



In Their Own Images

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Introduction

Is a picture truly worth a thousand words? If so, what attributes must be embedded in an image to elicit a rich reaction from a viewer? In a world saturated with images, what makes some of them pass the test of time, to withstand evolving social circumstances, while most disappear from the collective consciousness? For example, consider Leonardo da Vinci's painting, *The Last Supper*, or his *Mona Lisa*, which continues to fascinate generations of viewers from around the world. Why do some images become almost permanently engraved in our cultures, while so many others disappear in a seemingly endless ocean of instantly transmitted imagery?

The ability to produce images rich with meaning is one of the most distinctive traits that differentiates our species from all others. Humans have long been aware of the power that can be found in images. Long before our highly structured communication system existed, early human groups were already using images to represent what was important to them. Examples of those so-called primitive pictures have been discovered in places such as the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc cave in France, Latin America, and the southwestern area in the United States. Interestingly, whereas the origins of the groups who created those drawings may be drastically different, the purposes behind their images may be quite similar. Hunting for food to secure a tribe's survival, recording human activities in a specific region, or searching for explanations to understand natural occurrences could be reasons to explain the existence of these images.

Although the ancient groups responsible for creating those early drawings are long gone, the practice of using images for social, religious, educational, and political purposes has continued over time. Human settlements evolved and gave way to tightly organized communities in which individuals were placed in specific hierarchical classes. Languages became increasingly more sophisticated, and written communication appeared among many societies, but that didn't end the usage of imagery as a tool of human interaction.

Today, new and less costly technological tools are used by millions of people around the world to communicate in ways that were unimaginable just a generation ago. For example, modern cell phones allow people to exchange information and images at once. Interestingly, while many cell phone users choose to use abbreviations, as well as the so-called *emojis*, to communicate complete thoughts with a minimum of effort and time, most other images are still enjoyed and shared in their originality. In the middle of what seems to be an unstoppable revolution in global communication, images, such as photographs and paintings, continue to

be powerful vessels of information, which can make a profound impact in our societies. Unlike written and oral language, images can reach individuals raised in drastically different cultures. This is one of the reasons why images are the perfect instrument to communicate, inspire and educate individuals. Artists have played an important role during many historical events, such as the French revolution, or the American independence. Over time, paintings, sculptures and photographs have been used to preserve a visual testimony of social transformation. Individuals in different cultures can create, preserve and transmit their values, dreams and struggles through images. Perhaps in the future, other generations will look back at our time to find tell-tale clues that explain the choices we made as a society.

Rationale

As the only first grade, partial Spanish immersion teacher working in an inner-city public school in Richmond, Virginia, I feel strongly obligated to teach not only the Spanish language to my young students, but also, to introduce them to the Hispanic culture and its extremely rich inventory of traditions and creative works. As a Mexican woman, born and raised by parents who, to this day, continue to nourish their profound love of multiculturalism, I feel committed to share with my students, and their families, my passion towards some of the most relevant expressions of the Mexican arts. Having visited most of the places mentioned in this unit, I know that photographs can never take the place of direct exposure to works of art. There is no replacement for the joy of standing in front of world-renowned murals, such as those painted by Diego Rivera.

For this reason, and with the intention of making this unit as meaningful and enjoyable as possible for my students, I am including information related to the Richmond Mural Project, which has been slowly enhancing Richmond's urban landscape during the past decade. After all, there is a strong likeness between this artistic effort in Richmond, and the work done by the Mexican muralists. Since my school is located near some of those murals, I am planning on taking my students there for better understanding of what these murals represent in our community. Teachers working in other regions may consider searching for similar images in their own cities, taking their students on a field trip to the nearest art museum, or working in collaboration with their art teachers to create a space dedicated to pictorial narrative in their classrooms, where students can communicate their stories in their own images.

In this unit, I am including brief, but important, information about historical circumstances that created perfect conditions under which the Mexican Muralism movement arose. This historical and social background is essential to fully understand the origins and trajectory of this important movement, as well as the tremendous work done by the Mexican to promote education and social progress, despite many challenges. I am also including some biographical information about each artist, to give teachers and students an opportunity to look at the muralists as individuals ahead of their time. It is my hope that by introducing my students to the beauty and relevance of murals painted in Mexico, but also in this country, they will further develop life-long understanding, appreciation, and consequently, tolerance for other cultures, as well as their own.

This unit is intended to be taught over a period of several weeks, by implementing a variety of activities that had been carefully prepared to meet Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs). Teachers in other regions may want to modify some of the activities to satisfy their local requirements and according to their specific circumstances. This unit seeks to offer students interesting, fun, but also academically rigorous experiences.

Classroom Context

I work in a public school located in a beautiful building erected more than 100 years ago. I work with a class of up to 27 first graders. Most of my students are native English speakers, with a handful of English learners. Parents at my school have enthusiastically embraced our partial Spanish immersion program for the past several years, and those who place their children in my class, which has a limited number of seats available, are very supportive of my activities and teaching policies. My students learn a great deal of Spanish during the school year, and in the process, they also learn many interesting facts about Hispanic culture. I am always looking for engaging activities to foster in the children a life-long enthusiasm for Spanish culture and language. I believe this unit will provide many hours of enjoyable learning to everyone in my class.

Unit Objectives

As a result of teaching this unit, my students will be able to:

1. Understand the concept of visual narrative, and compare it with written or oral narrative.
2. Understand that different societies use art to record important events from their past, express their cultural identity, and transmit their values to future generations.
3. Identify the causes that originated the Mexican Muralism movement, and gain a basic understanding of its founders.
4. Learn about some important historical events portrayed on several Mexican murals.
5. Understand the reasons that have generated the Richmond Mural Project in the city of Richmond, Virginia, and its impact on our community.
7. Create a painting that express their individual identity, and/or collaborate in the creation of a collective painting to express our identity as members of our school.
8. Prepare a writing piece and oral presentation to describe their painting.

