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## **The Art of Understanding and Connecting through Butterflies**

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*“The wings of transformation are born of patience and struggle.”— Janet Dickens*

### **Introduction: A Multispecies Study**

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Art often serves as storytelling and it has the power to convey emotion and awareness. From an ecological standpoint, art can support an understanding of organic life’s interconnection as well as cultivate empathy for the world around us. Nevertheless, art typically needs language to aid in activating that power. By establishing a basis for thinking about specific works of art, one can help individuals truly see beyond an artist’s composition. According to Karl Kusserow in *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*,

By developing ecocritical frameworks of interpretation, we enable people to see ecological and environmental meanings in art of both past and present. And the more diverse those frameworks are, the greater their impact across audiences and different forms of art.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, looking at art with a purposeful lens can help us discover new ways of seeing the value of all living things as well as their right to be on earth.

For this unit, I have chosen to take on a multispecies approach in pursuit of environmental conservation of essential living creatures. For instance, multispecies storytelling through monarch butterflies and human being migration in art draws on a narrative method that looks at nature through a beyond-human lens. By rethinking our relationship with other species, we invite the creation of new narratives through illustrative practices, and reshape our understanding and knowledge of landscape value, culture, and aesthetics.<sup>2</sup>

This study cogitates a way to think about who speaks on behalf of nature, and uses various art forms to contribute to participatory valuation and decision-making processes about nature itself and the lives that

inhabit it. More importantly, this is an analysis of a passionate immersion in the lives of animals and humanity in order to uncover new understandings, relationships, and accountabilities. The idea is to explore such connections and become responsive to the diverse ways of life that constitute the world.

## Content Objective

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My objective in this unit is to transform the way in which students think, learn, and react through visual arts and nature while uncovering deeper connections. In the process, I would like to guide my students in inspiring conversations while understanding that their perspectives are valued because there is no wrong or right way of thinking; there is only growth and development. I believe it is vital that they learn from one another, respect each other, listen, and understand there are multiple ways to see any given situation. I want to preserve students' curiosity, help really see rather than simply look, make them lifelong learners, and become contributing citizens to a diverse and changing world. In the process, encourage empathy both for creatures in nature and for human beings, especially those who are displaced. Therefore, the strategy that I find most effective for this unit will be the Visual Thinking Strategy. Essentially, it is a teacher-facilitated method where I introduce visual images and encourage discussions within the classroom about what we are seeing and how we can relate to it. Art can have so many meanings based on life experiences and when a teacher welcomes discussions about individual thoughts on art, it establishes grounds for engagement by contributing observations and ideas based on the student's personal experiences. This is because it enables students to will utilize existing visuals and cognitive skills to develop empathy as well as be open-minded to new experiences, and better understand their surroundings and environment.

More precisely, in this multispecies approach, I would like my students to become aware of the relationship between butterflies and humankind. We will not only examine and discuss their importance, but also engage in an understanding of how they relate to one another. Initially, I will refer to the scientific and ecological significance of the butterfly species given that they are crucial pollinators that contribute to the health of our planet. Their existence is vital for the reproduction of many plants that humans and other wildlife depend on. Subsequently, we will take a closer look at the symbolism of butterflies within artwork across history. The intention is to recognize the metaphorical notion of these delicate yet impressive beings.

I will center our focus on monarch butterflies as it pertains to the migration of individuals from Latin American countries. This amazing butterfly species is the only one that completes a 2-way migration, traveling up to 100 miles a day in search of forests to survive over the winter.<sup>3</sup> This fall migration has an ecological and cultural significance for people from Mexico, and it is evident in various public art forms. This notion of transnational migration, adaptability, and community is special, and one that resonates with many individuals.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it has grown to be a symbol of immigration and several artists utilize this representation in their artwork while advocating their conservation. We will explore various artworks that represent this beautiful interaction of human beings and nature. I am hoping students can see through the art and the beauty of nature in order to instill the importance of not only protecting human life but also wildlife.

## Classroom Context

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I have taken into great consideration our neighborhood and school's demographic when planning this unit. From 449 students currently attending Seward, 98% are Hispanic and 100% come from low-income families. Unfortunately, the high crime rate and gang activity within the neighborhood has negatively influenced our students' attendance and academic performances. We have experienced an even worse decline these past two years after we have welcomed many immigrant students to the school. After enrollment, student attendance has become weak, and communication with parents or guardians becomes a challenge. Those that do attend, particularly upper grade students, struggle academically. There are quite a few that do not know how to read or write in either English nor their native Language (Spanish). Our school's test scores fell far below the state average. The percent of proficiency in reading currently stands at 8% and proficiency in math stands at 4%. Undoubtedly, there are additional factors that have influenced this outcome, but I try my best to develop units that would support our students academically by incorporating subjects that peak their interests and motivation. I do so by utilizing their experiences or building off their prior knowledge, and encouraging open-mindedness in the process. Additionally, the core focus for this study is to cultivate empathy through the observation of their surroundings, finding connections, and sharing practices through art.

I am a strong believer in employing art as a tool for nurturing empathy because it can help people understand human emotions and stories. When artists make and share their artwork, they can illustrate their subjects' experiences and reflect their own thoughts, feelings, and understandings. This can also help the viewers connect with the art, and understand the artist's perspective, which can lead to empathy. I will also integrate critical thinking as an approach to learning because it is an essential skill in which students can actively conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. More importantly, this can be transferable to other disciplines.

