

ARE 6148: Art Lesson

Unit Title: Organic Artifacts

Teacher: Mr. Testa

Lesson Title: Cranium & Skull Art

Grade Level: 9-12

Estimated Completion Time: One Month

Overview

Students will gain insight into different cultural traditions and viewpoints towards the human skull. Our exploration begins with pre-colonization context, examining and reflecting on Ancient Aztec symbolism, and timekeeping. Our focus narrows on the *Mosaic Mask of Tezcatlipoca*. Students will compare the traditions of Ancient Mexico to contemporary *Day of the Dead* Celebrations. Parallels are drawn between Calaveras, and the work of Mexican political lithographer, José Guadalupe Posada. The work of Posada is connected culturally and subjectively to the work of Frida Kahlo and her partner, Diego Rivera. Students will gain an insight into Mixtec traditions. After learning the context and history of the skull as art, students will explore the work of Damien Hirst. Students will create, reflect, and research artwork involving celebrations and traditions using the skull as a symbol.

Enduring Understanding

People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

Enduring Ideas/Essential Questions

- I. How have Artists used skulls to create works of Art?
- II. How and why have cultural traditions and celebrations of death evolved?
- III. How does the presenting and sharing of objects, artifacts, and artworks influence and shape ideas, beliefs, and experiences?
- IV. How do objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented, cultivate appreciation and understanding?
- V. How do images influence our views of the world?
- VI. How is art used to impact the views of a society?
- VII. Is the controversial work, *For the Love of God* appropriation or appreciation?

National Core Arts Standards: Visual Arts

CREATING

VA:Cr3.1.Ia

Apply *relevant criteria* from traditional and contemporary *cultural contexts* to examine, reflect on, and plan revisions for works of art and design in progress.

PRESENTING

VA:Pr6.1.IIa

Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.

RESPONDING

VA:Re.7.2.IIIa

Determine the commonalities within a group of artists or visual *images* attributed to a particular type of art, timeframe, or culture.

CONNECTING

VA:Cn11.1.IIa

Compare uses of art in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts and make connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.

Lesson Objectives

- I. Students will **discuss** connections between artists.
- II. Students will **explain** connections between artwork presented and cultural traditions.
- III. Students will **justify** connections between social and political ideas surrounding the work.
- IV. Students will **determine** commonalities between traditional and contemporary Mixtec cultural festivities and artwork.
- V. Students will **learn** about the work of Ancient Aztecs, José Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo, and Damien Hirst.
- VI. Students will **compare** uses of the skull in historical and contemporary contexts.
- VII. Students will **make** connections between the work presented and local community work.
- VIII. Students will **ponder** the value of the second most costly contemporary work of art?

Tools and Materials

Internet

Smart Screen or Projector

Computer

Smartphones/Printed Materials

Word Processor

Dry Materials (Pastel, Crayon, Marker, Pencil)

Wet Materials (Acrylic Paint, Brushes, Water)

Mixed Media Paper (Bristol or Canvas)

Roll of Poster Paper

Permeant Markers

Introduction

The teacher will introduce the lesson by posing the question “**What is an Organic Artifact?**”

Students will share their ideas and the teacher will guide the discussion towards Human artforms and artifacts.

Procedure (Including Slides)

Background Information

Around the Earth, Skull Art is found throughout and before human history.

Many Indigenous Cultures view death as a part of daily life, “At the time of death, our original mother, Mother Earth, who nourishes our bodies, reclaims our physical form” (Longboat, 2005).

The use of Skulls as and within artwork, originated before the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

Death is a daily part of life that is celebrated instead of mourned, shunned or seen as taboo.

*Teacher will introduce background information and facilitate discussion, leading to the introduction of Ancient Aztec Culture.

Ancient Aztec Culture



Source: Universitätsbibliothek Rostock - FAMSJ.

The deity *Tezcatlipoca* depicted in the *Codex Borgia*.



Source: Museo Nacional de Antropología

The *Sun Stone*, depicting the five eras of Aztec mythical history, with calendric images.

Collaborative Mini Project:

Re-create an Aztec symbol using contemporary materials.

*Students will work collaboratively to create their own symbol using their skills of observation and interpretation of the Aztec Calendar. The teacher will highlight connections between Aztec symbols and modern Emoji.

Creative Investigation

Zoom Into an 'Aztec Calendar'



Aztec Art & Architecture

The Aztecs were themselves appreciative of fine art and they collected pieces from across their empire to be brought back to Tenochtitlan and often ceremonially buried.

Aztec art depicted all manner of subjects but especially popular were animals, plants and gods, particularly those related to fertility and agriculture.

The Skull is seen as a symbol of Rebirth. Worship of Death is seen as an integral part of life.

