ART
OF THE
AMERICAS
PRE-COLUMBIAN ART FROM MINGEI’S COLLECTION
CURRICULUM GUIDE
This guide, created by Mingei International Museum's Education team is designed for grades 3–12. Ideas and lessons can easily be adapted to other grade levels as needed.
Established in 1978, Mingei International Museum collects, conserves and exhibits arts of daily use by anonymous craftsmen of ancient times, from traditional cultures of past and present, and by historical and contemporary designers. The Museum’s collection is a singular mix of folk art, craft and design, ranging from ceremonial objects to vessels and furniture, with significant holdings of textiles, quilts and beads.

**ART OF THE AMERICAS: Pre-Columbian Art from Mingei’s Collection** is the most comprehensive presentation to date of the museum’s extensive holdings of objects used by people from the ancient cultures of Mexico, Central America and South America. The Museum has actively collected in this area for several decades.

Objects featured in this exhibition straddle cultural boundaries—from the Colima and Maya civilizations in Mexico to the Moche civilization in Peru—as well as numerous ancient traditions and cultures from Western Mexico.

Some the objects were made for ritual use, such as figurines, vessels and sculptures depicting gods, shamans, animals, marine life and floral motifs. Other objects were for domestic use, including jars, bowls, spindle whorls, ocarinas (wind instruments) and roller stamps used for decorating cloth, as well as adornments such as beads and ear plugs. A collection of textile fragments is also presented.

**HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

Included in this guide are discussion topics, activities, hands-on projects and lesson plans connected to the **ART OF THE AMERICAS** exhibition. The contents can be used in the
The curriculum and ideas in this guide are specifically focused on items in ART OF THE AMERICAS that were used for food and drink. These include objects for everyday use, celebrations, burials, rituals and spiritual ceremonies. As art objects, these items communicate the aesthetic values of the people who created and used them, while also serving a specific purpose.

When studying the artistic products of any culture, we strive to encourage exploration and critical thinking, while avoiding generalizations. This is particularly true when looking at a diverse range of cultures that span thousands of years. To mitigate this inherent challenge and explore deeper meaning, there are questions that we can consider when looking at the art of any culture to help inform our understanding of the work. While we may not always get concrete answers, we do get one step closer to interpreting the work and connecting with the maker and user.

**CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:**

- In what **time period** did this culture exist? What other cultures came before or after it, and how might they have influenced one another?
- What **materials and processes** were used? What level of technological innovation was needed to create these objects?
- What was the specific geographical **location** of this culture? What were the unique needs of people living in that region? What natural resources were available?
- What impact might **trade** or contact with other cultures have had on the movement of people and materials? Do you see proof of that in the objects created by that culture?
- Do you think these objects were meant to **function** in some way? How might they have been used and for what purpose? Who do you think might have used them?
- What can the **design and decoration** on an object tell you about the culture that created it? Is the design abstract or figurative? Animal or human? Complicated or straightforward? What story does it tell?
GEOGRAPHICAL CONNECTION

The Pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican cultures featured in *ART OF THE AMERICAS* span approximately 3,000 years. Some cultures are contemporary to one another, while others are thousands of years apart. In addition, there is geographical overlap, with more than one culture residing in the same region at different points in time.

Use the map and timeline below to discover where a specific culture was located, and what other cultures came before and after it.
### EXHIBITION VOCABULARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURE</strong></td>
<td>The combination of values, beliefs, language, attitudes and behavior of a particular society, group, place or time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIGENOUS</strong></td>
<td>Original or native to a region</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MESOAMERICA</strong></td>
<td>A region and cultural area in the Americas, extending from what is now Mexico to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua; pre-Columbian cultures flourished there before the arrival of the Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-COLUMBIAN</strong></td>
<td>Refers to periods of history and culture in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus in 1492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RITUAL</strong></td>
<td>A series of actions that are performed in a specific order, often connected to a religious ceremony or practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE AMERICAS</strong></td>
<td>The American Continent, including North, South and Central America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VESSEL</strong></td>
<td>A container made to hold something, such as food or drink</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREPARING FOR YOUR VISIT

Plan your visit to Mingei, and see firsthand the creative and innovative objects represented in this exhibition. Museum objects can serve as valuable primary resources for your students while giving them a unique experience outside of the classroom that supports their learning.

How to Schedule a Visit

• Schedule a Museum visit and Docent-led tour through the Education Department. Mingei offers free admission for all K-12th grade and college groups and transportation reimbursements for Title 1 schools.
  
