in symbols on this project, the picture does not have to look like them, it just has to represent them somehow (Artistic merit is not required for this project).

Next, the students will draw a few (4-6) *large* symbols surrounding the pictures of themselves.

These symbols can be related to:

*Family, Personal values, School, Birthplace (or current home)*

*Interests, Favorite foods, Any other symbol that describes you or your culture*

Lastly, fill in the remainder of the space with large geometric designs (basic shapes, lines, etc).

Next, cut out small pieces of construction paper with scissors and use the glue sticks to paste those pieces of color, filling in the shapes of the symbols, face, and patterns until the page is filled with color.

## ALTERNATE MATERIALS FOR ART CLASSES:

Flat Marbles (available at the dollar store) on cardboard or cardstock

Ceramic pieces, acrylic caulking, and drywall mud as grout

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Latin America has a rich history of art that dates back to long before Europeans settled and conquered the land. Pottery has been found in Latin America dating back as far as 2500 BC (1, p110).

Mosaic art entered Latin America perhaps as a form of necessity to achieve their desired artistic expression. The Olmec people, who lived from 200BC to 650AD built massive pyramids out of stone without the luxury of technologies such as the wheel (1, p112). Although the size of the stones used to create the pyramids was limited, the designers used mosaic to create relief sculptures much larger than the stones. Looking at pictures of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl you can see that there are large pictures surrounding the outside of the temple that are carved across several blocks which are assembled together (1, p124).

As civilizations evolved in Latin America, so did the complexity of their art. The Mixtecs, a society that existed in Mexico from 650 AD to 1430AD, developed a codex, or system of pictures to tell stories and convey histories. This codex was used to paint murals and create relief sculptures in their architecture (1, p147).

## **DISCUSSION NOTE - Define and discuss visual symbols. How are they used in our day?**

Mayan and Aztec cultures both used mosaic to create funerary masks out of jade for the tombs of prominent leaders.(6)(7)

After the Mixtecs, a military society evolved known as the Aztecs. The Aztecs were one of the main civilizations to encounter the Spanish colonizers. Unlike the Mayans, Aztec civilization did not go down without a fight. In fact, it was a very bloody battle between civilizations which eventually resulted in the near-destruction of Aztec civilization. While the Aztecs were collectors of ancient art of their society, Europeans even ordered art to be buried to avoid “[rekindling] ancient beliefs in the memories of the Indians.” (1, p11).

As Latin America was colonized and conquered by the Europeans, the conquistadors trained “generations of Indians specialized in discovering and looting” ancient tombs of Latin America. Golden art of the Americas was ordered to be “melted down” by Spanish royalty (1, p57)

After the Conquest, there were a few hundred years in which Latin American art was dominated by the artistic traditions of European society, without much innovation or development to the artforms.

It was in this climate of European art domination that three Mexican muralists entered the art scene in the early twentieth century. Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros created waves of change in giving Latin American art its own voice and style.

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Mexico was unique in the Latin American world in the early twentieth century, in that the government was providing funding for the arts. In 1907 the governor of Veracruz sent Diego Rivera on a trip to Spain to study the arts. While traveling Europe, Diego Rivera learned cubism from the art of Pablo Picasso, and learned composition and color from Gauguin and Cezanne (2, p44).

Between 1921 and 1924 Orozco, Rivera, and Siquieros were commissioned to paint murals by the Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, in the Colegio de San Idelfonso in Mexico City (2, p45)(9, 31). The themes they chose for their murals at first were mostly religious themes (2, p45). Instead of using Europeans for the figures of his mural “La Creación” however, Diego Rivera painted “Mexican [people] from the different regions of the country.” (2, p46). Shortly after painting these murals, and in the wake of violent assassinations both for and against the socialist party, the artists got together and signed a “bourgeois manifesto” stating that “casel painting” was the result of aristocratic thinking and that the arts should convey messages that helped to promote the causes of the people (2, 47)(9, 38). Furthermore, the new artists’ union dedicated itself in its manifesto “to the native races humiliated for centuries; to the soldiers made hangmen by their officers; to the workers and peasants scourged by the rich; and to the intellectuals who do not flatter the bourgeoisie.”(9, p39).

## **DISCUSSION NOTE - What other types of art have been used to communicate a social or political message?**

From that time forward, the art of all three of the muralists became more and more politically and socially charged. In “The History of Mexico”, Rivera painted a scene of ancient, pre-Columbian America. In this scene he shows a “golden age” of society in which there is industry, cooperation, and peace (9, p87). This is in sharp contrast to how the Aztecs were often stereotyped as “savages” (in part due to the human sacrifices that occurred in Aztec temples) (8).

## **DISCUSSION NOTE - What is happening in the mural about the ancient Aztecs? What do you think Rivera is trying to say about their culture?**

## **DISCUSSION NOTE - If you look at the background of the mural, there is blood flowing down the steps of the temple. Why do you think this detail is so small in comparison to the rest of the picture? Why do you think that Rivera included this detail at all? Are there aspects of the past history of the United States that perhaps we would rather not have define our culture or history?**

Mexican art from that time forward became more of “a transgression to the International Style purism and rationalism during a critical moment for the history of Mexico.” Instead of the realism of the past or the strict geometric design of their modernist contemporaries, the artists chose to use their art to help create a “new

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national identity” that connected the imagery of the ancient codex with the artistic traditions of the present day. (3) This desire for modern art to reflect the traditions of the past can be seen very poignantly in the huge mosaic mural by Juan O’Gorman for a university library. The arrangement of the images in the mural not only appear to follow the style of the codex, the mural itself seems to be arranged based upon the Aztec calendar.

Further south in Latin America, Joaquín Torres-Garcia took a different approach to the development of Latin American art. Garcia studied with the modernists such as Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and saw how they created their artwork using a grid. He also saw that instead of focusing on current political issues, they were basing their art on “universal” ideas related to the world and humanity(2, p, 128). As he continued developing his work in Uruguay, he connected that purity of design in the paintings of the modernists with the textiles and architecture of the people of the ancient Americas, especially the indigenous people of the South America (2, p132).

**DISCUSSION NOTE - Since these Latin American artists studied with and shared ideas with the artists of the European art movement, should they be considered in a separate category or art movement? Why or why not? Do the artistic styles within individual countries in Europe in the twentieth century have their own unique characteristics? Why are they often discussed of as being part of a cohesive group, then?**

In 1949 Elpidio Perdomo established the first mosaic glass factory in Mexico, “Mosaicos Venecianos de Mexico”, and developed a new type of mosaic glass using the native materials of the area (4) The new factory, as well as the influence of artists such as José Chavez Morado who traveled to Europe in 1949 to study mosaic art, helped to bring mosaic into the contemporary Mexican art scene. (5)

Siqueiros began his government career working with the military and with the Mexican consulate. In his travels he visited Spain and Italy and studied the murals of the Italian Renaissance (2, p44). Perhaps because of his experiences in the military, his murals are often graphically violent, showing scenes of massacre, torture, or totalitarian oppression. As the work of Siquieros developed over the years, it also seems to have used more visually simple forms, opting for a more symbolic approach to imagery.

**DISCUSSION NOTE: How does your own personal experience make your art unique? What symbols might show up in your art that might not show up in the art of the person sitting next to you?**

Not only did Latin American artists borrow from the achievements of the European artists, non-Latin American artists (such as local Utah artist Roger Whiting) up until this day are inspired and influenced by the discoveries and development of the Latin American artists.

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