I have chosen to complete this unit for our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. This is because the majority of these students are 1<sup>st</sup> generation or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants that have either encountered migration personally or have heard first-hand the experiences from their closest family members. After establishing relationships with many of my students, I have come to realize that their families have made the journey from Mexico, Honduras, Venezuela, or Columbia to the United States in hopes of a better future. It is unquestionably a difficult decision their families have made, and it came with many uncertainties. In their travels, they have encountered many trials and tribulations including instances of culture shock, rejection, and even worse- loss of loved ones. Through this lesson, my hopes are to bring recognition to the journeys of immigrants, and help students appreciate various experiences, consider difficult questions, and develop empathy for one another as well as relatable life forms such as the butterfly.

## Butterflies: Small Bodies, Huge Impact

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At first glance, because of their tiny size and frailness, one might not truly grasp the significance of these four-winged beings. They are not only beautiful to look at but also integral to ecosystems and have significant environmental impacts. There are more than 20,000 species of butterflies and they all have an essential role

in the pollination of plants.<sup>5</sup> They feed on the nectar inside of flowers and rub up against the pollen. This contains genetic material that becomes attached to the butterfly and is later dropped into other flowers they encounter. This pollen lands on the female part of another flower of the plant, allowing reproduction. These pollinators are a main source in growing fruits and vegetables. As stated by Environmental Science Writer, Keira Gaynor,

We can thank pollinators like butterflies for food like our fruits and vegetables. They are responsible for one in every three bites of food we consume and contribute over 200 billion dollars to the food economy worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

What is even more astonishing about these pollinating creatures is that they travel long distances, and the pollen attached to their bodies moves further than that of other pollinators. This helps plants and our earth by promoting genetic variation and disease resistance.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, butterflies help keep other organisms in check by consuming them in various stages of their life. In the larval, or caterpillar stage, they eat the leaves of host plants and utilize them as energy while the larvae grow. They also consume flowers or seed pods, and in turn, they help the plants lose leaves prior to autumn, or help keep specific plant species from spreading out of control. Typically, butterflies are very particular to the type of plant in which they feed such as the Monarch butterfly who only gravitate towards milkweed during their caterpillar stage. However, some adult butterfly species eat rotting fruit, carrions, or other animal excrement, thus assisting in eliminating waste from our environment.

Ecosystems depend upon various animals, insects, and plants to maintain balance and thrive. Scientists use the presence or absence of butterflies as a predictor of whether an ecosystem is healthy.<sup>8</sup> Both the adult and larval forms are sensitive to various pesticides. Climate change also effect butterflies since temperature variations and rainfall amounts may alter migration decisions and timing. Loss or devastation of their habitat - such as, losing the wide range they cover because of construction or defoliation - increases predation and reduces their opportunity of metamorphosis. Therefore, ecologists study butterfly behavior, their population numbers, and migration patterns to help determine the impact of these environmental issues. They can often be the first indicators that our environments are facing problems.

The unfortunate decline of the monarch butterflies has been a troubling indicator since the 1980s. The International Union for Conservation of Nature added the migratory monarch butterfly to its “Red List of Threatened Species” as endangered on December 30, 2021. Then, on September 27, 2023, they announced that the status would be changed from “endangered” to “vulnerable” starting December 11, 2023.<sup>9</sup> This alteration was due to a shift in the data used to evaluate the monarchs, not a change in its recent population. Deforestation at the overwintering site is the immediate threat, but not the only one. Within the U.S, the extensive use of pesticide-tolerant, genetically modified crops has dramatically reduced the supply of milkweed available for the monarchs.<sup>10</sup> This is a problem because this species will not lay their eggs on anything else, and it is a vital food source for them. Over the longer term, climate change is an even bigger threat. Drought along the monarch’s flying trail is now commonplace and the lack of nectar sources exacerbates the odds of their survival during their journey. Meanwhile, warmer winters are gradually driving monarchs to higher elevations in Mexico (main destination) and other sites because the butterflies can only perch successfully if temperatures that are favorable. Nevertheless, they are already near the mountaintops. Therefore, in another couple of decades, there will be nowhere for them to move up to. It is also unclear whether they can be induced to go somewhere else. Optimistically speaking, butterflies are tough beings.

They have dealt with global change during their roughly 1.5 million years living on earth.<sup>11</sup> Still, mankind continues to throw challenges at them as they try and adapt. Unquestionably, positive intervention by people is crucial for the survival of monarchs and other butterfly species. Organizations such as Monarch Joint Venture, National Wildlife Federation, and Xerces Society (just to name a few) are dedicated to conserving monarch butterflies as well as other native insect pollinators. They have made a tremendous impact, but restoring the habitat these remarkable creatures is mission that must be done worldwide. It is an obligation we must all uphold.