  EMAIL: sfoley@mingei.org
  PHONE: (619) 704-7495
  ONLINE: mingei.org/schooltours

• Review the information in this guide with your students; build their knowledge, excitement and confidence before they arrive.

• Attend one of the Museum’s Educator Events:
  
  Educators Fall Preview and Open House (K–12)
  October 5, 2017, 5:00–7:00PM
  
  College Educators Open House
  November 3, 2017, 5:00–7:00PM

• Discuss museum behavior and review the Tour Guidelines document that will be sent to you when your tour is confirmed.

• Explain to students that a Museum Docent will guide them through the exhibition. A docent is a knowledgeable, Museum-trained volunteer who shares valuable information with students while encouraging them to offer their own ideas.

• Explain that Mingei International is a museum of folk art, craft and design that shows work from all over the world, and that mingei is a Japanese word that means “art of the people.”

LESSON ONE
SGRAFFITO TILES
LESSON 1: Sgraffito Tiles

This lesson is designed for 3th–5th grade classrooms but is easily adapted for older grades. The full lesson plan is available at mingei.org/learn.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
Students will explore Pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican ceramic plates and vessels from Panama on display in ART OF THE AMERICAS. Then they will create a decorative tile that uses myth, narrative and symbolism to tell a visual story. They will learn ceramic techniques and use carving tools to create a multilayered image in a polychromatic (multi-color) scheme. In addition, students will apply literary skills to a visual art practice by creating their own myths, forming the inspiration for their unique work of art.

OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:
• Look closely at Pre-Columbian ceramics, using the Museum’s collection as primary source material
• Identify and discuss complex symbolism and iconography
• Read and discuss Pre-Columbian cultural myths
• Share or write their own myths
• Use their myths as subject matter and inspiration for works of art
• Create their own Pre-Columbian-style decorative tiles using plaster of paris and the sgraffito technique

MATERIALS
• Plaster of paris
• Water
• Acrylic paint
• Paint brushes
• Pencils
• Tracing paper
• Carving tools
• Plates (plastic)
• Bucket or container for mixing plaster
• Stirring stick
• Paint palette
RESOURCES

VTS: Visual Thinking Strategies in the Classroom
https://vimeo.com/194787697
https://vimeo.com/9827533

Maya Creation Myth:
https://maya.nmai.si.edu/the-maya/creation-story-maya

VOCABULARY

CERAMICS  Clay or earthen materials that are shaped and fired
MYTHS  Traditional stories told and understood within a culture to explain nature, history, and customs
PLASTER OF PARIS  Dry white powder that can be mixed to create a quick setting paste that serves as a workable art surface
POLYCHROMATIC  More than one color, multi-color
SGRAFFITO  The decorative process of carving through a surface to reveal another surface/color, used with clay and plaster
SYMBOL  A visual sign, character or graphic that represents an idea, object, relationship or process

DOCENT-LED TOUR

When you schedule your tour to visit Mingei International Museum, request that the tour theme be focused on mythology and symbolism, using the ceramics from Panama in the ART OF THE AMERICAS exhibition.

Previous, Tamale Platter with Feathered Serpent Decoration, 800–1100 AD, Panama, Coclé culture, clay. Mingei International Museum purchase made possible by a generous gift from Akaloa Resource Foundation.
PREPARATION

1. Mix plaster of paris (two-parts plaster of paris with one-part water); stir until completely smooth.

2. Pour the plaster onto a clean ceramic or plastic plate, which forms a mold for the shape of each student’s tile.

3. Smooth and even out the surface. If the plaster is thin enough, you can even out the surface by gently moving the plate back and forth.

4. Let the plaster dry inside the mold for at least 24 hours.

5. Remove the dry plaster from the plate; it might take a couple taps or a firm push to release from mold.
GUIDED PRACTICE

DISCUSSION

- Using images of ceramic plates from the ART OF THE AMERICAS exhibition, lead a discussion with students on what they notice about the objects. Consider using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) or another inquiry-based approach for drawing out individual observations, interpretation and critical thinking.

- If using VTS, replace the word “picture” with “design” to better discuss decorative and functional objects. For example:
  - What’s going on in this design?
  - What do you see that makes you say that?
  - What more can you find?

- Explore historical and cultural connections by discussing Pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican culture with students. What do they already know (if anything) about Pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican cultures?