This unit will be taught during approximately three weeks, beginning in March. Please note that information about activities such as walking trips to see murals, or having a muralist artist invited as a guest speaker in my classroom are not included in this unit.

Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs)

English

Oral Language

- 1.1 The student will continue to demonstrate growth in the use of oral language.
- 1.2 The student will expand understanding and use of word meanings.
- 1.3 The student will adapt or change oral language to fit the situation.

Reading

- 1.10 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of a variety of nonfiction texts.

Writing

- 1.12 The student will print legibly.
- 1.13 The student will write to communicate ideas for a variety of purposes.
- 1.14 The student will use available technology for reading and writing.

Math

Measurement

- 1.11 The student will use calendar language appropriately (e.g., names of the months, *today*, *yesterday*, *next week*, *last week*).

History and Social Science

- 1.1 The student will interpret information presented in picture timelines to show sequence of events and will distinguish among past, present, and future.

Geography

- 1.4 The student will develop map skills.

SOL 1.5 The student will construct a simple map of a familiar area, using basic map symbols in the map legend.

SOL 1.6 The student will describe how the location of his/her community, climate, and physical surroundings affect the way people live, including their food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and recreation.

Virginia Standards of Learning for Foreign Languages - Spanish I and II

SI.7 Cultural Perspectives, Practices, and Products

Making Connections through Language

SI.9 The student will connect information about the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking culture(s) with concepts studied in other subject areas.

Linguistic and Cultural Comparisons

SI.11 The student will demonstrate understanding of the significance of culture through comparisons between Spanish-speaking cultures and those of the United States.

Cultural Perspectives, Practices, and Products

SII.7 The student will demonstrate understanding of the perspectives, practices, and products of Spanish-speaking cultures and the ways these cultural aspects are interrelated.

Making Connections through Language

SII.8 The student will use information acquired in the study of Spanish and information acquired in other subject areas to reinforce one another.

Linguistic and Cultural Comparisons

SII.10 The student will demonstrate understanding of cultural similarities and differences between the Spanish-speaking cultures studied and the United States.

Strategies

The strategies that I will implement facilitate numerous opportunities for my students to observe, think and communicate, for example, *See Think Wonder*. Wondering promotes independent thinking and creativity, two qualities that I foster with my teaching. Working with very young children, some of them English learners, I always look for engaging activities that involve the use of appealing visuals, hands-on-experiences, technology, realia, Spanish vocabulary, videos and active communication.

Another strategy that I have successfully used in the past on many occasions is implementing different graphic organizers, especially *Venn diagrams* and *map concepts*. These diagrams help my students to focus their attention on specific details, and apply higher-thinking skills. I frequently notice that most of my students come to first grade with a very rudimentary understanding of what is similar among two or three items. It seems to be easier for them to notice differences, but finding common characteristics between two objects or concepts has always been more difficult for my children. Since this unit will help my students to focus their attention on cultural similarities between murals painted in Mexico, and the ones in the city of Richmond, I

believe it is important for the children to use simple but effective diagrams to organize and record their thoughts.

Overview

The Mexican Muralism Movement

Like many other regions around the world at the end of the 19th century, Mexico had a highly unstable social situation. The independence war, which began in 1810 and ended in 1821, ended Spain's dominance in Mexico, as would be the case among other Latin American countries. While the Spanish imposition in Mexico was over, oppression, poverty, illiteracy and other social calamities were rampant among most of the population. A large percentage of rural Mexican communities survived on subsistence agricultural practices, while thousands of individuals, many of them with indigenous ancestry, moved to bigger towns looking for opportunities beyond working the land.

With increasing industrialization, Mexico entered a new era. Agriculture was no longer the base of the national economy. In that transition from farm to factory, millions of Mexicans, especially those who lacked education or special skills, became vulnerable. Meanwhile, the Communist party made important political gains in Russia and other regions, spreading a wave of new ideas, and a strong desire for further social change. In Mexico, an incipient middle-class paid special attention to the Communist ideals. Many of those who had access to education and information felt responsible for helping the lower social class to get a better life. This group of social activists included individuals connected to different occupational fields. Doctors, teachers, artists, journalists, and members of the clergy, among others, were not indifferent to the painful situation that subjugated millions of Mexicans.

Among those who occupied the highest ranks in the newly organized government, was Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas, who was born in a family with indigenous ancestry and had received scarce formal education. During his presidential period from 1934 to 1940, he worked tirelessly to reach many rural communities that had been forgotten by previous authorities, and he was fully committed to promote social wellbeing and justice. Guided by one of the most popular mottos of the Mexican revolution, "*La tierra es de quien la trabaja*" ("The land belongs to those who work it"), he distributed millions of acres of farming land that had been in the hands of the social elite, to the masses of neglected peasants. He also created a network of health clinics, organized the political groups into a major party, and accomplished numerous other achievements, for which he is widely considered as the best Mexican president in the 20th century.

Another illustrious public functionary who shared Cardenas' social ideals was Jose Vasconcelos, founder and minister of public education in Mexico. Vasconcelos was a lawyer, philosopher, and a celebrated writer who had a profound admiration and love towards Mexico's indigenous past. It would be under Vasconcelos' patronage that the Mexican Muralism movement would produce its first pieces, which were considered *didactic* murals.

It is important that we pause here and recognize that the first murals in Mexico were painted during pre-Hispanic times, by the Olmec, Mayan and Aztec cultures (among other indigenous groups). Examples of some of these magnificent indigenous murals were discovered in the so-called *Temple of the Murals*, in Bonampak,

Mexico, where we see an exceptionally vibrant set of beautiful images that are undoubtedly telling a story. Scholars believe that these images were painted between 500AD and 800AD, and surprisingly, their original colors appear to have been largely preserved. The following Internet link is one of many links to images of the murals in Bonampak: <https://maya.nmai.si.edu/gallery/bonampak>

Following the Spanish conquest, murals were used in churches to visually spread religious ideas and values among the largely illiterate population. An outstanding example of these Christian murals are those painted in Atotonilco, Mexico, by Miguel Antonio Martínez de Pocasangre, a well-known mestizo muralist of the late colonial era. Photographs of these paintings can be seen at the following link, which is one of many interesting resources available at the World Monuments Fund website:

<https://www.wmf.org/project/jes%C3%BAs-nazareno-church-atotonilco> For more images and information about this topic, please look at the list of additional resources at the end of this unit.

