



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2005 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from Olmec Times to the Present

The Ceramic History of the Olmec Culture

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One of my goals as an art teacher is to help my students recognize that human experience is a shared phenomenon. This is important because it connects them to their artwork, their world, and themselves. Art reveals a range of ever-changing images and attitudes as artists express opinions of themselves, their social surroundings, and their place in the spiritual world. Each on a quest to interpret the world they live in. My overarching goal in this unit of study on the Ceramic History of the Olmec Culture is that students are able to understand how these ideas are revealed through their art and how throughout the history of art, we find similar patterns that can be useful in helping us develop relevant perceptions of people in their specific historical context.

Within this unit of study, students will be given the skills necessary to be able to interpret works of art. By providing students with the vocabulary to talk about art, they will be empowered to articulate the formal qualities of the work. They will be able to not only understand but provide appropriate responses to such critical thinking questions as: How does a utilitarian object such as the *Bottle with Carved Jaguar-Dragon Paw Wing Motif*, from the Early Formative Period of the Olmec culture, end up in an art museum? What are the established criteria for a piece of ancient pottery for example, to be considered worthy of museum status? Who is it that defines these statues?

Through a series of studio-based lessons, students will understand the technical aspects of clay bodies, designing and constructing forms, and kiln firing. Each student will complete a number of ceramic pieces, which reflect the ideas, and traditions of the Olmec culture. The products will be a contemporary expression of how they interpret the world they live in as response to these ideas and traditions learned in this unit.

(Developed for Ceramics and Studio Arts, grades 9-12; recommended for Ceramics and Studio Arts, grades 9-12)

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