

# Aztec Codex

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## GOALS/GRADE LEVELS

Students will learn about and demonstrate an understanding of Aztec culture by making a replica of an Aztec codex. Like archaeologists and historians, they will examine codices to identify significant aspects of Aztec culture. Students will depict distinctive Aztec figures with flat foreheads and large noses, show relevant styles of dress, and represent people engaging in appropriate daily activities. Students may also learn about glyphs and include relevant examples or invent their own. They will compare examples of Aztec and Maya codices and gain perspective on the biases of European conquerors and colonizers of Mesoamerica.

The project was designed for seventh grade, but can be modified for other grades studying Aztec culture and archaeology by changing the detail and complexity of the teacher's presentation and by adapting the reading.

## CULTURAL/HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This project will discuss Aztec culture from 1200-1600 C.E., located in and around present day Mexico City.

Aztec codices are relatively easy for students to mimic, and the subject matter is of inherent interest. The books were made from long, rectangular strips of bark or cured animal skin, cut to various dimensions and accordion-folded. Many examples exist in museums around the world, including the Vatican Museum in Rome. The codices depict calendars and discuss many aspects of the Aztec civilization, including taxation, history, storytelling, trade, dress, daily life, and religious practices. Artists used combinations of figurative drawings and glyphs to represent ideas; the glyphs were pictographic and ideographic, but they could also represent phonetic sounds.

Some stylistic markers of human figures:

- Face, arms, and legs are generally shown in profile or flat  $\frac{3}{4}$  view, but with a frontal torso
- Faces have a flattened forehead and large nose
- Typical male dress includes a loin cloth and a tunic or a cloak tied over one shoulder
- Typical female dress includes a tunic top or long blouse with sleeves to the elbow, and a long skirt reaching below the knee

Gods, priests, and high-status figures dress in a variety of clothing; students should examine a selection of clothing types chosen by the teacher.

Possible topics for student illustrations include:

- building a chinampa (floating garden) for farming
- the daily life of Aztec girls and boys
- Aztec religious and agricultural ceremonies
- Aztec fashions
- the conquest of the Aztec empire by Pizarro
- the capture of Montezuma

## TIME NEEDED

An introduction to Aztec codices should follow a lesson studying Aztec culture. A presentation on codices and Aztec representational artistic styles can be completed in about 45 minutes. After seeing examples of codices, students should choose topics and practice drawing sample illustrated pages during class. The codex can be completed in two class periods of about 45 minutes each, or the teacher may choose to make this a take-home assignment.

## MATERIALS, TOOLS, AND PREPARATION

The teacher will need to research Aztec and Maya culture and codices as well as the Spanish conquest. S/he must also obtain and organize materials. To save time, or to help younger students, the teacher can cut and fold the books in advance so that students can begin illustrating right away. Glyph and codex examples can be found in Nicholson and Watts 1994: 21, 22, and codex examples in Longhena 1998: pp. 80, 82, 83, 84-87.

Materials:

- Card stock paper strips about 22" x 4" long (students cut an 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  sheet of paper in half lengthwise and tape two pieces together at the seam)
- Colored pencils
- Sample Aztec designs and glyphs, and reprints of pages from Aztec codices
- Paper collage materials for background and added texture

## THE CLASSROOM PROCESS

### Studying Mesoamerica

Prior to studying the Aztecs, students explore Maya culture. They read an excerpt from Lewis Spence, [The Myths of Mexico and Peru](#), published in 1913 (Knoblock 2007: 186). Spence presents the European view of native cultures from the perspective of an English historian. The excerpt focuses on how Europeans viewed the Maya and why there are so few examples of Maya codices still

extant today. Students learn how the excerpt can function as both a primary and secondary source. Spence describes how Europeans destroyed many of the Maya texts because of priestly fanaticism and the belief that the texts were “inventions of the father of evil” in depicting scenes of human sacrifice. Students analyze Spence’s statements for what they reveal about early twentieth-century European bias toward Mesoamerican cultures. They learn that much evidence from the past has been lost, damaged or destroyed. The class then considers why so many more Aztec codices exist than Maya ones. Since the Aztecs lived more recently than the Maya, fewer codices have been lost over time. In addition, students examine the ease with which Aztec codices can be translated compared to the Maya texts, for which there is no “Rosetta Stone” to aid in translation.