Mexican Muralism Movement Founders - Biographical Information

Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros are considered the organizers and most important participants in the Mexican Mural movement. While they were united by the same desire to promote education, social equality and national identity through their art, their personal lives differed considerably. It is important to learn about them as individuals who witnessed dramatic social events, such as the Mexican revolution, the first world war, and the financial collapse that marked the beginning of the Great Depression in the United States, to comprehend their uniqueness. Those events, and others, left an indelible stamp on the content of the muralists' work. As a teacher, I want my students to understand the way circumstances shaped the work of the Mexican muralists. Because of limitations in this unit, I am including only brief biographical information about each artist. Teachers interested in gaining a broader understanding about the lives of the Mexican muralists may want to consult some of the resources included in the list at the end of this unit.

Jose Clemente Orozco

Born in a middle-class family that had the financial means to provide him with an education, Orozco witnessed the horrors of the Mexican revolution. As a young man, he met Jose Guadalupe Posadas, the famous political illustrator and creator of the world-known dancing skeletons (*calaveras*) who would permanently influence Orozco's artistic career with his humorous and sarcastic cartoons. Orozco studied art at San Carlos Academy, in Mexico City, a center known for the large number of distinguished artists who graduated from that institution. After Orozco's father suddenly died, he left school and searched for ways to support his mother and two siblings. At age 21, while preparing fireworks to sell, Orozco triggered an explosion and lost his left hand. In addition, he became ill with rheumatoid arthritis. Despite those challenges, he was determined to fulfill his artistic aspirations. He became a successful artist, who was known by his very quiet manner and a somewhat somber personality that may have left a mark in many of his paintings. Whereas Siqueiros and Rivera were highly popular and maintained very social lives, Orozco kept himself away from the masses.

Orozco is remembered by his numerous murals of highly dramatic images. On page 2 of his article, *Orozco's Prometheus: Summation, Transition, Innovation*, published by the College Art Association, (<http://www.collegeart.org/>) David W. Scott says,

“In June, 1930, José Clemente Orozco finished the first Mexican fresco to be painted in the United States. In at least one fundamental sense, the Prometheus at Pomona College (Claremont, California) was the first major “modern” fresco in this country and thus epochal in the history of the medium. It revealed a new concept of mural painting, a greatly heightened direct and personal expression. It challenged accepted conventions which decreed that wall decoration should be flat and graceful, pleasant, decorous, and impersonal. In the Prometheus, Expressionism achieved a monumental scale.”

In the series *American Masters*, PBS.org offers a clear glimpse into the life of this extraordinary artist:

“...Orozco spent a total of ten years in the United States. He created four major murals here (at Pomona College, the New School for Social Research, Dartmouth College, and the Museum of Modern Art), along with hundreds of easel paintings and graphic works that challenged U.S. stereotypes of Mexican art. Despite episodes of censorship and periods of financial deprivation, Orozco became a pioneer of the public arts movement of the 1930s and 40s. Isamu Noguchi, Ben Shahn, Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, and Jacob Lawrence were among the American artists influenced by his expressionist style. In the 1960s and 70s, Orozco’s work helped inspire a new generation of Chicano and African American muralists to reinvent public art within their communities. His legacy continues today among contemporary artists on both sides of the border.”

David Alfaro Siqueiros

Born in a middle-class family, Siqueiros was an art student at the prestigious San Carlos Academy in Mexico City. He showed early signs of his artistic abilities, inquisitive mind, and rebellious personality. Disenchanted with the lack of social equality and absence of opportunities that chronically plagued most of the population, Orozco saw a path to creating a better world in Communist ideals. Firmly determined to use his artistic abilities to improve the living and social conditions of millions of illiterate Mexicans, Siqueiros embraced an ideology and activism that left no room for contradictions or negotiations with those he considered enemies of the people. His radical ideas and continuous political rebellion would place Siqueiros in dangerous situations on more than one occasion, but no danger would stop him from painting the world as he saw it. He enlisted in the Mexican revolutionary military for a short period of time, and served as a captain. Soon thereafter, Siqueiros came to the United States, where he was appalled by the racial discrimination that was common practice during those years. He would later travel to Europe and become familiar with the new painting styles, including cubism. While in Europe faithful to his social ideals, Siqueiros refused to work on projects that he felt could betray his principles. Soon after the end of the Mexican revolution, Siqueiros returned to Mexico to work under the patronage of Jose Vasconcelos, then President of the National University. There, he would lead a successful and productive career. On its website, The Art Story Organization (<http://www.theartstory.org/>) mentions some of Orozco’s achievements:

“To create his activist and revolutionary public art, Siqueiros brought together elements of avant-garde painting with traditional art historical symbolism and folk art. With this combination, he believed that he generated dynamic forms with popular appeal, capable of delivering educational content to a disenfranchised public.”

“In his experimentation with unconventional materials and industrial techniques, Siqueiros expanded the range of avant-garde painting. His Siqueiros Experimental Workshop, led in New York, exposed students (including Jackson Pollock) to contemporary notions of automatism and accident, and encouraged them to adopt new approaches to how paint could be applied. His leadership was crucial in breaking away from traditional techniques of fine art to more gestural and individualistic means of painting.”

Diego Rivera

The best known in the trio of muralists, Rivera demonstrated an exceptional artistic talent since his childhood. He attended the San Carlos Academy when he was still a child, and presented his first art exhibition when he was only 21 years old. He spent years in Europe, where he carefully studied different painting styles, including cubism. On page 24 of his book, *Mexican Muralists: Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros*, Desmond Rochfort says,

“The impact of Cubism on Rivera was immense. For four years, influenced by the examples of Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris, Rivera immersed himself in the movement, contributing much to its diversity of style. Although he never forgot the lessons of Cubism, the movement ultimately proved inadequate for Rivera’s need to express the social and political realities that were increasingly engaging his attention.”