*Teacher will introduce Aztec art and facilitate discussion of the Mosaic Mask of Tezcatlipoca.

Mosaic Mask of Tezcatlipoca

- **Title:** Series: The Turquoise Mosaics
- **Description:** Human skull covered with turquoise and lignite mosaic held in place with pine resin adhesive.
- **Technique:** polished; painted; mosaic
- **Production Date:** 1400 – 1521 C.E.
- **Findspot:** Excavated: Mexico
- **Culture:** Aztec (*Mexica*); Mixtec



Source: Trustees of the British Museum

Mosaic Mask of Tezcatlipoca

The work is believed to represent the god Tezcatlipoca, or 'Smoking Mirror', one of four powerful creator deities.

The name of the work refers to the material with which he was associated, obsidian.

Obsidian was used by pre-Hispanic peoples to make mirrors, which were used for rituals and prophecies.

*Teacher will discuss cultural traditions and the use of skulls within the Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico.

Cultural Connections & Traditions

The *Day of the Dead* or Día de Muertos celebration stems from indigenous traditions understanding the **cyclical** nature of life, crops and a celebration of life.

Contemporary celebrations, particularly those outside of Mexico incorporate elements of Catholic holidays such as "all saints" and "all souls" days.

*Traditions connected with the holiday include building home altars called ofrendas, honoring the deceased using **Calaveras**, Aztec Marigolds (National Geographic Society, 2012).*



Photo By, Ellen Fields: "Catrinas"
Source: National Geographic

Calaveras

Calavera (Spanish) – skull

The “calavera” is usually an ornately decorated representation of a skull, often featuring flowers, animals, and other decorations.

“During the holiday, this imagery is seen everywhere, from Ofrendas, to paper crafts, and even to cartoons on newspapers” (Cereal Ventures).



Source: Cereal Ventures

*Students will work independently to explore different designs and patterns painted on decorative and culturally significant skulls.

Creative Investigation

[Colorful Calaveras for the Day of the Dead](#)



La Calavera Catrina

- **Title:** La Calavera Catrina
- **Artist:** José Guadalupe Posada
- **Description:** Zinc Etching
- **Technique:** Lithography
- **Production Date:** 1910–1913
- **Origin:** Mexico



Source: The Grace Museum

La Catrina was created as part of a series of satirical lithographs that addressed political and societal issues and were published for the masses in the Mexican press (Bridges, 2020).

*Teacher will introduce the work of the Artist, José Guadalupe Posada.

Artist: José Guadalupe Posada



Source: Library of Congress

Grand Electric Skull Gran Calavera Eléctrica, (1900-1913).



Source: Library of Congress

Calavera Oaxaqueña, (1903).

Mini Project:

Create Your own Political Cartoon, Anime, or Illustration.

*Students will create a cartoon addressing a social or political issue, using dry materials based on the work of the Artist, José Guadalupe Posada.

Girl with Death Mask

- **Title:** Girl with Death Mask
- **Artist:** Frida Kahlo
- **Description:** Oil Paint
- **Technique:** Painting
- **Production Date:** 1938
- **Origin:** Mexico



Source: FridaKahlo.org

This painting depicted a little girl, which is believed to be Frida herself at the age of four, was wearing a skull mask. By her feet there is a carved wooden tiger mask (FridaKahlo.org).

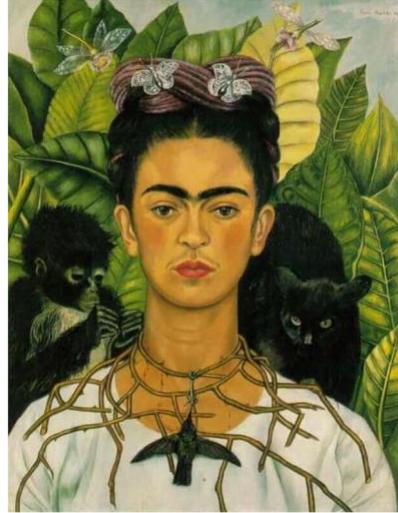
Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940

Artist: Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo is remembered for her self-portraits, pain and passion, and bold, vibrant colors.

She is celebrated in Mexico for her attention to Mexican and indigenous culture and by feminists for her depiction of the female experience and form.

Pre-Columbian artifacts were common both in the Kahlo/Rivera home.



Source: FridaKahlo.org

*Teacher will introduce the work of the Artist, Frida Kahlo.

Creative Investigation

[Frida Kahlo's Work:
Animated](#)



*Students will explore Frida Kahlo's work in a new light, using modern background animation techniques to bring the painting to life, using digital techniques.

Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central

- **Title:** Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park
- **Artist:** Diego Rivera
- **Description:** Fresco
- **Technique:** Mural
- **Production Date:** 1947
- **Origin:** Mexico



Source: Sotheby's

In this vast mural, the space is filled with characters who define Mexico's complex and turbulent history, shown promenading through Alameda central park (Sotheby's, 2019).

*Students will explore Diego Rivera's fresco, Dream of a Sunny Afternoon in Alameda Park, while learning more about the history of Mexico and the characters within the mural.

Creative Investigation

[Diego Rivera's Dream
of a Sunday
Afternoon, a
Surrealist Tableau of
Mexican History](#)



For the Love of God

- **Title:** For the Love of God
- **Artist:** Damien Hirst
- **Description:** Platinum, Diamond, Human Teeth
- **Technique:** Lapidary, VVS Pavé
- **Production Date:** 2007
- **Origin:** England



Source: DamienHirst.com

Hirst stated the idea for the work came from an Aztec turquoise skull at the British Museum. (Steinmetz, 2009).

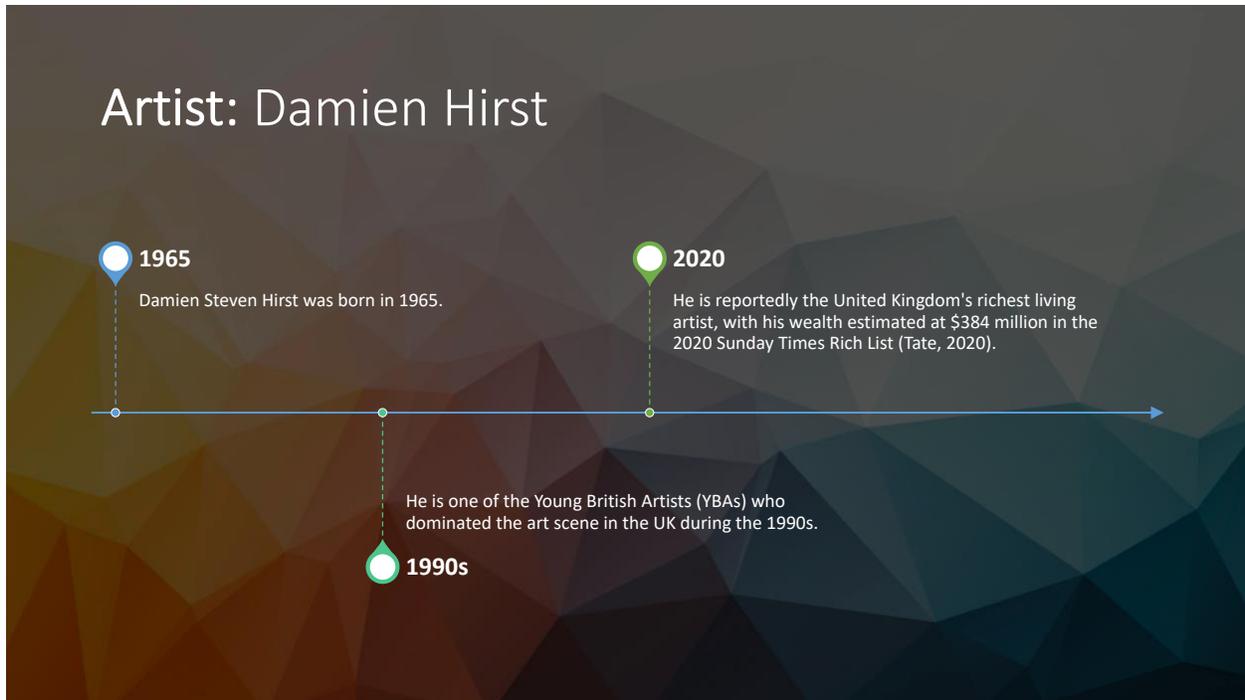
*Teacher will introduce the work of the Artist, Damien Hirst, facilitating discussion surrounding the controversy about the work, the inspiration behind the work, and the value of a work of art.

For the Love of God (Continued)

The skull from which the work, *For the Love of God*, was cast was radiocarbon dated to as early as 1720 C.E.

The title of the work is said to have come from a phrase the artist's mother would often say.

Financed by means of an investment of \$28 million of the artist's own money the work is reputed to have sold for \$100 million, paid in cash. (Steinmetz, 2009).



*Teacher will put the work of Hirst, in context with the earlier Artists mentioned.

*Teacher

Final Project

Cranium: Skull Art

Part I: Create & Reflect!

- Using any media, medium or material: Create an original work of art using symbols, ideas and imagery from this lesson.
- Reflect on your artmaking throughout the process and write an Artist Statement summarizing the work and how it relates to contemporary ideas, or events.

Part II: Research & Learn.