- Expand their knowledge by reading or telling a Pre-Columbian myth together. Visit mingei.org/educators to download a copy of the Mayan Myth of Creation: Popol Vuh. After discussing the story, ask students if they know any myths, and share those as a class.

SGRAFFITO TILES / LESSON ONE
LESSON:

1. Have students brainstorm about their own myths or legends, either ones that they already know or ones that they create. Follow the link below to help students write their own myths: http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/myths_mymyth.htm

2. Divide the surface of the plaster with tape, and paint with two to four colors.

3. Let the tile dry completely, 48 hours is recommended.

4. Have students draw their myths, using tracing paper to transfer the images to their tiles. Since they will not be able to draw the entire story on their tiles (due to space), encourage them to use symbols that convey information about various parts of the story.

5. Carve away paint to reveal the design. Use carving tools and a paintbrush to push away dust.
ASSESSMENT:

Either in small groups or as a class, have students share their tiles with their peers. Ask students to respond with what they think each myth is about, based on the design.

CONTENT STANDARDS

California Common Core Standards – English Language Arts
Grade 3: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.3 (A, B, C, D)
Grade 4: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3 (A, B, C, D, E)
Grade 5: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3 (A, B, C, D, E)

California Visual and Performing Arts - Visual Arts Content Standards
Grade 3: 3.4, 5.0, 5.2, 5.3
Grade 4: 2.0, 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 4.0, 5.3
Grade 5: 1.1, 2.7, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.2, 5.2

National Core Arts Standards
Grade 3 VA: Cn10.1.3a, Re.7.2.3a, Cr3.1.3a, Cr2.2.3a, Cr2.1.3a
Grade 4 VA: Cn11.1.4a, Re.7.2.4a, Cr2.1.4a
Grade 5 VA: Cn10.1.5a, Re.7.2.5a Cr2.1.5a
LESSON TWO
AGRICULTURE, TRADE AND CELEBRATION
LESSON 2: Agriculture, Trade and Celebration

This lesson is designed for 6th–8th grade classrooms but is easily adapted to older and younger grades.

EXHIBITION CONNECTION

The objects in ART OF THE AMERICAS reflect deep and rich Mesoamerican traditions of agriculture, trade and celebration, many of which can be traced back to the Maya culture. In this lesson, students will explore the connection of agriculture, trade and celebration in pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican cultures by learning about two Maya food staples: a cacao drink and tamales.

Originating in the Yucatán around 2600 B.C., the Maya civilization rose to prominence around 250 AD in what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, northern Belize and western Honduras. It is known for its sophisticated writing and astronomical systems, calendar, art, mathematics and architecture. While the Maya did not develop an actual currency, they often used cacao beans as money in order to trade throughout the region. Farming and food gathering were central to everyday life, with much of the population toiling in the fields. Though the ancient Mayas worked hard, they also took time to celebrate and feast. Feasting among the nobility was regarded as a favorite pastime as well as an important political tool to maintain peace and negotiate with neighboring groups. Even among the poorest of the Maya, small-scale feasts were held to celebrate important life events such as marriages.

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:
• Learn about Maya culture, including food, customs and traditions
• Explore how Maya traditions are still present in today’s celebrations
• Explore the impact and influences of trade in both traditional and contemporary contexts
• Learn about two ancient food-preparation techniques that are still used today
GUIDED PRACTICE

COMPLETE A CLASS KWL CHART (What do we KNOW? What do we WANT to know? What did we LEARN?) about ancient cultures. What do students already know about ancient cultures, specifically pre-Columbian and Mesoamerican cultures, including farming, food and trade? Look at a map that shows where the Maya resided, along with images of the cacao vessels and the serving platter from ART OF THE AMERICAS.

What can students hypothesize about place, material, purpose or design? What more would they like to know?

RESOURCES

Maya Exploration Center http://www.mayaexploration.org/

National Museum of the American Indian’s “Living Maya Time”
maya.nmai.si.edu/maya

VOCABULARY

AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY  A community whose social order is based on farming

CACAO  The dried, partly fermented fatty seeds of a South American evergreen tree that are used in making cocoa, chocolate and cocoa butter, also called cacao bean or cocoa bean

TAMALE  (Spanish: tamal) A traditional Mesoamerican dish made of masa (dough) that is steamed in a corn husk or banana leaf

Previous and right, Serving Platter, 620–700 AD, Mexico or Guatemala, Maya culture, clay. Mingei International Museum purchase made possible by a generous gift from Akaloo Resource Foundation.
DISCUSSION: CELEBRATION

Start a discussion with students about how Maya culture still influences community celebrations today.