In Mexico, Rivera accepted several assignments to paint in different important public buildings, all part of the program of public murals commissions that Jose Vasconcelos implemented. Orozco and Siqueiros would also be part of these efforts to bring art to places used for educational purposes. Over time, Rivera would receive assignments that allowed him to create his monumental murals in many public buildings.

The Mexican Muralism Movement Objectives

Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros found inspiration in the magnificent murals left behind by ancient civilizations, for example, the Mayans. Another source of inspiration were the Aztec codices, which contain clear images of daily life in the indigenous communities. The Mexican muralists had solid knowledge about the pre-Hispanic population and its culture, and made a deliberate effort to integrate this important influence in the art.

From its conception, the Mexican Muralism movement had, as one of its fundamental objectives, to take the art out of fancy galleries and private homes, and place it in highly visible public buildings, where art could be admired by everyone, and its visual message could not be ignored. The artists wanted to make Mexicans aware and proud of their indigenous heritage and culture. They believed that painting, like other human activities, should serve the common people, instead of creating decorating items only for those who could afford to acquire them. Until then, Mexicans had little access to pictorial art, except for the large images suspended inside churches, or the modest and rudimentary paintings decorating cantinas (bars). Universities, government buildings and many other places of social gathering became giant canvases which the muralists transformed into visual narratives.

In addition to disseminating their art on public walls, the Mexican muralists wanted to restore a national identity that had been badly damaged after a long period of brutal oppression under foreign powers. With this idea in mind, the artists frequently included the presence of indigenous peoples in their images. Peaceful looking women, dressed in traditional indigenous attire, occupied with daily chores, or surrounded by flowers, became a constant motif in murals. Another significant theme was that of Mother Nature, many times portrayed as a massive, sensuous, prodigal, nurturing and protective native woman. Images of idyllic beauty, almost reminiscent of the Christian paradise, but with a powerful indigenous quality, became very popular. Natural landmarks, such as the volcanoes Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, pre-Hispanic ruins, and images of indigenous monarchs from the past occupied an important place on the new artistic movement.

Along with beautiful landscapes, the Mexican muralists also created a special place in their paintings to memorialize the fights and sacrifices endured by many distinguished personalities in Mexico's history. From presidents to soldiers, political figures and influential artists, the Mexican murals came alive with dramatic and very realistic representations of historical events. The brutality of the Spanish conquest, the annihilation of the pre-Columbian monarchies, the forceful conversion of the indigenous communities into the Christian faith, and the subsequent battles to create a democratic country, were all documented by the muralists, who wanted to keep those events alive in the collective memory.

Whereas their pictorial retelling of past events remained a crucial component of their art, the Mexican muralists were receptive to the promises of the future. They firmly believed in the possibility of creating a better society by educating the masses, distributing land and other natural resources among the underprivileged, and establishing solid institutions. They saw themselves as communicators in support of the working class, using their painting tools as journalists used their pens. As such, the muralists left a legacy of images in which the viewers can find a strong social message. The lavish eccentricities of the bourgeoisie, the miserable working conditions in factories, the sinister wave of fascism advancing in Europe: these and other somber realities were openly exposed by the artists.

The Richmond Mural Project

The Mexican Muralism movement left a lasting legacy in the artistic world well beyond

Mexico's borders. This legacy included new techniques, styles, motifs and, perhaps most importantly, the pursuit of open spaces that can be used for human expression. Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros had ample opportunity to travel and work in different countries, leaving a trail of innovative ideas along the way. Similarly, artists around the world are using public spaces to express their ideas and to reach their viewers. Remarkable examples of this trend can be seen on the streets of several modern cities. From numerous locations in the United States, to Canada, Ukraine or Argentina, murals are appearing with increasing frequency, bringing something new and interesting to their communities. Many muralists today are leaving evidence of their talent in places far removed from their countries of origin. They are rising above borders of geography and barriers of language, to reach individuals having very different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles. Unlike the case with written documents, murals do not need to be translated to different languages to be understood. Their creators can communicate a wide range of idea in the absence of any text, thanks to the seemingly universal language of certain imagery. In addition, many of the murals painted in our modern public spaces are undeniable examples of outstanding artistic technique and beauty. The magnitude of space

available to muralists offers them plenty of room to display their artistic skills and imagination. A quick online search will reveal numerous examples of superb murals that compare well with many paintings kept in museums.

For the past several years, in Richmond, Virginia, a city with a rich and sometimes turbulent history, a group of artists from around the world have been gradually modifying the urban landscape by participating in what is known as the Richmond Mural Project. As a person who grew up admiring the beauty of the Mexican murals, I find this mix of large whimsical images against the old, beautiful, red brick-walled buildings in Richmond to be delightful. Whereas many of these images appear to be simply playful decorations, some of them clearly convey a social message that reflects life in our modern urban communities. These messages are not always conspicuous, however, thereby requiring viewers to be active thinkers while they observe the piece.

Despite working in Richmond for some years, it is only now that I have begun learning about the muralists participating in the annual events organized by the Richmond Mural Project. In the process of gathering information for this unit, I discovered that most people I know are unaware of the purposes leading the efforts made by the Project. Intrigued by this lack of information among those who are recipients of this artistic manifestations, I spent many hours searching for answers about this movement. One of the most important sources of information is the Richmond Mural Project's website, (<http://richmondmuralproject.squarespace.com/>) from where I copied the following extract,

“The Richmond Mural Project is a yearly event with the goal of creating over 100 murals by world-renowned talent in the first 5 years alone. The recurrence and solidification of the project throughout this time will establish Richmond as a landmark destination for internationally recognized murals and will create exposure for the city, establishing it as a premier art destination. By concentrating a large number of murals throughout the city the project will increase tourism and will bring the much needed “Feet on the Street” which will help local business thrive.”