Choose one of the Following topics to explore:

- Prehistory, Aztec Artifacts
- Photographer, Ellen Fields
- Artist, José Guadalupe Posada
- Artist, Frida Kahlo
- Artist, Diego Rivera
- Artist, Damien Hirst

Distribution and Clean-Up

Materials will be organized, at stations grouped by similar tools. For example, the acrylic paint will be next to the sinks, paper towels, acrylic brushes, and recycled cardboard paint pallets. Students will be asked to gather materials, in a socially distant organized fashion by

table. Students will be encouraged to clean their table, hands, and any materials used at the end of each period. "Used" materials will be separated to be disinfected before their next use. Students are expected to engage respectfully with materials, artwork, and other students.

Closure

The teacher will reinforce the lesson objectives and encourage student reflection on their work and performance by facilitating a group critique of the final projects. A conversation and sharing about the assignments leading up to the final project will guide the discussion throughout history. Students share their work with their peers and others through a folder on Google Classroom, and by the work hanging up in the classroom.

Assessments

- I. Collaborative Mini Project: Symbols**
- II. Creative Investigation: Aztec Calendar
- III. Creative Investigation: Colorful Calaveras
- IV. Individual Mini Project: Political Cartoon**
- V. Creative Investigation: Kahlo Animation
- VI. Creative Investigation: Surrealist Mexican History
- VII. Final Project**
 - a. Create & Reflect
 - b. Research & Learn
- VIII. Group Critique

Artists or Works of Art Studied

- Prehistory, Aztec Artifacts
- Photographer, Ellen Fields
- Artist, José Guadalupe Posada
- Artist, Frida Kahlo
- Artist, Diego Rivera
- Artist, Damien Hirst

References

The British Museum. (n.d.) *Back-Ornament; MOSAIC; HUMAN Remains: British Museum*. The

British Museum. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Am-St-401.

Bridges, R. (2020). *La Catrina - a history*. The Grace Museum.

<https://www.thegracemuseum.org/online-learning-blog/2020/11/2/la-catrina-a-history>.

COLECCIÓN. (n.d.). Museo Nacional de Antropología. <http://www.mna.inah.gob.mx/>.

(Firm), A. V. A. (1970). Calavera oaxaqueña. Library of Congress.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99615830/>.

(Firm), A. V. A. (1970). Gran Calavera eléctrica, que SE les va a regalar, Calavera MUY

Fachosa de PURA ELECTRICIDAD. Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99615924/>.

FridaKahlo.org. (n.d.). Girl with death MASK, 1938. [https://www.fridakahlo.org/girl-with-](https://www.fridakahlo.org/girl-with-death-mask.jsp)

[death- mask.jsp](https://www.fridakahlo.org/girl-with-death-mask.jsp).

Google. (n.d.). *Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca* – Google Arts & culture. Google.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/mosaic-mask-of-tezcatlipoca/0gHRmF7lJ3MC6w?hl=en>.

Google. (n.d.). *Zoom into an 'aztec calendar'* - google arts & culture. Google.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ywXh2cKOWFIcqg>.

Hirst, D. (2007). For the Love of God. Damien Hirst. [https://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-](https://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-loveof-god#_ftnref2)

[loveof-god#_ftnref2](https://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-loveof-god#_ftnref2).

Longboat, D. (2005) *Indigenous Perspectives on Death and Dying*. Ian Anderson Continuing Education Program.

<https://www.cpd.utoronto.ca/endoflife/Slides/PPT%20Indigenous%20Perspectives.pdf>.

Loubat (1898) Codex Borgia. Universitätsbibliothek Rostock - FAMSI.

<http://www.famsi.org/research/loubat/Borgia/thumbs0.html>.

National Geographic Society. (2012). *Día de los Muertos*. National Geographic Society.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/dia-de-los-muertos/>.

Ruzhili. (2021). Animated Frida paintings. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjgXwJ_kmpo&t=9s.

Sotheby's. (2019). Diego Rivera's dream of a Sunday afternoon, a SURREALIST tableau of

Mexican history. Sothebys.com. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/videos/diego-riveras-dream-of-a-sunday-afternoon-a-surrealist-tableau-of-mexican-history>.

Sotheby's. (2019). Diego Rivera's dream of a Sunday afternoon, a SURREALIST tableau of

Mexican history. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/R7oIm0UULnQ>.

Steinmetz, J. (2009). For the love of god: The artist as capitalist. Art21 Magazine.

<https://magazine.art21.org/2009/04/29/for-the-love-of-god-the-artist-ascapitalist/#.YTFqQi33bi1>.

Tate. (1991). Damien Hirst born 1965. Tate. [https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/damien-](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/damien-hirst)

hirst 2308.

Ventures C. (n.d.). *Calavera*. Day of the Dead. <https://dayofthedead.holiday/sugar-skull/>.