

OLMEC

COLOSSAL MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

Dear Educator:

Thank you for supporting your students' visit to the exhibition *Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*.

Exploring the newest archaeological discoveries, this exhibition features two colossal heads and more than 100 other objects. By visiting the exhibition, students will explore the archaeological process, learn about the environment in which the Olmec lived, and analyze how the works of art document their culture.

In this curriculum guide you will find two sets of lesson plans developed for grades 3–5 and grades 6 and above.

Lesson plans have been developed in collaboration with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's Education Department and San Francisco Unified School District educators Hector Lee and Michael Guenza.

For more resources, visit us online at:
www.deyoungmuseum.org/curriculum/olmec

Education programs presented in conjunction with this exhibition are generously underwritten by the William K. Bowes, Jr. Foundation, Denise Littlefield Sobel, and Douglas A. Tilden.

EXPLORING SYMBOLS AND MEANING: ANIMAL PORTRAITS (3RD–5TH)

continued...

Visual Arts Standards

2.0 Creative Expression

Creating, Performing and Participating in the Visual Arts:

- Students apply artistic processes and skills, using a variety of media to communicate meaning and intent in original works of art.

Grade 4

ELA Standards Writing Strategies

- 1.1 Select a focus, an organizational structure, and a point of view based upon purpose, audience, length, and format requirements.
- 1.3 Use traditional structures for conveying information (e.g., chronological order, cause and effect, similarity and difference, posing and answering a question).

Visual Arts Standards

- 2.2 Use the conventions of facial and figure proportions in a figure study.

Grade 5

ELA Standards Writing Strategies

- 1.2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions:
 - a. Establish a topic, important ideas, or events in sequence or chronological order.
 - b. Provide details and transitional expressions that link one paragraph to another in a clear line of thought.
 - c. Offer a concluding paragraph that summarizes important ideas and details.

Visual Arts Standards

- 2.2 Create gesture and contour observational drawings.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER FOR ANIMAL SELF-PORTRAIT

Name _____ Date _____

Introduction:

Animal _____

Characteristics _____, _____, _____

Characteristics

Example or evidence

Characteristics

Example or evidence

Characteristics

Example or evidence

Conclusion:

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER FOR ANIMAL SELF-PORTRAIT *continued...*

Introduction:

The _____ animal _____ represents me because it is _____ characteristic _____
, _____ characteristic _____, and _____ characteristic _____.

I am _____ characteristic _____ when _____ evidence or example _____
_____ evidence or example _____.

Also I am _____ characteristic _____ when _____ evidence or example _____
_____ evidence or example _____.

Additionally when I _____ evidence or example _____
I am _____ characteristic _____.

Conclusion:

I am _____ characteristic _____, _____ characteristic _____, and _____ characteristic _____.
I am a(n) _____ animal _____!

CHARACTERISTICS

active, energetic
adventurous, risk-taker
affectionate, loving
angry, irascible
aspiring, ambitious
assertive, insistent
athletic, sports-minded
beautiful, attractive
brave, courageous
candid, honest, sincere
capable, able
clean, organized, neat
clever, ingenious, skilled
considerate, thoughtful
cooperative, helpful
creative, artistic, imaginative
curious, inquisitive
determined, persistent
devoted, dedicated
disciplined
dynamic, changing
enthusiastic, excited, motivated

faithful, loyal
fast, quick
forgiving, magnanimous
friendly
frugal, thrifty, economical
generous
gentle, calm
grateful, thankful
hard-working, industrious
humble, modest
humorous, funny
independent
joyful, happy, cheerful
kind, good, caring
mature, grown-up
open-minded, tolerant
peaceful, nonviolent
persevering, tenacious
playful, fun-loving
pleasant, personable
positive, optimistic
punctual, prompt

respectful, polite, courteous
responsible, reliable, dependable
sad, despondent
self-confident, self-assured, proud
selfless, unselfish
sensitive, conscientious
serious
shy, introverted
silly, joking
sociable, gregarious
strong, powerful
strong-willed, stubborn
sympathetic, compassionate
tactful, prudent
talented, gifted
talkative, loquacious
trusting
unpretentious, down-to-earth
wise, intelligent, smart

ARCHAEOLOGY, GEOGRAPHY, AND SYMBOLS (6TH–12TH)

Description: Students will develop a contextual understanding of Olmec art and archaeology—especially in terms of object/artifact images, related vocabulary terms, geographical setting, natural resources, and connections between Olmec symbolism and spiritual beliefs—prior to an in-person visit to the de Young Museum’s *Olmec* exhibition.