Whereas the murals in Richmond may add another reason for tourists to visit a city already rich with cultural and historical attractions, not to mention some irresistible Southern cuisine, the message embedded in several of these murals goes well beyond simple visual entertainment. Some of these images strongly suggest certain events, places, characters and situations that are very familiar to many of those who live in or visit Richmond. In my quest to include information in this unit about murals in Richmond that carry a social message, I contacted four important muralists who have collaborated with the Richmond Mural Project. These artists have graciously provided me with authorization to include images of their paintings in this unit, which are protected by copyright laws. Teachers who may want to contact these artists or learn more about their work, can use the links provided at the end of this unit.

Muralists in Richmond

Nicolas Santiago Romero Escalada, “Ever”

This young and very talented Argentinian muralist has developed a style that is vibrant, fresh, and highly original. The murals he painted in Richmond combine some of the elements that are frequently found in his art. In the first mural (image 1, located at 534 N Harrison Street), we can see faces of young people with clearly different ethnic features. Whereas these faces are sharing the space on the wall, they are not looking at each other. Beams of laser-like light emanate from the four pairs of eyes, and disappear on two groups of beautiful images that resemble flowers and animals. A large hand, appearing from above, seems to suggest the presence of a higher power. The second mural, (image 2, located at 2416 W Cary Street), has some of the same elements: young faces, flowers, eyes that project blue beams of light or water, and hands placed in a peaceful manner. Both murals combine beauty and harmony, in a blend that is intriguing and appealing. As a viewer, I reflect on the way Romero’s murals seem to be very much at home in Richmond, a city which is rapidly becoming more culturally diverse. The faces in Romero’s images seem to mirror those of the thousands of young people who come to Richmond from different places to study, work and contribute toward a more racially-tolerant future.

In an interview that Nicolas Romero gave to a tour group in Argentina (BA Street Art tour), Romero shared a few thoughts about his art. I quote from the BA Street Art website, (<http://buenosairesstreetart.com/>):

“What I really like is normal, everyday people. It’s just a feeling I get. I prefer to paint ordinary people, it doesn’t interest me painting the faces of beautiful models who appear in magazines or popular culture. These people have much more character.”

Nils Westergard

Among the excellent artists who have left their mark in Richmond, Nils Westergard, a native Virginian who started painting at age 14, has achieved well-deserved notoriety because of his very distinctive art style. His mural, (image 3, located at 1533 Floyd Avenue), painted in 2015 in the Fan District neighborhood, shows a black and white portrait of a young person wearing a dark hood, with eyes blinded by two enigmatic hands. At first impression, it is hard not to think of this painted hood as a symbol of tragic social turmoil and racial confrontation, while the hands imposed over the eyes seems to suggest some sort of control inflicted on the young person. This reaction makes sense, given the frequent political nature revealed in many of Nils' paintings. However, a simple online search reveals that the title of this intriguing mural is *Within*, which opens the door to a different interpretation. This mural, compared to the many other portraits that Nils has created, is a great example of how the use of a simple color palette can result in a powerful image. In addition to his brilliant career as a painter, Nils is also a superb paper artist, and has produced breathtaking samples of paper cut-outs. An example of his talent is this map of Amsterdam, which he made in the shape of a leaf, <http://www.boredpanda.com/amsterdam-map-paper-art-leaf-cutout-nils-westergard/> Finally, Nils is also an innovative filmmaker. An example of this facet of his artistic career is his short and imaginative video, *Wallflower*, which can be seen at the following link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svfvLpcVszo>

The following is a fragment taken from an interview posted on, *I Support Art Street’s* website, (<http://www.isupportstreetart.com/>) Here, Nils shares some of his thoughts about his art,

“...Im also very big on having art be accessible to the masses, and while I love art that requires a lot from the viewer, that also shuts out a lot of people. Depends on if you’re looking at my political work, or my portraiture!”

Elio Mercado, “Evoca1”

Born in Dominican Republic in 1984, and currently living in Miami, Florida, Elio Mercado, also known as Evoca1, is an extraordinary, self-taught artist. Despite the financial obstacles that Elio’s faced during his childhood, he started developing his artistic skills very early in life, and has already achieved an international reputation at a very young age. One of the most beautiful murals painted in Richmond is Elio’s *Glory*, (image 3, located at 727 West Clay Street), which he painted in 2015. This mural, inspired by the American Civil War, brings to life a dramatic moment in which a Confederate drum boy runs away from a defeated and burning Richmond. Painted only a few blocks away from the Robert E. Lee Memorial, Elio’s mural is a strong reminder of Richmond’s difficult transformation from former capital of the Confederate States of America to a vibrant, ethnically diverse community that seems to be striving toward social equality. Elio’s multifaceted talent is evidenced by the numerous pieces he has created around the world. An excellent example is a mural inspired by the song, *Gonna Make Time* (by Saun & Starr), which was painted for the Airwaves Festival, in Iceland (<https://www.urban-nation.com/artist/evoca1/>), in 2015.

In addition to his spectacular artistic career, Elio is also an exemplary advocate of social causes. An example of his commitment to support disadvantaged individuals is *Sketches for Mankind*, (<https://www.facebook.com/sketchesformankind/>), a non-profit organization that Elio organized with the purpose of helping the homeless population in Florida.

Jonatan Rivera, “Jade”

Another outstanding example of a self-taught artist, is the young Peruvian muralist Jonatan Rivera, also known as Jade, who has achieved international recognition thanks to his distinctive painting style. His use of bright colors and whimsical characters give his art a unique appeal. The mural that Jonatan painted in Richmond (image 5, located at 609 Iddlewood Avenue), resembles a photograph that captures what feels like an intimate moment in a family’s life. On this mural, it is easy to recognize the physical features associated with Hispanic people. The overall composition suggests a migrant family returning to their home. The flowers, placed in the middle of the painting, add a touch of delicate beauty, in an otherwise somber scene. In Richmond, a city with a large population of Hispanic immigrants, Jade’s mural connects to the daily immigrant experience.