## The Fluttering Existence of Butterflies in Art History

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Butterflies have certainly been depicted in an educational context for analytical or observational purposes in science and art textbooks, guides, articles, etc. Nevertheless, butterflies symbolic introduction dates back to ancient times. The butterflies' journey in the arts begins in ancient Egypt and Greece thereafter. For the Egyptians, butterflies were a symbolic meaning related to life after death. For the Greek, they were associated with the human soul. This notion fluttered its way into various artworks, where butterflies represented the soul's journey and the afterlife.<sup>12</sup> During the medieval era, they started appearing in enlightened manuscripts and were often portrayed as symbols of resurrection and spiritual transformation. Fast forward to the Renaissance period where there began a renewed view of the natural world, and butterflies became an admired subject for both artists and scientists. It was during this time that these fascinating creatures were seen as representations of nature's perfection and the delicate balance of life. At one point, even Leonardo Da Vinci was mesmerized by their anatomy and beauty, and it was evident in his detailed sketches of them. During the Victorian era, butterflies made their way into the realm of fashion and home décor. They seemed to depict of transformation, femininity, and the ephemeral beauty of life. Victorian artists adored their delicate appeal and grace which made them a staple in decorative art. As time progressed, butterflies continued to captivate artists, becoming a representation of change freedom, and fragility.<sup>13</sup>

Maria Van Oosterwyck, a Dutch Golden Age painter, was recognized for her *vanitas* paintings, which remind viewers of the ephemerality of worldly luxuries and the eternal nature of the soul.<sup>14</sup> This was reflection of a butterfly's brief lifespan. Oosterwyck was also known for her use of Red Admiral butterflies in her most significant paintings and many observers believe these butterflies were her unique symbol of Christ's resurrection, and a promise on eternal life. In her paintings, their metamorphosis metaphorically reflected the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In comparison, still-life painters named Adriaen Coorte and Rachel Ruysch were also famed for their impressive depictions of butterflies.

In the 17th century, artists and naturalists around the world set out to feature plants and wildlife of remote lands. Many of these depictions, though apparently scientific, were primarily informed by the artistic tastes and cultural beliefs of the artists. This was demonstrated in their illustration of butterflies where they incorporated hovering around bouquets of flowers and plants. A naturalist illustrator to note during this period is Maria Sibylla Merian who included these creatures in her illustrations of the flora she discovered while traveling in Suriname in 1699.<sup>15</sup> Her illustrations were popularized in *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, a prominent volume of Suriname's natural landscapes.

In Japan, the butterfly has a rich symbolic history. It appeared in family crests, in origami, on kimono designs,

and in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints of the Edo era. It symbolized a transition from girlhood to womanhood. In most cases, butterflies were tied to many aspects of female ritual and experience. It became an especially prevalent subject in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints made by artists such as Utagawa (Ando) Hiroshige and Yanagawa Shiganob, who made detailed images of courtesans and performers in butterfly costumes and attire.

In late 18th century, artists were considering the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, both on the environment and on existing ways of life. For example, artist Thomas Gainsborough's painting titled *The Painter's Daughters chasing a Butterfly* (1756) illustrates his two young daughters chasing a butterfly that lays on a prickly thistle.<sup>16</sup> The butterfly is an indication of coming dangers, while at the same time acting as metaphor for hope, expressed in the promise of the young girls. In later Impressionist paintings, such as the famous Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, butterflies are seen floating around scenes of middle-class urban leisure, which was enabled by the industrial revolution.

Artists in the modern age also emphasized the inspiring aspects of a butterfly's existence. A Symbolist artist named Odilon Redon, for example, included butterflies along with shells and flowers as natural objects that stirred a sense of admiration and wonder that art was capable of evoking. Even Vincent Van Gogh devoted an entire series to butterflies. He saw in them the promise of humanity's abilities to change their lives for the better, and the existence of an optimistic reality ahead. Another profound instance is Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940) where she is crowned by butterflies.<sup>17</sup> The blue wings rest delicately on her hair almost halo-like. Many have interpreted this as a symbol of Kahlo's own rebirth following her life-changing accident that had nearly killed her. Butterflies, in this case also suggest the possibility of near resurrection.

Damien Hirst was one of the first famous contemporary artists to employ butterflies within his artwork. In his installation titled *In and Out of Love* (1991), Hirst invites viewers to bear witness to the evanescent beauty of butterflies' lives by seeing them evolve from cocoons, live, and die within the course of the exhibition. He describes this as his most conceptual work at the time, creating the entire life cycle of butterflies in the one space and then turning those same butterflies into art in another. This poses a fundamental question about the line between art and life. During an interview in 1991, Hirst explained,

It's about love and realism, dreams, ideals, symbols, life and death. I worked out many possible trajectories for these things, like the way the real butterfly can destroy the ideal kind of love; the symbol exists apart from the real thing. Or the butterflies still being beautiful even when dead. All these things are completely thrown off balance by a comparison I tried to make between art and life, in the upstairs and downstairs installations, a crazy thing to do when in the end it's all art.<sup>18</sup>

Later, in his work titled *I am Become Death, Shatterer of Worlds* (2006), the artist incorporated nearly 3,000 sets of butterfly wings into a vibrant psychedelic-like image. It is an intricate composition created entirely of actual dead butterfly wings organized in a radiating pattern. Essentially, it is a sublime arrangement incorporating a dual heart and a vortex of forms, expressing beauty and life, yet challenges the horror of what one sees. In other words, it is a remarkable presentation of exquisiteness, but it pulls the viewer into thinking about the terror of its portrayal- death. Hirst often explored the territories of religion, science, and death within his work, and it was apparent in this instance. He even once declared, "I think I have an obsession with death, but I think it's like a celebration of life rather than something morbid. You can't have one without the

other.”<sup>19</sup>

In summary, butterflies have fluttered their way into art throughout history to signify many ideas such as the human spirit, life's ephemerality, natural beauty, grace as well as elegance, transformation, and hope. To a greater extent, a specific butterfly species has now become a cultural symbol of migration, conservation, as well as beliefs and traditions. It is for this reason that I will address the Monarch butterfly in connection to Latino immigrants.