Objectives: Students will be able to “do” basic archeology, especially creating hypotheses to answer specific questions, based on the Olmec objects exhibited, working through a progression of noticing/observing, wondering/questioning, and hypothesizing/forming realistic conclusions based on available visual, textual, and geographic evidence.

Students will be able to demonstrate measurable skills in: visual analysis, open-ended questioning, basic archaeology research and theory, making connections between natural resources and archaeological artifacts to a larger and more abstract belief system, and making connections between physical place (site) and physical object (artifact).

Part 1: Notice, Wonder, Hypothesize (one 45- to 60-minute class period)

Materials:

- Archaeology PowerPoint presentation
- Map of Central America
- Object posters
- “I Notice, I Wonder” student worksheet

Vocabulary: archaeology, Mesoamerica, Olmec

Steps:

1. Before looking at the images of Olmec art, the teacher will lead two brief (approx. 10 minutes) introductory brainstorm discussions, on archaeology and on Mesoamerica, using the “spider” or “sun” graphic organizer (drawn on front board) to elicit and evaluate students’ level of pre-knowledge on these subjects. [15–20 minutes]
 - a. The teacher draws a “spider” or “sun” graphic organizer on the board with ARCHAEOLOGY at the center, then another graphic organizer with MESOAMERICA at the center. Students provide verbal responses to the topics, and teacher (or

students) write their responses on the “legs” or “rays” of the diagram.

- b. Teacher can display or project the two archaeological site/dig images provided in the curriculum materials to get students oriented and thinking on the subject.
- c. Though the student responses should remain essentially unfiltered and uncorrected at this point, there are leading questions the teacher can pose to keep discussion and ideas flowing, such as:

Archaeology discussion questions:

- What type of tasks does an archaeologist perform while on the job?
- Where do archaeologists do their work?
- What are archaeologists trying to find out or discover?
- What kinds of evidence or clues do archaeologists look for?
- How can archaeology be used to help us understand our past and present world?

Mesoamerica discussion questions

- Where is the region known as Mesoamerica?
- What well-known groups of people or civilizations lived there in the past?
- Who lives in Mesoamerica now? What countries are there today?
- Why do archaeologists continue to do so much work in Mesoamerica?
- What do you know already about the different civilizations from Mesoamerica?

2. In the second part of the lesson, students analyze and respond to four color images of Olmec art objects included in the *Olmec: Masterworks of Ancient Mexico* exhibit (as follows), which the teacher can post around the classroom at four different stations. There is one duplicate of each image, so eight stations can be arranged. [25–30 min.; approx. 10 min. per each stage of think-pair-share]

Kunz Axe
Monument 52
Colossal Head
Votive Axe & Celt

Students will work at each station in a think-pair-share analysis (notice-wonder-hypothesize) format, taking notes on a formatted worksheet. For each artifact, students will answer these prompts (at first, alone in “think” phase):

NOTICE (students write statements, notes, details)

What specific details do I notice about this artifact?
What do I see here?

WONDER (students write questions)

What question(s) do I have about the society or culture that made this object?

What question(s) do I have about the function or use of this object?

After taking brief notes (solo/“think” phase) on each artifact, filling in corresponding areas of the lesson worksheet while viewing and analyzing each artifact, students will compare their notes with a partner’s notes and add whatever details they agree with or want to consider as possibilities (“pair” phase).

Finally, the whole class group will share results of this “first impression” exercise and compare and contrast each other’s ideas and reactions to the artifacts.