In an interesting interview that appeared at the *Youth Arts’* website (<https://youthartsonline.org/painting-walls-with-jade/>) in 2013, Jonatan shared his thoughts about the meaning behind his murals, ‘I have an idea, I paint it and I give it a title but I never give it a meaning. I like that every person gives it his own story.’

Activities

I am planning for my activities to be implemented over a course of approximately three weeks. In my first grade, partial Spanish immersion class, each activity will take between 40 and 45 minutes, with three weekly sessions. The activities have been designed to meet Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs), as well as this unit's objectives. Please note that the numbers that appear next to the activities are there to provide a tentative sequence, which may change if unexpected circumstances arise.

Activity 1 School cafeteria mural

My school cafeteria is beautifully decorated by a large mural that covers the walls. The images on this mural show children, landscapes and animals interacting in a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere. Next to the images, there are messages written in different languages expressing a common desire to live peacefully in this world. Since the mural is at our school and my students see it all the time, I decided to use it for my first activity. Teachers in other cities can easily find comparable murals images online. I have included a link to some of those murals in the list of additional resources.

Procedure

1. We will briefly review what we have previously learned during our daily language arts activities, about using images to gain understanding and make meaningful connections. I will divide my class in small groups, with 3 or 4 students per group. The groups will be dispersed along the cafeteria, so the children can observe different parts of the painting. I will ask the students to pay attention to the images as well as the written messages. (10 minutes)
2. After the initial observation, and while still at the cafeteria, we will sit together and talk about what each group observed, making emphasis on what each image on the mural seems to communicate. Using a large piece of chart paper and markers, I will help the children to write a list with ideas gained from observing the mural. (10 minutes)
3. The students will work in pairs, using clipboards, pencils and paper, copying at least two images which they think carry the message about living peacefully in this world. (10 minutes)
4. We will return to our classroom to share the sketches and to talk about what the mural means. We will use another large piece of chart paper to write a few sentences about the mural. (10 minutes)
5. We will talk about how, while the sentences on the mural are written in different languages, several of which we can't understand, the images have a clear message that everyone can "read." We will share our impressions about the messages that we were able to interpret, and if these messages go along with the images (10 minutes)

Activity 2 - Visual Narrative/Read Aloud

Students in first grade continue to develop and apply their observation skills. They learn how to compare and/or contrast, and they apply this knowledge as they make progress in different subjects. Today we will learn about how different cultures have used images to communicate stories about important events.

Procedure

1. We will review what we did yesterday, when we went to the cafeteria to observe the mural. I will remind the children that even though we couldn't read all the written messages on the mural, we didn't have

problems understanding the pictures. I will introduce the term, *visual narrative*. I will explain how people have been using images for thousands of years to communicate. I will show them a few samples of images that carry a message, for example, pictures of street signs. I will ask the children if they have ever seen other images that brought a message to their minds. (10 minutes)

2. I will read *Artful Stories*, by Jude Tolar. I chose this book because it describes how images can represent stories. The book includes information and colorful photos about famous pieces that go along with this unit, including cave and Egyptian paintings, the Bayeux Tapestry, Chinese handscrolls, and Mexican murals. I will pause during the reading to make comments, clarify doubts and to ask questions. (15 minutes)
3. After the reading, I will use my LCD projector to show the children photos of cave paintings found in different regions of the world. We will also look at photos of pictographs that were found in the Southern area in the United States. I will ask the children, "Why do you think these paintings were made?", and "How are these images similar and different?" We will use a Venn diagram to write our observations. (15 minutes)

Activity 3 Pre-Hispanic Murals

Procedure

1. I will introduce this activity by reminding my students that different societies, which may live far away from one another, might communicate very similar ideas by painting comparable images. I will explain that today we will look at images discovered at two different archeological sites, to find common characteristics. The murals we will look at are those discovered at Bonampak and Cacaxtla, both Mexican communities. For this part of the activity I will use a map of North America, and a large map of Mexico. To give my students an opportunity to apply their map skills during today's session, we will use the first map to briefly review the cardinal directions and the location of Mexico in the continent. Using the second map, I will point to the exact locations where the world-famous Bonampak and Cacaxtla murals were discovered. I will give my students some basic information about the history and geography of those two communities, to enhance their understanding about the individuals who painted the murals. (15 minutes)

2. I will use my LCD projector to show images of the murals found at the Bonampak archeological site, making pauses to answer questions and make comments. I will ask my students to carefully observe the images, because we will compare them with the ones from Cacaxtla. Teachers can access these images using the following links:

<https://maya.nmai.si.edu/gallery/bonampak> and

<https://leonidemartinblog.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/bonampak-murals-1.jpg>

I will then show images of the murals found at Cacaxtla. The following links can be used to see those images:

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/eb/Cacaxtla01.jpg>

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Murals_in_Cacaxtla#/media/File:Cacaxtla10.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Murals_in_Cacaxtla#/media/File:El_hombre-p%C3%A1jaro.JPG

Afterwards, we will sit on the carpet to share our observations about the murals. Using a large piece of chart paper, I will help the children to write a list with what we noticed were similar characteristics, for example,

colors, clothing garments, etc. (20 minutes)

Activity 4 The Mexican Muralism Movement and Diego Rivera

Today I will introduce my students to the story of the Mexican Muralism Movement. I will also share with them some basic biographical information about Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. This activity will help the students to understand the social purposes that fueled that movement and the educational quality of the murals.