## Human Migration

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Humans by birth have the natural instinct to survive just like all other living things on this planet. When their environment poses a threat in any way, it is normal to move away from danger and find a haven in order to thrive. It is also in our nature to adapt and live in new surroundings just as butterflies do. Although motives vary by individuals and families, difficult socioeconomic and security conditions—exacerbated by natural disasters and poor governance—appear to be the most significant drivers of economic migrants and asylum-seekers.<sup>20</sup> This has been the case for those migrating from Latin American countries. Some research suggests these migratory waves also become self-reinforced over time, as families seek reunification and those that leave their communities serve as examples. They share their experiences and resources to those who have remained behind. It is a migration pattern found in nature overall, although the journey alone could be *perilous*, and poses many uncertainties.

Migrants from Latin America have traveled to the United States in a number of ways, including legally, illegally, and through immigration parole programs. Nearly half of all the migrants now residing in the US entered the country legally through a port of entry such as an airport or a border crossing point where they were subject to inspection by immigration officials, according to new estimates from the Pew Hispanic Center.<sup>21</sup> With a visa, migrants are allowed to visit or reside in the US for a short amount of time, though many intend to stay permanently. Characterized as “overstayers”, these migrants become part of the “unauthorized” population when they remain in the country after their visas expire. Another smaller portion of the unauthorized migrant population enter the country legally from Mexico using a Border Crossing Card, which is a document that also permits limited stay at the border region, but later violate the terms of permission. The remainder of the unauthorized migrant population, largely more than half, enter the country illegally. This means discreetly by foot or by hiding in vehicles. Given challenging circumstances, this may be the last resort for many individuals.

The most dangerous terrains in Mexico's northern states are the last stop for many Latin American migrants before attempting to cross the border into the United States. Along the way, many of these men, women and children suffer assaults, robbery and abduction by criminal gangs.<sup>22</sup> There has been numerous accounts of extortion and mistreatment by police as well as immigration officials. Tragically, some migrants are killed before they even reach their final destination.<sup>23</sup> In a book titled “Photography and Migration”, Tanya Sheehan emphasizes tragic experiences such as these through visual/media documentation. She states, “For far too many migrants, the journey to seek safety and economic opportunities ends in death”.<sup>24</sup> She continues by saying “Along the United States-Mexico border, migrant deaths increased tenfold between 2001 and 2014 after a shift in enforcement made the deadly Sonoran Desert the most likely route for migrants seeking to

enter the country without documentation.”<sup>25</sup> This raises pressing questions about the ethical obligations of the countries’ involved. They need to bring attention to this immorality and ensure the safety and human dignity of the migrants that cross these borders. Still, conditions of precarity have not hindered many migrant individuals and families, which speaks volumes about their determination and perseverance to survive. Once arriving to the United States, the struggle to live justifiably continues.

Latin America became the highest origin region for US immigrants in 1990. By 2019 migrants from Latin America comprised 6.5 percent of the US population.<sup>26</sup> Naturally, Mexico is the largest source of Latin American migrants to the United States, and it continues to grow. By 2022, there has been a reported amount of 4.1 million immigrants from Mexico.<sup>27</sup> We often see in the media and/or social networks that migrants are portrayed as an economic burden for host countries, overlooking the significant contributions reported in many studies and research. Migrants are agents of sustainable development, contributing to countries' economic growth. They create job opportunities and promote innovation and technological changes. Their contribution as consumers and taxpayers is also noteworthy. Additionally, migration is also a tool for poverty reduction for migrants and their families, contributing to a Sustainable Development Goal, which is ultimately to end poverty.<sup>28</sup> Just like pollinators, immigrants are substantially indispensable. It is important to empower immigrants to catalyze their contributions to this development and leverage the advantages of migration. It is also imperative that movements are made in promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration. The integration of migrants should be at the center of governments' public policies, by promoting the welfare and protection of the human rights of all migrants.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, immigration has been, and remains to be a heated political debate in the United States, and often times, it results to unfair treatment of migrants.

