## Project Background

**Cate Tolnai**

► *What Museum exhibition / collection / exhibit inspired your project?*

“Open Chest Figurine” found in the Natural History Museum’s *Visible Vault*, an exhibit which features objects from Ancient Latin American cultures.

- Teotihuacan figurine from Mexico, Santiago Ahuizotla, 300–600 A.D.
- Students study objects in the *Visible Vault*

► *What was the “big idea/essential question” that guided the project?*

How is identity influenced by nature? (specifically, identity of self, Aztecs, Incas, and the Maya)

► *Who were your community/artist partners or collaborators?*

Our project collaborators were teaching artist Libby Gerber, Natural History Museum staff, including Gallery Interpreters Sofie Hunter, Robert Saldivar and Doug Pearlstein, and English teacher Catherine Gibson.
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Project Goals
► What were your interdisciplinary goals? (e.g. classroom learning content, art form, museum content/subject)
   1) Gaining insight into the class structure, religious beliefs, family life, and agricultural techniques of the Aztecs, Incas, and Maya
   2) Expressing the influence of nature on the students’ identities through symbols and poetry

► Were there additional learning goals you hoped to accomplish? (e.g. social/developmental goals)
Helping the student gain an openness to collaboration and an increased sense of trust and camaraderie with their peer group

► What state standards did you plan to cover?
History
   7.7 Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Meso-American and Andean civilizations.
   
   1. Study the locations, landforms, and climates of Mexico, Central America, and South America and their effects on Mayan, Aztec, and Incan economies, trade, and development of urban societies.
   
   2. Study the roles of people in each society, including class structures, family life, warfare, religious beliefs and practices, and slavery.
   
   4. Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations.

English Language Arts
   3.0 Literary Response and Analysis
3.4 Identify and analyze recurring themes across works (e.g., the value of bravery, loyalty, and friendship; the effects of loneliness).

1.0 Writing Strategies: Evaluation and Revision
   1.7 Revise writing to improve organization and word choice after checking the logic of the ideas and the precision of the vocabulary.

**Visual Arts**

1.3 Identify and describe the ways in which artists convey the illusion of space (e.g., placement, overlapping, relative size, atmospheric perspective, and linear perspective).

2.3 Develop skill in using mixed media while guided by a selected principle of design.

2.4 Develop skill in mixing paints and showing color relationships.

5.2 Use various drawing skills and techniques to depict lifestyles and scenes from selected civilizations.

**Project Activities**

▶ Describe the project. How did you decide what to do? How did you plan your project?

The project is a case study of Mesoamerican cultures and addresses the essential question, “How is identity influenced by nature?” The theme of the 2010 Roundtable projects speaks to sustainability and the notion of showcasing certain aspects of life and keeping others more private. We’ve merged these two themes into this project, as we studied the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas. We looked at the way their cultural identities were linked to the natural world, and then the students looked within themselves to uncover aspects of their own identities, or “soul,” that are influenced by nature. We also looked at other aspects of class structure, family, religion, and agriculture.
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As their history teacher, I wanted to engage the Mesoamerican content on a very personal level. Because of the rudimentary, yet exotic, nature of these civilizations, it can be difficult to truly grasp the depth of their belief systems and attachments to the natural world, which we may take for granted in our modern age. Therefore, I wanted the students to connect to these cultures and find similarities between the worlds of the past and their very own. Also, I wanted to offer the students an engaging and creative process for doing this deep thinking, and creating murals, poetry, and collages seemed to be an excellent fit.

► Describe what happened? What were the activities?

PART 1: Students study Mesoamerican culture in class (including a visit from parent Lou Delgado who discussed his Peruvian family’s Incan roots through images and stories)
PART 2: Museum gallery interpreters provide classroom pre-visit discussion and activities, and teaching artist Libby Gerber presents an overview and history of mural-making
PART 3: Barnhart students visit the Natural History Museum’s Visible Vault and participate in a number of gallery and learning activities
PART 4: Mural creation begins, facilitated by Libby Gerber
PART 5: Students go on a nature walk to collect inspiration for their “soul” collages
PART 6: English teacher Catherine Gibson works with students to create poems that link nature with their identities, or “soul.”
(The activities in PARTS 5 & 6 were inspired by the open-chest figurine in the Visible Vault.)

Students engage in museum learning activities
Working on collaborative mural

Project Reflection

► Did you have any “ah-hah” moments? Transformative teacher or student moments?

Unexpected moments or discoveries?
I was most surprised by the students’ willingness to collaborate and by the trust and dependency that grew out of this process. They were asked to think very critically about values and identity, and they rose to the occasion with great respect for culture and for each other. I was also surprised to see the students’ careful eye as they traveled around campus looking for natural inspiration.
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► How did your community/artist partnerships impact your project?
I was so pleased that the Mesoamerican cultures and Museum collection was so respected in this process. It's easy to have a field trip and keep that experience in a separate learning bubble never to really be addressed again. But, this particular group seemed to really take the images and experiences at the Museum and leaned upon it throughout their mural work. I am so grateful to have had Libby to collaborate with on their project as she has the artistic expertise that I simply don't. And the Museum Staff had so much knowledge to share that it became an incredibly rich project that not only exposed the students to the arts, but did so while also aligning to the state standards for Social Studies, English, and Visual Arts.

► How was your student work made public?
• Student work, including the mural, collages, poems, student reflections, and project video were displayed in a dedicated exhibit space at the Natural History Museum, called Inter/Act, from March 20-April 25, 2010.
• The entire project, including text, photos, video, project summary, reflections, and audience responses, is available on the Natural History Museum’s Website.
• Families and school staff were invited to attend the Museum on Sunday, March 21, from 3-5pm to view the exhibit. (11 families and 2 teachers attended)

► How did you document your work and your students work?
We documented this project through professional photography, a video summary, student reflections, student work and parent/teacher/collaborator feedback.

Project Reflection from the Community/Artist Collaborator(s)

Libby Gerber

► How did the visual arts enhance student learning about Ancient Latin American cultures and identity in this Roundtable project?
Working on a collaborative mural allowed the students time to informally discuss what it was that they were painting. While much of the conversation that happened during the time they were fabricating the mural consisted of gossip and discussions about hot new singers, there were many interesting moments of discussion about the content of the mural. Because each student was tasked with designing a certain sector of the mural, oftentimes classmates would ask, “Why did you put X right there in the cross-section underground?” This frequently resulted in a debate about what would or would not be found as relics of bygone eras. Only in a collaborative and longer-term project do these types of spontaneous discussions about content happen.
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Teaching artist, Libby Gerber, facilitates mural-making activities with Barnhart students.

► How did you motivate the students to incorporate the visual arts into their thinking and learning?
I did not really need to do much to motivate the students to use the visual arts in their thinking. They consistently had a positive attitude and were very excited about the prospect of painting a large-scale mural. There were several students in the class who were members of the school’s Art Club who were natural leaders and seemed to inspire the few in the class who got distracted.

► Did you have any transformative teacher or student moments?
Mostly I was humbled by how cooperatively the students worked together. In my own art practice, I enjoy collaborating with other artists, but it can also be a very difficult. Setting aside my own ego and desire for authorship in service of the final outcome of the project is something I wish I were better at. Watching a group of 7th graders (the age most often characterized as being narcissistic and uncooperative) do this with only minor bumps along the way inspired me to do the same.