Procedure

1. I will show a short video about the Mexican Muralism Movement, making pauses to answer questions and make comments about the content. This video is narrated in Spanish, but teachers can choose to mute the narration and use the images. The video can be found here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGFckyfHu7Q> (15 minutes)
2. After the video, we will sit on the carpet to exchange ideas about the reasons that originated the Mexican Muralism Movement. We will then fill a concept map diagram with some of those reasons. (15 minutes)
3. Using a document camera, I will show images from these two books,

"A Weekend with Diego Rivera", by Barbara Braun, and *"Diego Rivera"*, by Mike Venezia. These books have many attractive illustrations and engaging text that will certainly engage my young students. I will use these books to enhance my students' understanding of Rivera's life. We will then fill a concept map with some of the facts about Rivera's life that we learned today. (15 minutes)

Note: I will follow a similar sequence to teach about the lives of Orozco and Siqueiros. Due to space limitations, I am not including those activities here.

Activity 5 - Historical Narrative in Mexican Murals

Procedure

1. I will remind my students about how Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros painted murals to communicate messages that had a social content. I will explain that today we will see how one of Rivera's murals contains a visual narrative that describes historical events.

We will watch a 14-minute video titled, *The History of Mexico City. Documentary based on Diego Rivera Mural in National Palace*. This video can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-DKc4i5bIQ> I chose this video because the producers did a very good job interpreting images from the painting to describe important historic events that happened in Mexico's history. In the video, the events are described chronologically, carefully matching the narrative with the corresponding images. (15 minutes)

2. After watching the video, I will call my students to the rug for the next activity. We will use 6 - 8 sentence strips already labeled with words that refer to the historical events mentioned in the video, for example, "Mexican revolution", "Teotihuacan", and "Mexican independence." I will also have color copies of some of the images shown on the video. These images can be reproduced from one of the books mentioned in the bibliography at the end of this unit. We will match the sentence strips with their corresponding image, placing them on a pocket chart, in chronological order. We will use the sentence strips and color copies to summarize the main events mentioned in the video. (10 minutes)

Note: I will repeat the same steps using Rivera’s famous mural, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. I will use this mural as inspiration for one of the items that my students will prepare during this unit.

Student Produced Work

Project: In Your Own Images

Day 1

Goal: Inspired by Diego Rivera’s mural, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, my students will create images based on important events in their lives.

Procedure

1. Students will sit on the carpet, and I will briefly review what we have learned about the narrative that may be embedded in images. I will explain to the students that today we will start creating our own “dream.” Using *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* as example, I will explain the way I could prepare a narrative about my life, using mostly images and only a bit of text. I will make pauses to check for understanding and to answer questions. (10 minutes)
2. I will ask the students to think how could they represent important moments in their lives, using images the way Diego Rivera did. I will give students time to organize their ideas and then share them with a partner. I will ask a few students to share their thoughts with the class. (10 minutes)
3. I will distribute the questionnaire/checklist titled, In Your Own Images. I prepared this questionnaire to help my students to organize their ideas before preparing their own art piece. We will read the directions together, and I will answer any questions about it. (10 minutes)
4. Students will go back to their desks to work in pairs, and start answering the questionnaire. We will continue this activity tomorrow. (10 minutes)

Day 2

Procedure

1. Students will sit on the carpet. I will share with them some of the answers to the questionnaire that was used yesterday, to check for understanding. I will ask questions and make comments to make sure each student is on track. I will distribute the questionnaires and I will send the children back to their desks. (10 minutes)
2. Students will finish answering the questionnaire. I will walk among them to provide support as needed. We will go back to the carpet, and the children will exchange their questionnaires to read their peers’ answers. A few students will share their answers with the class. (15 minutes)
3. For the next activity, I will give each child three sheets of legal size white paper and a ruler. We will fold the papers in three sections, trying different combinations. For more Information about this part of the activity, please look at the images included in the list of resources. Using a sheet of paper, I will model the way I could start preparing my own “dream.” Students will return to their desks to work individually, sketching images to represent main events in their lives. (15 minutes)

Day 3

Procedure

1. Students will finish preparing the sketches for their visual piece. We will return to the carpet to share the work, make comments and answer questions. (15 minutes)
2. I will ask the students to think about which words could they include in their piece, which would go along with their images. Using my own sketch, I will share with them different ways I could add some text to my images. I will show them images from art books, to illustrate the way some artists use scrolls, banners, and other visual components to add text to images. (15 minutes)
3. Students will talk with a partner about words they could use in their sketch. Some students will share their thoughts with the class. The students will go back to their desks to write some of those words using the Adding Text form I designed for this part of the project. (10 minutes)

Day 4

Procedure

1. Today we will review everything that we have done to create the first draft of our own visual narrative. Using my images and text, I will model the way my piece would look. I will show the children how I could modify some of the images or text. I will talk about adding color to the images and making any necessary changes to create the second draft. (10 minutes)
2. Students will receive additional sheets of paper. They will go back to their desks to prepare a second draft of their visual narrative. This draft will have color and text. I will observe the students as they work, providing support as needed. (20 minutes)
3. Students will return to the carpet to share their work with a partner. Some children will share their second draft with the class. (10 minutes)

Day 5

Procedure

1. Today we will use old magazines, pieces of discarded fabric and craft items to enhance our visual narrative. This is an optional step, and not all children may want to use these items. Students will be free to choose and use some of these objects, find their own at home, or both. I will model the way I could add some of these items in my piece. Students will select what they want, and they will put their items in a Ziploc bag labeled with their name. (15 minutes)
2. After the children put their items away, they will go back to the carpet to observe the way I write a simple description of my own piece. I will make pauses answer questions and check for understanding. I will explain how my description and images are similar to those used by Rivera in his mural. I will ask the students to think about their own descriptive passage. (15 minutes)
3. Students will go back to their desks to write a draft for their written piece. I will collect the descriptions to give each child feedback about their writing later. (15 minutes)

Day 6

Procedure

Students will take their two drafts, written description and bagged items home. I will give each child two large

pieces of white construction paper, and a letter for their parents. This letter explains the way each child needs to complete their final piece, and prepare a 5-minute presentation. Children will have one week to complete their project at home. They will bring their image, and at least two photographs (printed or digitally submitted) showing them working on their piece to document authenticity. Each child will present their finished work to the class. After the presentations, my students images, descriptions and photographs will be exhibited in our school library.