## The Migrants Connection and Advocate Artists

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The monarch butterfly has now become the representational beauty of migration. Favianna Rodriguez, a printmaker and digital artist that highly influenced this movement explains

People and animals alike belong to nature, and nature has no borders. The butterfly is a symbol for the right of all living beings to move freely. Like the monarch butterfly, human beings cross borders in search of safer habitats.<sup>30</sup>

They symbolize transformation and renewal, as their life cycle from caterpillar to cocoon to butterfly is a metaphorical journey that many immigrants can relate to. In a *moving documentary series* titled "Voice of Art - Migration is Beautiful", Rodriguez addresses the debate surrounding immigration policy in the US, and the overall perception of immigrants. She also sheds light on the growing influence of artists in the political realm. In an interview, Rodriguez affirms

Art can spark the imagination like nothing else can, and yet I think that progressives do not fully understand the powerful role that artists can play in social change. The anti-immigrant movement has successfully been able to dominate the immigration debate by pushing out messages about migrants that are inhumane, racist, xenophobic and hateful. But those of us who fight for migrant



rights are not only fighting back, we want to reframe the way migrants are viewed, artists especially. We want to expose the tragic losses that have resulted from unjust immigration laws, and we want to inspire and challenge people to reimagine migration as something beautiful and natural -- something we all do.<sup>31</sup>

This is especially reflective in her own work as an artist and activist. On July of 2012, she and a group of more than two dozen undocumented activists gathered in Phoenix, Arizona to paint a 1972 sea-foam green bus.<sup>32</sup> They applied monarch butterflies in their design with black, white, and orange spray paint. The vehicle was named "Undocubus", and they traveled across the country, stopping in 10 states to protest the failures of immigration policy before the Democratic National Convention.<sup>33</sup> Although these butterflies were used for more than a decade in various Latin American migration artworks, it was not until this particular year that artists began "popularizing the symbol" within the current immigration debate. It became stable to the global immigrant rights movement. Subsequently, in 2018, Rodriguez created a Social Justice Poster design titling it "Migration is Beautiful". This artwork celebrates the courage, determination, and resilience of migrants who cross borders in search for a better life. It features an artistic adaptation of a monarch butterfly with each wing showing a human profile using bold vibrant colors. Now, Rodriguez's work is widely recognized in contemporary immigration advocacy, and "Migration is Beautiful" is now part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection.

For Jaqueline Romo, an artist, teacher, and immigrant, the migration experience that she, her family and friends as well as many others have endured is aptly reflected in a collection of artwork she titled "The Passion of the Monarca Migrante".<sup>34</sup> Her artwork is composed of 15 relief prints made from carved linoleum blocks to represent her faith and migration experience. In Romo's rendering, her faith is repetitively represented as a monarch butterfly and the body of a migrant pushed to the margins of society. Born in Los Altos, Jalisco, Mexico, she migrated to the United States with her family when she was just 2 years old. She and her siblings had a difficult upbringing, and it became even more challenging as well as devastating when her father was deported back to Mexico. Romo recalls, "My mom had to raise the three of us, and she was the one who had to work to support us".<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, at an early age, her mother instilled the Catholic faith in her children, which helped Romo cope with the desolation. This carried over into adulthood and influenced her artwork. She recalled the migration stories told by her family members, stories about how they traveled through the desert and crossed the border. She also recognized that the monarch butterfly has been used as a depiction of resilience by immigrants because of the long journey they undergo. Making connections, she saw similarities in the stories of suffering, sacrifice, and hope. Thus, she decided to make art in a Latino way, in other words, through the eyes of a Latina migrant. *In her composition, one can see colorful monarchs alongside images like desert landscapes, footprints, hands reaching out, chains, crosses, borders, and a figure of immigrant enforcement. During an interview in 2019, Romo explains*

I decided to focus on the Mexican experience of crossing the border, not because Mexicans are the only ones — they are not — but because that was the way I would portray myself in this work, reflecting on what the Passion of Christ means to a Latino in the United States and portraying the untold stories of people who cross a desert, a river, not knowing if they will make it.<sup>36</sup>

These relief prints express a poignant reminder of the migration struggle while also revealing a fertile ground for theological reflection. Another artist that uses monarchs in a comparable manner (different medium) is

Ernesto Muñiz.

Ernesto Muñiz is a Mexican collage artist, born in Mexico City. He studied graphic design and found a career in photojournalism. After facing a personal crisis, Muñiz directed his artistic form of expression to collage-making. He does so by using found materials and images cut from magazines. His composed pieces take on a life of their own communicating complex ideas and tackle challenging subjects. The main, recurring themes in his artworks are religion, violence, love, and death. He reimagines religious iconography, combining it with Latino imagery, nature-focused imagery, mysterious symbolism, a variety of architectural forms, and wide-ranging cultural references, both old and new.<sup>37</sup> Frequently hidden in his compositions, viewers can find various butterfly species, monarch butterflies being one. For instance, in his artwork titled “Garden of Delight”, monarchs are found at the center, surrounded by fruits, flowers, plants, birds, the Virgin Mary, and iconic art figures such as Frida Kahlo. This is a slightly *peculiar reminiscence* of Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (1490-1500) that narrates a bewildering perspective of humanity along with nature, and it is certainly worth exploring. It provides a visual feast of color and imagery that takes viewers on a symbol-filled journey of discovery, and intended to stimulate alternative ways of thinking.

Laurie Buman is a phenomenal Chicago artist who constantly seeks ways to understand, make tangible, and express beauty within the world. Her artwork is layered with meaning beyond the obvious. Buman expresses that

Every item and image within a piece has a history all its own, and when combined they tell a greater story that transcends the physical. Each creation represents a personal journey that requires me to challenge my own belief systems and reinterpret what I think is true. It is a space in which the line between belief and knowledge becomes blurred, just as my work reflects both the real and the abstract.”<sup>38</sup>

In a collection titled “Santos Del Corazon”, Buman creates profound images that honor creatures and phenomena that hold special places in her heart. One of which is the monarch butterfly. “Saint Monarca of the Milkweed” is a mixed media print done with gold leaf, and it illustrates a sacred figure, similar to the Virgin Mary, devoted to these magnificent beings (Figure 1).