For example, the Maya were the first to cultivate the cacao plant and to ferment, dry and roast cacao beans before grinding them into a thick chocolate paste. Typically, the paste was combined with hot water, maize (corn flour) and a myriad of spices.

Making a traditional cacao drink: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vC4dq69rqE

Tamales also come from early Maya culture, as far back as 7000 B.C. Tamales are made of maize or rice flour and various fillings, wrapped in a corn husk or leaf, tied and typically steamed. Both cacao and tamales were enjoyed during community and private feasts. Often, a family would come together to prepare and enjoy these two dishes.

Making a traditional tamale: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jO9l60zcY1A

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

• Have you ever had drinking chocolate or tamales? What was the occasion?
• Have these foods been served at a celebration you attended?
• Which foods hold special meaning to you? On what occasions are they served?

DISCUSSION: AGRICULTURE & TRADE

The Maya civilization was a largely agricultural society, with 90 percent of the population involved in farming. Cacao and maize were two of the most important plant products of Mesoamerica. The quality of the agricultural land and soil varied throughout the Maya territory, which motivated cities without access to suitable land to trade with more prosperous cities.

Cacao was highly sought after; it was regarded as a currency and used frequently for trade. Other trade goods included salt, honey, fruit, ceramics, clothing, tools and luxury items such as jade, gold and marble.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

• Where does your food and clothing come from (a store, a garden, a family member, etc.)?
• Have you ever brought something home with you after a trip? Was it unique to the place you visited? What made it unique?
DOCENT-LED TOUR
When you schedule your tour to visit Mingei International Museum, request that the tour theme be focused on agriculture, trade and celebration, specifically the food vessels.

TAKE IT FURTHER (EXTENSION IDEAS)
• Try making your own Maya cacao drink at home. Instructions are available here: http://www.instructables.com/id/Mayan-Chocolate-Drink/
• Go through your kitchen and find any items that may have come from somewhere other than California. Identify those places and share with the class using a map. Calculate the distance the foods traveled.

CALIFORNIA COMMON CORE STANDARDS
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1 A, B, C, D
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1 A, B, C, D
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1 A, B, C, D
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4

This lesson is designed for 9th–12th grade art classrooms but may be adapted for younger grades.

EXHIBITION CONNECTION

The *Stirrup Spout Vessel*, a distinctive form, is primarily from indigenous cultures in Peru. This type of ceramic vessel has a handle resembling a saddle stirrup that forms the spout of the container. Stirrup vessels may have held liquid for both ceremonial and daily use. The shape of the vessel made it easy to transport and hold, and its narrow opening and shape likely slowed down evaporation. Many stirrup vessels were created in the form of an animal or human effigy, evoking the power and essence of the form depicted.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Students will study and analyze pre-Columbian stirrup spout vessels from Mingei International Museum’s collection. They will then design and create their own vessels out of clay using pinching, coiling and hand forming techniques. Students will design the body of their vessel based on a narrative of their choosing. They should ensure that the vessels are functional (hold liquid, can be held by the handle, pour easily) yet aesthetically pleasing.

There is evidence to suggest that stirrup spout vessels were made with a variety of processes, using molds, coils, and slab building techniques. For this project, students focus on coil and slab, but molds could also be incorporated.

Previous, *Stirrup-Spout Seal Effigy Bottle*, 100–400 AD, Peru, Moche culture, clay, Mingei International Museum purchase made possible by a generous gift from Akaloa Resource Foundation. Photo by Katie Gardner.
OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:
• Look closely at historical works of ceramic art (primary resources) from the Museum’s collection
• Identify the subjects represented based on their own interpretations, supported by evidence from the text (artwork)
• Develop their own narratives to use for their designs
• Create pinch-and-coil-built stirrup vessels that use figurative representation to express narrative ideas, while also functioning as vessels that hold and pour liquid
• Discuss their finished work to their peers and talk about their choices of subject and narrative, idea exploration, organization, and refinement process as well as the construction and decoration process

MATERIALS
• Clay and slip
• Modeling and shaping tools
• Scoring and slipping tools
• Paddles
• Rib tools

RESOURCES
How to Make a Pinch Pot
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS7M77pDuYg

How to Make a Coil Pot
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SA-rGYh2UHO