Works Cited

Charlot, Jean, (1963). The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920-1925. Yale University Press

Rochfort, Desmond. (March 1st , 1998, p.24). Mexican Muralists Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros.

David W. Scott, (Autumn, 1957, p.2),Orozco's Prometheus: Summation, Transition, Innovation College Art Journal Vol. 17, No. 1 Published by: College Art Association

American Masters, PBS.org (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/>)

The Art Story Modern Art Insight (<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-mexican-muralism.htm>)

The Richmond Mural Project (<http://richmondmuralproject.squarespace.com>)

Resources for Teachers and Students

Books

Tolar, Jude, (2000). Artful Stories. Rigby Literacy

Winter, Jonah and Jeanette, (1991). Diego

Braun, Barbara, (1994). A Weekend with Diego Rivera. Published by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.

Bernier-Grand, Carmen T. and Diaz, David (Illustrator) Diego Bigger Than Life. This

book is a collection of poems inspired in the life and art of Diego Rivera.

Tonatiuh, Duncan Diego Rivera His World and Ours. The author provides biographical information about Rivera in a fun and playful way. The book has many colorful illustrations that will delight young students in grades K - 2.

Venezia, Mike, Diego Rivera (revised edition) - This is an excellent book for students in grades K - 3. The book provides information about Rivera's life and art work. The illustrations are colorful and fun.

Reef, Catherine, (2014). *Frida and Diego: art, love, life* Houghton Mifflin

Images

Pre-Hispanic murals in Mexico

Olmec Murals

http://michaelruggeri.com/MIKE_RUGGERIS_OLMEC_ART_PORTFOLIO/MIKE_RUGGERIS_OLMEC_ART_PORTFOLIO/Pages/Olmec_Murals.html

Murals in Teotihuacan (near Mexico City)

<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/teotihuacan-murals.htm>

Bonampak murals and information

<https://leonidemartinblog.wordpress.com/tag/bonampak-murals/>

<https://maya.nmai.si.edu/gallery/bonampak>

<http://www.mexicoarcheology.com/bonampak/>

Murals in Mexican churches and convents (16th - 18th centuries)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sanctuary_of_Atotonilco,_San_Miguel_Allende#/media/File:Atotonilco_dome.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sanctuary_of_Atotonilco,_San_Miguel_Allende#/media/File:ByChapelAtotonilco.JPG

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sanctuary_of_Atotonilco,_San_Miguel_Allende

<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/f9/10/f0/f910f07e401a36e65d92f483db41bae7.jpg>

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sanctuary_of_Atotonilco,_San_Miguel_Allende#/media/File:CeilingAtotonilco4.JPG

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0c/Atotonilco%2C_Guanajuato.jpg

<http://mexicosmurals.blogspot.com/2017/07/>

This is a great blog about Mexico during colonial times. <http://colonialmexico.blogspot.com/>

This is an excellent blog about old Mexican murals <http://mexicosmurals.blogspot.com/>

Schools murals in USA

<http://www.thrivecollective.org/portfolio/>

Mexican Muralism Movement images and videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mzQDfK3A5Q>

Diego Rivera's life and work

This is an excellent video and has beautiful Mexican music <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyLHcwBH6PI>

<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rivera-diego.htm>

Excellent video about Mexico City's history as seen on one of Rivera's most famous murals.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-DKc4i5bIQ>

Paintings <http://allpainters.org/theme/diego-rivera>

David Alfaro Siqueiros' life and work

<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-siqueiros-david-alfaro.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACRmeSkgCaA> (the narrator fails to pronounce Siqueiros' last name correctly in this otherwise good video)

Jose Clemente Orozco's life and work

<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-orozco-jose-clemente.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/jose-clemente-orozco-orozco-man-of-fire/82/>

<http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/explore/news/jose-clemente-orozco-epic-american-civilization>

Orozco's painting *Prometheus* (Pomona College) <http://www.dartmouth.edu/digitalorozco/app/>

Other Resources

The Detroit Institute of Arts has several resources that can be used to correlate visual arts activities with literacy. Among those resources are their *Artful Adjectives*, and *Visualizing Verbs* printable worksheets.

<https://www.dia.org/education/resources>

<https://www.dia.org/sites/default/files/DIA%20Standards.pdf> (visual art form)

https://www.dia.org/sites/default/files/DIA_Verbs.pdf (Visualizing Verbs)

https://www.dia.org/sites/default/files/DIA_Adjectives.pdf (Colorful Adjectives)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_pWZBOR4ec

Art activities for children: Diego Rivera

<http://kidworldcitizen.org/2014/03/23/diego-rivera-for-kids-make-your-own-mural/>

<https://www.crayola.com/lesson-plans/the-murals-of-diego-rivera-lesson-plan/>

<https://www.deepspacesparkle.com/diego-riveras-mothers-helper-art-lesson/>

<http://artprojectsforkids.org/?s=Diego+Rivera>

Murals in Richmond, Virginia, USA

Richmond Mural Project <http://richmondmuralproject.squarespace.com/>

Muralists

Nicolas Romero, “Ever”

<https://eversiempre.com/>

https://www.flickr.com/photos/ever_dsr/9497067242/

Nils Westergard

<http://nilswestergard.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/nilswestergard/>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nilswest/>

<http://www.isupportstreetart.com/interview/our-first-interview-nils-westergard/>

Elio Mercado, “Evoca1”

<https://www.facebook.com/evoca1/>

<https://www.instagram.com/evoca1/>

<https://www.urban-nation.com/2015/09/wall-poetry-we-paint-the-music-you-love-to-hear/>

<http://www.widewalls.ch/widewalls-artist-of-the-week-evoca1/>

Jonatan Rivera, “Jade”

<https://www.facebook.com/RIVERAJADE/>

<http://jadeuno.com/>

<http://lamonomagazine.com/jonathan-rivera-raices-andinas/> (Spanish)

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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