Figure 1

“Saint Monarca of the Milkweed”

Print with Gold Leaf, 35” x 26”

She acknowledges these butterflies by saying

The monarch butterfly migration across the continent provides an invaluable service, essential for many ecosystems to thrive. It is thanks to these pollinators, as well as bees and other insects, that we have many of the flowers and nutritious foods that sustain us. Canonized in my imagination, Saint Monarca is dedicated to the preservation of the Monarch butterfly. I created this saint to offer protection as the butterflies make their journey south to their overwintering grounds in the mountains of central Mexico. When they arrive, they will cluster together, coating the sacred Oyamel Fir trees of Michoacán.<sup>39</sup>

This mystical art piece is beautifully embedded with thoughtful cultural and historical references all the while honoring the life of these butterflies. It also conveys an indication of a Mexican tradition- the Day of the Dead- that celebrates ancestors that have passed on. The arrival of these butterflies in Mexico during the winter months coincides with this holiday, which is celebrated between November 1st and 2nd. For some people, the butterflies symbolize the spirits of the dead returning to visit their families and friends each year. So much can be revealed in this composition, and another component to highlight is the milkweed crown that emphasizes the key source of their survival. Buman imaginatively advocates for these beings, and articulates the importance of their existence in a beautiful way.

Numerous artists continue to employ monarchs as well as other butterflies in a meticulous fashion, not only

for aesthetics, or metaphorically, but also to bring awareness to the wonders of nature as well as instilling the weight of protecting both humans and wildlife equally.

## Teaching Strategy

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After sharing the scientific aspect of the butterflies through their contribution to our planet's well-being, the history of butterflies in art, and its comparisons to the migration of people, we will analyze the artworks containing monarchs as well as migration as the subject matter, and thoroughly study its significantly profound connections. Consequently, my students will respond to the lessons by creating artwork of their own both individually and collaboratively.

In order to do so, I will guide my students in learning how to "read" and respond to art. We will focus on a five-level process of digesting various artistic forms:

First Reaction – Students will answer the following questions: What is your first impression of the artwork? What pops into your mind? How does it make you feel? What mood does the artwork create? What do you think the artist wanted you to feel when you look at this artwork, what emotion does it evoke in you? Afterwards, we go a little bit deeper and look in more detail.

Formal Analysis- This contains all the things about the artwork they can see without any further thought. In art, we usually use the elements of art and principles of design to interpret an art piece. Therefore, we look at how the artist applied these elements and principles in their artwork, and students will answer questions such as: What is the line quality, the mark-making techniques this artist used? How did they use color and what mood does that demonstrate?

Note: The elements of art are the tools that artist use to make their work. These are as follows: color, line, shape, value, form, space, and texture.

The principles of design are the way in which they use them. These are the following: balance, unity, repetition/patterns, harmony, emphasis, rhythm/movement, proportion.

Artists use some blend of many or all of these aspects in order to make their work aesthetically pleasing and/or to communicate a message effectively. The objective is draw in the viewer and be thought provoking. Students study these components in order to develop a way to "read" a composition and understand the core idea.

Content-Based Analysis- Students will become investigators at this level and unravel questions such as: What are you actually looking at? Does it tell a story? What is the story/depiction? Who or what is the main subject represented in the artwork? Are they using any specific symbols in the artwork?

Context-Based Analysis- In this type of analysis, students ask questions beginning with words such as why and how, and they will seek answers through research taking into consideration the time period in which the artwork was made. For instance, what was the general feeling, mood, and tension within a country or around

the globe at that time? Then students start delving a little bit deeper and look at the artist's life and what they intended to communicate with this artwork.

Opinions and Beliefs- This level is supported by personal experiences as well as facts.

### **Additional Strategies to consider:**

Learning Logs- Learning logs are used to help students keep track of learning during the class discussion and any in collaboration work. Therefore, after utilizing the visual thinking strategy above to interpret artwork, I will have students jot down the similarities they have discovered from every discussion in their sketchbooks. This will help students reflect on and refer to when they are seeking clarification and inspiration during assignments. Additional notes will also be encouraged.

Collaborative Learning- Collaborative learning is a significant strategy that I will utilize for most of this unit because it helps students to establish a strong team and work together to solve a given problem or reach a common goal. There are several benefits students get when working in a group setting such as: develop social skills, learn from peers, build trust, engage in learning, and gain confidence. This will truly be essential since their final assignment asks that they work together in a communal effort to complete a textile art piece for their school.

Think-Pair-Share: Oftentimes, some students may be too shy or insecure to share their thoughts and ideas with the entire class. Therefore, I utilize this collaborative learning technique. A student will first examine & think about an art piece alone. Afterward, they will have the opportunity to share their insight with another classmate.

Jigsaw Method: The jigsaw strategy is said to improve social interactions in learning and support diversity. It involves separating an assignment into subtasks, where students in groups will investigate and explore an assigned art sample. Subsequently, the group will essentially educate other groups about their assigned butterfly art sample. Confidently, the students would then discuss ideas between groups before coming back together as a whole classroom and sharing their experience.

