



Organic Artifacts

Mr. Testa

L1: Cranium: Skull Art

Testa (Italian) – head; skull; brain

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.

Ancient Aztec Culture



Source: Universitätsbibliothek Rostock - FAMSI.

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.

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.

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.

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

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

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).



Source: The Grace Museum

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.

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

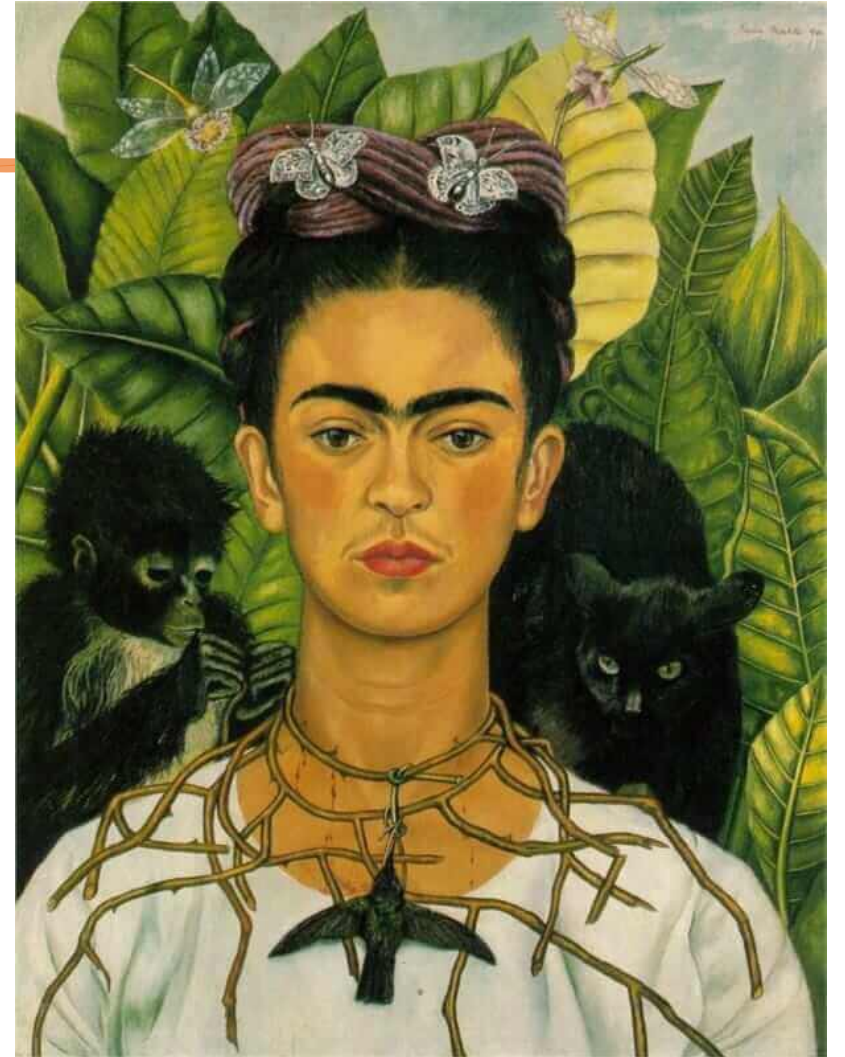
This painting depicted a little girl, which is believed to be Frida herself at the age of four, was wearing a skull mask. By her feet there is a carved wooden tiger mask (FridaKahlo.org).

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.



Creative Investigation

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



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).

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

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



Source: DamienHirst.com

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).

Artist: Damien Hirst

1965

Damien Steven Hirst was born in 1965.

2020

He is reportedly the United Kingdom's richest living artist, with his wealth estimated at \$384 million in the 2020 Sunday Times Rich List (Tate, 2020).

1990s

He is one of the Young British Artists (YBAs) who dominated the art scene in the UK during the 1990s.

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

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