VOCABULARY
COILING A pottery technique that involves building up the sides of a form with successive rolls of clay
EFFIGY A visual representation of a person or an animal, meant to take on the power and spirit of the form represented
PINCHING A pottery technique that involves pressing and hand forming the clay
SGRAFFITO The decorative process of carving through a surface to reveal another surface/color, used with clay and plaster
STIRRUP VESSEL A ceramic container whose liquid contents are poured through a stirrup-shaped handle and spout
GUIDED PRACTICE:
PRELIMINARY DESIGN PHASE:

• Divide students into small groups. Give each group a stack of pictures of stirrup vessels from Mingei International’s collection. Have each group discuss the common elements of the objects and then sort the objects into categories of their own choosing (such as style, technique, or narrative). Have each group explain how and why they grouped the pieces in the way that they did.

• Explore the possible symbolic meanings of specific figures and the functions of individual vessels. Ask students to support their interpretations with evidence that is observable.

• As a class, ask students to consider:
  a. What might the function of these objects be?
  b. What time period and culture might they be from? What evidence suggests this?
  c. Why might they be in the shapes of figures and/or animals?

• Have students brainstorm and sketch ideas for narrative stirrup vessels of their own, reflecting on a contemporary context and narrative that is personal to them. Narratives can be mythological, autobiographical, biographical, religious, pop cultural, political, sociological, psychological, historical, or cultural.
  a. Organize and refine ideas and sketches with feedback from their peers.

PROJECT EXECUTION:
Based on teacher and peer feedback, students select their strongest design ideas and build their vessels using the pinching, coiling and hand forming techniques. Begin the forms as pinch pots, and then score, slip, and compress coils of even thickness to continue building the forms.

Steps

• Create a wide, open-mouthed pinch pot to serve as the base of the vessel.

• Build up the walls of the vessel by adding coils, smoothing and shaping as you go. *Remind students to pay special attention to making strong connections (score, slip, and compress), maintaining walls of an even thickness, and avoiding trapping pockets of air to prevent cracking and exploding during the drying and firing process.*

• As coils are added, shape the vessel based on the design, adding longer or shorter coils to create the shape. Use the shaping tools to further define and smooth.

• Use modeling tools and techniques to render stylized figurative elements of the vessel’s foot and body, spout, and/or handle like the examples from Mingei’s collection.

• Carve out two small holes in the vessel where the handle will meet the body.

• Create the stirrup-shaped handle by rolling a slab of clay. Slice three pieces of slab in which to form each element of the stirrup. Wrap each piece around a dowel, pencil or stick, depending on how large you want the opening. Score, slip and smooth the edges together. Remove the dowel and shape each section. Attach the pieces together to create the stirrup handle, score, slip and smooth the pieces together. Allow time to air dry and set.

• Attach the handle to the body of the vessel in the desired location (where holes have been carved out) by scoring, slipping, and smoothing the pieces together.

• Students can enhance their figurative vessel forms with decoration techniques such as relief carving and sgraffito before being fired and glazed. (This project can also be done with air-dry clay and paint, but the vessel will not be functional for holding or pouring liquid)

• Remind students to document their creative and technical process with digital video and photography for their reflections and group presentations at the end of the project.

ASSESSMENT
- Complete peer feedback forms from the preliminary design phase
- Design a project objective rubric
- Create a project blog, vlog, or journal for students to add to
- Complete a written reflection, group presentation, or guided critique
- Present the finished work to the public by submitting it for Mingei’s STUDENT CRAFT 2018 exhibition

DOCENT-LED TOUR
When you schedule your tour to visit Mingei International Museum, request that the tour be focused on stirrup vessels, looking at narrative elements, form, and evidence of process.

CALIFORNIA COMMON CORE STANDARDS
California Common Core Standards – English Language Arts
Grades 9-10: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R.1.1, 1.2, 2.5, 2.6, 3.7
Grades 11-12: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R.1.1, 1.2, 2.5, 3.7

California Visual and Performing Arts - Visual Arts Content Standards
Grades 9-12: VAPA VA: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.3, 4.3, 5.1

National Core Arts Standards
Grade 9-12: VA: Cr1.1.IIa, Cr1.2.IIa, Cr3.1.IIa, Pr6.1.IIa, Re7.2.IIa, Re8.1.IIa, Cn10.1.IIa, Cn11.1.iia


ART OF THE AMERICAS is part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles, taking place from September 2017 through January 2018 at more than 70 cultural institutions across Southern California. Pacific Standard Time is an initiative of the Getty. The presenting sponsor is Bank of America.