## **Classroom Activities**

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### **Lesson 1: "I can analyze, interpret, and create the depiction of butterflies" (Inspired by Ernesto Muñiz)**

Summary- The first activity is an introduction to the portrayal of butterflies artistically throughout history. Once students have grasp their understanding in the representation of butterflies through our historical content analysis, I will ask students to choose a depiction they feel strongly about (ex: human spirit, life's ephemerality, natural beauty, elegance, transformation, hope, resilience, etc.) and this will become the focal theme of their first project- a photomontage. This photomontage will be broken into three parts: The background, middle ground, and foreground. These sections should interplay establishing depth, contextual

storytelling, and have an aesthetic balance. After the project is complete, student will create an artist statement that contains a brief written description of their work in order to help viewers understand their thought process. Ultimately, it should convey the meaning of the butterflies. Following this assignment will be a classroom gallery walk. A gallery walk is a student engagement activity in which students display their artwork, move around the room and explore their classmates' artwork while responding to the assortment. We will discuss similarities, differences, highlights, and overall project experience.

#### Objective-

- Make connections between prior knowledge and new information using the process of analysis
- Note relevant information using visual thinking
- Create a visual representation in response to butterflies in art history (photomontage)
- Synthesize visual information in a landscape format considering the back ground, middle ground, and foreground

#### Materials-

- Bristol Board,
- Magazines, newspapers, photos, or other recycled illustrations
- Scissors and/or utility knife
- Cutting matt
- Glue stick
- Writing utensil
- Sketchbooks/notebook

#### Instructions-

Create a Photomontage that illustrates your chosen portrayal of butterflies. This mixed media art form involves combining multiple images to create a new meaning. It includes cutting and pasting photographs, as well as adding non-photographic elements like text, shapes, or patterns. To create an aesthetically pleasing composition, please consider the following:

**Background-** This is the furthest part of the scene. It gives some context to the scene, where it might be taking place. In this case, where would one place these butterflies given the perspective? A nature landscape? A spiritual environment?

**Middle ground-** This is the central area of your image, between the foreground and background. It is often where the main subject or focal point resides which will be your butterflies. You may chose to have one or several butterflies species. Purposefully utilize principles of design in this space.

**Foreground-** This is the part of the scene that is closest to the viewer. Here is where your interpretation will become illuminated through images such as human figures, wildlife, objects, symbols, and even text.

## **Lesson 2: “I can make a connection between monarch butterflies and migration.” (Inspired by Jaqueline Romo and Laurie Buman)**

Summary- In this lesson, students will be working independently on a two-part painting that demonstrates the connection of monarch butterflies and human migrants on their journey. Student will have the opportunity to share their own personal experiences on this project or chose to express their thoughts of migration indirectly based on narratives they gathered from family members or close friends. Part 1 will consist of a painted landscape of their choosing that had a profound impact in their life during, before, or after migration. Additional imagery and text will be encouraged to express mood and/or cultural references. Part 2 will be a stained glass-like design of monarchs completed on a transparency sheet, which will later be placed on top of the landscape in order to create one cohesive piece. The stain glass effect will be a mirroring representation of hope and resilience. Prior to completing the assignment, students will swap their work-in-progress, and provide meaningful feedback to a classmate while receiving insight in exchange. They will proceed by either revising or adding to their final artwork before our gallery walk. In the process, I hope they engage in communicating various perspectives and empathize for one another while also considering the significant lives of monarchs.

### Objective-

- Recognize that their experiences and perceptions have value
- Explore the elements of art and principles of design in two artistic forms
- Design a composition that connects monarchs and human migration experiences
- Share meaningful feedback with peers based on knowledge of content

### Materials-

#### Part 1: Landscape

- Press painting paper
- Paints (Watercolor, tempera, or acrylic)
- Paint brush
- Additional drawing/painting utensils

#### Part 2: Stain-Glass Monarchs

- Stained glass sheets or transparency sheets
- Black and colored markers
- Double-sided tape or liquid glue
- Construction paper or cardstock for frame
- Monarch butterfly templates (optional)

### Instructions-

Part 1: Create a landscape painting that expresses your personal migration experience or that of a loved one. What would you like your viewers to know about this journey? How would you like them to feel? You may draw on your views that occurred before, during, or after your migration. All paintings convey mood in some sort of way, and landscape as the subject matter sublimely so. Therefore, please use elements of art with intention to create strong currents of emotion such as nostalgia, melancholy, serenity, joy, or even subtle combination of

these. Color, content, and the overall composition can contribute to the mood of the painting.

Part 2: You will mimic the notion of Stained glass by creating a mesmerizing mosaic design of monarch butterflies on regular paper, then transferring it to a transparent sheet. The arrangement of the butterflies is your choice. Outline the design in black and fill the space with color markers. Lastly, using tape or glue, carefully place your stained glass design on top of your landscape. Be prepared to share your work, and support your artistic approach.