**Creating the codex**

1. Students discuss and finalize their ideas for illustrations of Aztec culture that can be depicted on five pages.
2. When they are satisfied with their ideas, they write a sentence or two to explain each image.
3. They then construct their books. Students fold two 8 1/2” x 11” pieces of card stock paper in half vertically, pressing a careful crease down the center. Then they cut the paper down the center and tape the two halves together by joining two short (4 1/4” - wide) ends to form a 22”- long codex.
4. To create the final accordion-folded book, students carefully fold each 11” book half into three pages, allowing a title page and five pages of illustrations.
5. They use the first square of their book for a title page, and then draw a picture on each of their five remaining pages (or tape drawings onto the pages). The illustrations should be colorful as well as accurate, and students may glue decorative elements onto their pages.
6. Lastly, students write or attach the explanation for each page on the back of the drawing.

**ASSESSMENT**

Students are assessed according to the following rubric:

Accurate rendering of figures (stylistically and historically accurate depictions of humans, clothing, and other physical details)	_____ (10 pts.)
Accurate representation of an Aztec story, myth, historical, or cultural event/behavior	_____ (10 pts.)
Neatness, care and creativity	_____ (5 pts.)
Total = 25 points	_____ / 25

**RESOURCES**

Chaplik, Dorothy. Latin American Arts and Cultures. Worcester: Davis Publications, 2001.

Knoblock, Kathleen. Primary Source Fluency Activities: World Cultures through Time. Shell Education Publishing, 2007.

Longhena, Maria. Ancient Mexico. New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, a Division of U.S. Media Holdings, 1998.

McDonald, Fiona. Step into the Aztec and Maya Worlds. Lanham, MD: Southwater Publishing (National Book Network), 2007.

NationMaster Website. “Mayan Codices.”<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Maya-codices>

Nicholson, Robert, and Claire Watts. Journey into Civilizations: The Aztecs. New York: Chelsea Juniors, 1994.

Rees, Rosemary. Understanding People in the Past: The Aztecs. Chicago: Heinemann Library, 2006.

Spence, Lewis. The Myths of Mexico and Peru. 1913. Provided in the public domain by Internet Sacred Texts Archives <http://sacred-texts.com>.

**NATIONAL STANDARDS**

*National Standards for History and Social Science*

**National Center for History in the Schools**

History Standards for grades 5-12, Era 5  
<http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/worldera5.html>

Standard 6: the expansion of states and civilizations in the Americas, 1000-1500

Standard 6A: the student understands the development of complex societies and states in North America and Mesoamerica. Therefore, the student is able to analyze how the Aztec empire arose in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and explain major aspects of Aztec government, society, religion, and culture (integrate historical data).

**Contents of Historical Thinking Standards for Grades 5-12:**

[http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12\\_toc.html](http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12_toc.html)

- Standard 1: Chronological Thinking
- Standard 2: Historical Comprehension
- Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
- Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities
- Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

**National Council for the Social Studies Standards**  
<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands>

Theme I: Culture and Cultural Diversity: Ia, Ic, Id.  
Theme II: Time, Continuity, Change: Id, If, IIb, IIc, IID  
Theme IV: Individual Development and Identity: IVd  
Theme V: Individuals, Groups, Institutions: Vc, Vf, Vg  
Theme VI: Power, Authority, and Governance: VIc, VIh

**National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)  
Standards Grades 6-8**  
<http://www.ncte.org/standards>

**NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts**

- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, and people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information)
- Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the U.S. and the world
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes

**National Standards for Arts Education**

**Consortium of National Arts Education Associations**  
<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards/>

**NA-VA.5-8.3 CHOOSING AND EVALUATING A RANGE OF SUBJECT MATTER, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS**

Achievement Standard:

- Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks
- Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

**NA-VA.5-8.4 UNDERSTANDING THE VISUAL ARTS IN RELATION TO HISTORY AND CULTURES**

Achievement Standard:

- Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures
- Students describe and place a variety of art objects in

historical and cultural contexts

- Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

**NA-VA.5-8.5 REFLECTING UPON AND ASSESSING THE CHARACTERISTICS AND MERITS OF THEIR WORK AND THE WORK OF OTHERS**

Achievement Standard:

- Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art
- Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry
- Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures

**NA-VA.5-8.6 MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VISUAL ARTS AND OTHER DISCIPLINES**

Achievement Standard:

- Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context
- Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts

**National Standards for Geography**

**National Geographic Society**

[http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/soc\\_sci/geography/k\\_12.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/soc_sci/geography/k_12.shtml)

**NSS-G.K-12.5 ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY**

As a result of activities in grades K-12, all students should:

- Understand how human actions modify the physical environment.
- Understand how physical systems affect human systems.
- Understand the changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources.

**NSS-G.K-12.2 PLACES AND REGIONS**

As a result of their activities in grades K-12, all students should:

- Understand the physical and human characteristics of places.
- Understand that people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity.
- Understand how culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.