3. In the third stage, after the “share” phase/group discussion, students will make a list of three to five high-priority questions that they will ask the docent directly on the museum exhibit tour. [5–10 minutes]
4. Day 1 Homework or Lesson Extension
 - a. Students receive a vocabulary worksheet with 12 terms (4 adjectives, 8 nouns/noun phrases) listed and defined (see attached worksheet). Class can read through the terms and definitions aloud if this activity takes place in class.
 - b. Students complete Cloze (fill-in the blanks) exercise using the terms (could be pair or group work if done in class).
 - c. Students write a holistic, unified paragraph using all of the terms in cohesion. Sentence/story starters are provided to initiate student writing.

Part 2: Olmec Belief System and Symbolism (one 45- to 60-minute class period)

Materials:

- Symbol PowerPoint presentation
- Object posters
- Symbol worksheet

Vocabulary: symbolism, interpretation, composite, Olmec

Steps:

1. In this subsequent lesson, the students will return to visual analysis of the images/artifacts from Day 1 but look much more closely at their symbols and details, ideally using concepts and vocabulary learned in the Day 1 homework or lesson extension. [25–30 minutes]
 - a. The teacher can begin this lesson by reviewing the Day 1 homework or lesson extension if time permits. Otherwise, the teacher should open class by orienting students to the image/artifact stations from the prior lesson. A possible introduction might be, “Today I want you to revisit these artifacts, look at their symbols, shapes, and details very carefully, and think about and hypothesize about the Olmec relationship with the natural environment, the animal world, and the supernatural. What did they believe in, and what was important to them?”
 - b. As students again work through through the stations, in pairs or alone, they will fill out the symbol worksheet. On this sheet, students will analyze the images and confirm which artifacts (from the vertical column at left) contain or display certain symbols and materials (from the horizontal row at top) common to Olmec art. These include the cleft head, the maize/celt shape, “fiery” eyebrows, the axis mundi cross (X), “helmet” headgear, a downturned mouth facial expression, running-water “earfolds,” jadeite, and basalt. The teacher should model the layout and goal of the worksheet with the class or a select pair of students in order for this activity to work well.
 - c. Students should be guided to focus and think deeply about the last (far right) vertical column of the worksheet, which invites evaluation and synthesis. *“I think the Olmec combined these symbols and materials to show . . . ”*

2. In the last phase of this lesson, students should do two things. First, they compare and contrast the results of their work in the activity above, again in the “share” format of the class-wide discussion modeled in the Day 1 lesson. [10–15 minutes]

Then, students should be directed back to their list of high-priority questions they generated for the docents on Day 1. Students should check how many of their initial questions they have already answered and finalize their list to three (or more) high-priority questions for the actual tour at the de Young.

2. Day 2 Homework or Lesson Extension:

- a. Students will be given a blank outline of a map of the Olmec region, with the archaeological sites plotted for each image (e.g., La Venta for Votive Axe, artifact 4 in Day 1 Lesson), as well as modern-era borders and blanks for major land and sea features, and city and nation place names (Pacific Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico, Guatemala, etc.).
- b. Students will be directed to use Internet or print sources, such as textbooks, maps, or encyclopedias, or the labeled map provided in the curriculum guide, to locate and label on the map the names of the archaeological sites, the numbers or titles of the artifacts found there (1–4 from Day 1), and finally, the current geological feature and city and nation place names. This activity can be solo, in pairs, in small groups, or with the whole class.

Standards:

Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills

Chronological and Spatial Thinking

3. Students use a variety of maps and documents to identify physical and cultural features of neighborhoods, cities, states, and countries and to explain the historical migration of people, expansion and disintegration of empires, and the growth of economic systems.

Research, Evidence, and Point of View

1. Students frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research.
3. Students distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, essential from incidental information, and verifiable from unverifiable information in historical narratives and stories.

4. Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them.

Historical Interpretation

5. Students recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered.

Social Studies Standards Grade 7:

- 7.7 Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations.

OLMEC: COLOSSAL MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

Day One Lesson (Gallery of Artifacts)

Name _____

Directions: As you walk through the gallery of Olmec artifacts, take notes about each object you study. Write statements for what you notice and questions for what you wonder.

Object 1

Notice: What specific details do I notice about this artifact/object? What do I see here?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the society or culture that made this object?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the function or use of this object?