### **Lesson 3: “I can work collaboratively to bring awareness and establish social change.” (Inspired by Favianna Rodriguez)**

Summary- In this lesson, students will work together in a communal effort to complete a large textile art piece. Motivated by what they have learned thus far in the unit and inspired by social justice for immigrants, we will create a work of art that will be shared with the entire school. This lesson will also be divided into two parts. The first portion of this lesson will be creating relief prints with the conservation of monarch butterflies in mind. Through a series of prints, students will illustrate the vital importance of preserving the lives of monarchs as well as what we can do to in advocating for these creatures. This can be done through images and text. These student-made designs will then be utilized for the second part of this assignment- creating a giant quilt-like textile crafted by recycled clothing of our community. Ideally, I would like the fabric to be donated from my students, their families, and our school staff that they may have worn in the duration of migration or share value to a relatable experience. We will create an arrangement and sew them together carefully. Proceeding this stage, we will stamp the relief print designs directly into the fabric in a purposefully story-telling manner. In addition, we may add additional components using other recycled items and/or paints. Once completed, we will publicly display our artwork for everyone to see. To conclude this unit, students will write an Artist’s reflection of their overall thoughts, discoveries, and take-aways.

Objective-

- Recognize that their experiences and perceptions have value
- Work collaboratively on a textile wall piece, strategizing about theme, medium, and individual student contribution to the finished work
- Explore the elements and principles of art as they choose compositional layout
- Gain experience with sequential imagery to convey a common message
- Develop visual images and symbols using a collaborative process
- Establish reflection through documentation of thoughts, acknowledgement of accomplished objective and share the process

Materials-

- Recycled fabrics (donated by student, families, and community)
- String, ribbon, yarn
- Scissors
- Sewing kits
- Paint
- Paint brushes
- Linoleum blocks
- Gouge tool
- Roller or brayer



- Spoon or baren
- Block ink (preferably monarch wing colors)
- Drawing utensils

Instructions-

Relief Print: Create a design to inform your audience of significance of monarchs from their contribution to our food source to essential migration. This design will be transferred to a linoleum block to make a series of prints. Complete the following steps for relief print-making:

1. Prepare your block. You can use a dull pencil or pen to design your image into the block.
2. Carve your image. Use gouges to remove areas of the block that you don't want in the final print, leaving others raised in relief.
3. Apply ink using a roller or brayer. Gently roll it onto the block, covering the entire surface to the edges.
4. Place on "testing" paper: Carefully position the paper over the inked block.
5. Apply pressure to the block. Use a spoon or baren to apply pressure to the back of the paper, or run the paper through a printing press
6. Remove the paper by carefully lifting it away from the block.
7. If you are happy with the print, save your linoleum block for part 2. Modify if needed.

Collaborative Textile: Bring in clothing you chose to recycle but hold of value to you based on your experiences. Contribute in sewing the pieces together and adding to the overall layout to make our audience socially aware.

1. Generate a common theme/focus
2. Brainstorm focused content and imagery (migration and monarchs)
3. Create Sketches and reach an agreement
4. Finalize the composition
5. Calculate needs and collect materials
6. Cut fabric to desired shape that suits projected structure
7. Arrange the composition
8. Streamline the order of operations (share responsibilities to ensure that everyone is contributing in a certain manner)
9. Sew pieces together using
10. Apply relief prints to the composition
11. Add any desired components
12. Display and admire

## Appendix

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As an IB (International Baccalaureate) certified school, I am implementing IB's framework for teaching and learning in arts for the Middle Years Programme (MYP). For this unit, the key concept I will focus on is *Communication* because it is defined as "the exchange or transfer of signals, facts, ideas and symbols. It also requires a sender, a message and an intended receiver." Communication involves the activity of conveying information or meaning and that is essentially, what the students will be putting into practice in this unit. The

related concepts (promoting a deeper learning of the key concept) will be: *Visual Culture, Interpretation, and Audience*. The global context in which the students learn from is *Personal and Cultural Expression*. This is because the students will explore the ways in which we discover and express ideas, feelings, nature, culture, beliefs and values; the ways in which we reflect on, extend and enjoy our creativity; our appreciation of beautiful meanings in public art. The approach to learning that I will teach these students *CriticalThinking Skills*. The expectation is to make connections between ideas as well as apply existing knowledge to generate new ideas and a product. In addition, they will explore the ways in which they study, reflect on, extend and recognize creativity; an extended appreciation of art and, in this case, nature as well.

### **National Core Arts Standards Addressed**

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and Conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

*VA:Cr1.1.8a Document early stages of the creative process visually and/or verbally in traditional or new media.*

Enduring Understanding: Creativity and innovative thinking are essential life skills that can be developed.

Essential Questions: What conditions, attitudes, and behaviors support creativity and innovative thinking? What factors prevent or encourage people to take creative risks? How does collaboration expand the creative process?

Through their observation, analyzation, and class discussion, students will be able to understand how an artist's express ideas with specific images and symbols. They will also explore the messages artists are trying to convey, and be able to implement this notion on their own through their own creations.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

*VA:Re8.1.8a Interpret art by analyzing how the interaction of subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, use of media, art making approaches, and relevant contextual information contributes to understanding messages or ideas and mood conveyed.*

Enduring Understanding: People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

Essential Question(s): What is the value of engaging in the process of art criticism? How can the viewer "read" a work of art as text? How does knowing and using visual art vocabularies help us understand and interpret works of art?

Through this study, students will better understand that there is intention in artistic process. Artists often have purposeful meaning behind their artwork. My observing and studying what they see, students may be able comprehend the subject matter and contextual information.

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