Object 2

Notice: What specific details do I notice about this artifact/object? What do I see here?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the society or culture that made this object?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the function or use of this object?

OLMEC: COLOSSAL MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

Day One Lesson (Gallery of Artifacts)

Name _____

Directions: As you walk through the gallery of Olmec artifacts, take notes about each object you study. Write statements for what you notice and questions for what you wonder.

Object 3

Notice: What specific details do I notice about this artifact/object? What do I see here?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the society or culture that made this object?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the function or use of this object?

Object 4

Notice: What specific details do I notice about this artifact/object? What do I see here?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the society or culture that made this object?

Wonder: What question(s) do I have about the function or use of this object?

OLMEC: COLOSSAL MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

Day 1 Homework or Lesson Extension

Vocabulary Terms and Definitions

1. **monumental:** impressively large, significant, or astounding. *Experts consider the colossal heads made by the Olmec to be monumental works of art.*
2. **composite:** made up of different or distinct parts. *Many Olmec art pieces are composite in nature, because they combine animal and human features.*
3. **jadeite:** a usually green mineral consisting of sodium and aluminum. *Jadeite was a highly valuable material in the Olmec civilization.*
4. **celt:** a prehistoric stone or metal implement shaped like a chisel or axe head. *Many jade celts have been excavated in the Olmec region of Mesoamerica.*
5. **basalt:** a dark gray to black dense- to fine-grained igneous (volcanic) rock. *Olmec artisans worked with materials such as basalt, jade, clay, and greenstone.*
6. **maize:** a tall, widely cultivated American cereal grass (*Zea mays*) bearing seeds on elongated ears; also known as Indian corn. *Maize is an important symbol in Olmec art because it was a primary food source for the Olmec people.*
7. **lowland tropical forest:** the majority of tropical rainforest in the world; forest which grows on flat lands at elevations generally less than 3,300 feet (1,000 m.). *The Olmec people lived in the lowland tropical forests close to the Gulf of Mexico.*
8. **context:** the environment, setting, or interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs. *It is difficult for archaeologists to describe the entire context of Olmec daily life because very few written records remain from that time.*
9. **hierarchy:** the classification of a group (such as a people) according to ability or to economic, social, or professional status. *Archaeologists believe Olmec civilization was a hierarchy in which an elite ruling class controlled the use of natural resources.*
10. **mother culture/cultura madre:** a term for an early people or civilization that has great and widespread influence on later cultures and people. *Archaeologists think of the Olmec as a mother culture (*cultura madre*) of the Aztec, Maya, Mixtec, and Zapotec.*

OLMEC: COLOSSAL MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

Day 1 Homework or Lesson Extension

Cloze Exercise

Directions: Using the terms and definitions on the previous page, choose the best term to fill in the blanks in the following sentences.

1. My favorite artifact in the Olmec exhibit is the _____ figure made of _____ that combines jaguar and human features in its face.
2. The colossal heads made by the Olmec were carved from single boulders of _____, and the largest of them weigh more than 50 tons (100,000 pounds)!
3. Olmec farmers probably cleared large areas of _____ in order to create and plant fields of _____.
4. When we study the Maya and Aztec religions and cultures, it is easy to see how the Olmec influenced those civilizations as a _____.
5. By excavating physical evidence and artifacts, archeologists try to determine the daily _____ in which regular people lived in ancient times.
6. It is possible that Olmec ruling-class _____ lost power between 400–350 BC, a time of massive population decline in the eastern Olmec region.
7. It is hard to imagine farming maize if a _____ is your only regular tool.
8. The Olmec colossal heads are not easy to move around the world to different museums because they are so _____.

Holistic paragraph exercise

Directions: Use all 12 of the vocabulary terms in a unified paragraph or story. Here are some first-line paragraph or story starters to help you begin.

1. When we stumbled out of the jungle into the clearing, I knew we were about to make one of the most incredible archaeological finds ever recorded
2. Dear Diary, will anyone will ever find this book in the future, be able to translate it, and truly learn to understand our special Olmec way of life?
3. Suddenly I realized that I had been rocketed 2,500 years into the past. When I came to, I was lying on a woven mat in a dim, smoky room, surrounded by what looked like Olmec people . . .