

## MATERIALS

- amate paper or bark paper (available from several art supply companies) cut into 6" x 8" or 4" x 6" pieces (brown paper bag or construction paper)
- paper for sketching
- pencils
- erasers
- tempera or acrylic paints
- paintbrushes
- permanent markers (black)
- containers for water
- newspaper to cover tables

## RESOURCES

- Museum of International Folk Art  
<http://collection.internationalfolkart.org>
- Mexconnet, arts of Mexico articles  
<http://www.home.earthlink.net/~kering/amate.html>
- Wikipedia, additional information  
<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amatl>

## VOCABULARY

 (Definitions on page 4)

- |                       |                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| • <b>Codices</b>      | • <b>Amatl (Amate)</b> |
| • <b>Tlacuilos</b>    | • <b>Nahuales</b>      |
| • <b>Papel picado</b> |                        |

## NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
- **Presenting:** Interpreting and sharing artistic work.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.



Museum of International Folk Art Education Collection,  
photo by Patricia Sigala.

# Mexican Amate Paintings

## INTRODUCTION

*Amatl* (Amate {Spanish}) from the Nahuatl (NA-watl) language means “paper”. Nahuatl is the language of the Aztecs/Mexika and part of the Uto-Aztec language family. The Hopi and Huichol languages are also members of this linguistic family.

## OBJECTIVES

- To learn about the process of making amate and its use over time to convey important events and transmit cultural values (historical and cultural understanding).
- To explore the imagery used in amate painting (perceiving, analyzing and responding).
- To use their own imagery to create amate paintings (creating and performing).

## MEXICO



Puebla (orange) & southwest Guerrero (pink)



Maps sourced from mexinsurance, blog puebla

The state of Puebla to the east of Mexico City which shares border with the states of Veracruz, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Mexico, Morelos, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. Its capital of Puebla de Zaragoza is also its largest city. Its major indigenous groups are the Nahaus, Otomi, Totonacas, Mixtecs, and Popolocas and each one adds its own cultural stamp to the collective culture of this state. This state is known for their amate paper production and the artisans in small town San Pablito, who are of Otomí ancestry, continue to practice this ancient tradition of paper making, and produce cut-out figures called *Nahuales* (devils and spirits) used in ceremonies. To the southwest in the State of Guerrero, amate paper is brightly decorated with beautiful scenes depicting everyday life of the villagers, such as the harvest, fiestas, weddings, religious customs and wildlife.

## MOTIVATION

- Show students images of amate paintings. Ask questions to stimulate conversation about the imagery: What is going on in the painting? Are the paintings decorative? Do they show historical events, celebrations, everyday life or are they decorative patterns and designs? What motifs and patterns are used? Do you see animals, floral imagery, people? What are the people doing? Are the forms and shapes outlined? What kind of lines do you see?
- Have students decide what type of painting they would like to make: decorative painting, a painting that represents flowers or animals, a everyday scene, or a historic event?

## PROCEDURE

1. Have students use scrap paper and pencils to sketch their ideas. Then have them transfer their final drawing on the amate paper. Encourage them to leave open space for the amate paper to show through.
2. Outline the forms with markers.
3. Apply paint to the drawing and set aside to dry (colored pencils can be substituted for paint).



## EVALUATION

- Display the amate paintings with labels describing each painting. Have students talk about their work and how it felt to work with amate paper. Create groups of paintings that have a similar theme or subject matter. Have students respond to the groups by creating a story or poem about the arrangements.

## CONNECTIONS & EXTENTIONS

- Students can use amate paper to create a codex which describes a historic or current event related to Mexico (social studies).
- Introduce students to the way amate is used to make Otomí spirit figures. Have students make figures of their own (visual arts).
- Show students the relationship between cut amate and contemporary papel picado. Have students create their own papel picado and use it to decorate the school or classroom for a Day of the Dead celebration (social studies and visual arts).
- Students can study the ways that comic strips, comic books, and codices, use symbols and forms with outlines. They can create comics or codices that convey elements shared by each form (visual arts).
- Have students research different ways that people have recorded history using scrolls, carved tablets, book forms, and oral traditions. Students can report their findings back to the group orally, create a time line showing the development of recorded history, or make examples of their findings (social studies).

## VOCABULARY

- Amate** - amalt (amate {Spanish}) from the Nahuatl (NA-watl) language means "paper". Amate is made from the pulp of the fig and mulberry trees.
- Nahuales** - cut out figures (devils and spirits) used in ceremonies.
- Codices** - an accordion-folding picture book that contains historical secular and sacred information, i.e., dynasties, weddings, wars, heroes, names, calendars, and rituals.
- Tlacuilos** - Mexika/Aztec scribes who were well-educated men with artistic talents.
- Papel picado** - paper cut-out banner or flag made out tissue paper and use in celebrations.



Museum of International Folk Art Education Collection, photo by Patricia Sigala.

# Mexican Amate Paintings

*Amatl* (Amate {Spanish}) from the Nahuatl (NA-watl) language means “paper”. Nahuatl is the language of the Aztecs/Mexika and part of the Uto-Aztec language family. The Hopi and Huichol languages are also members of this linguistic family.

*Amate* is made from the pulp of the fig and mulberry trees. The color and grain of the paper depends on the bark used to make it. To make amate, the outer tree bark is peeled and the inner bark is boiled and soaked in water over night, then beaten with a smooth flat stone until it becomes pulp. A glutinous substance, taken from orchid bulbs, is added and then this paste is formed into sheets, and dried in the sun.

The state of Puebla to the east of Mexico City is known for their amate paper production and the artisans in small town San Pablito, who are of Otomí ancestry, continue to practice this ancient tradition of paper making, and produce cut-out figures called *Nahuales* (devils and spirits) used in ceremonies. To the southwest in the State of Guerrero, amate paper is brightly decorated with beautiful scenes depicting everyday life of the villagers, such as the harvest, fiestas, weddings, religious customs and wildlife.



Museum of International Folk Art Education Collection, photo by Patricia Sigala.

## CODICES

The ancient Mexika/Aztecs used amate or deerskin to paint books called *codices*, an accordion-folding picture book that contains historical secular and sacred information, (i.e., dynasties, weddings, wars, heroes, names, calendars, and rituals). The word *codex* is Latin in origin and refers to a rare manuscript. The plural of *codex* is *codices*.

Each codex has a name, such as the *Codice Vindobonensis Mexicanus* (Latin), which was created by Mexika/Aztec scribes who were well-educated men with artistic talents, known as *tlacuilos*. These scribes drew pictures to look like real objects, or used symbols to represent ideas. For example, a foot print on a codex page meant movement, or journey. Codices were read from top to bottom or around the page, from left to right. Banners or flags were also made of amate paper. *Papel Picado* (paper cut-outs) are contemporary examples of this ancient tradition and are used in celebrations.

The Museum of International Folk Art has a reproduction of the codice, *Codice Vindobonensis Mexicanus* in its library; the original is bound by wood is 40 feet long and lives in the National Library in Vienna, Austria. To date, only twenty-five codices are known to have survived the cultural genocide carried out by the Spaniards on the indigenous people of this region. Eighteen of these codices are of pre-conquest origin.

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## WEBSITES

Mexconnet, arts of Mexico articles  
<http://www.home.earthlink.net/~kering/amate.html>

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amate>

Amate Painting Pioneer, Cristino FloresMedina,  
<http://www.mexican-folk-art-guide.com/cristino-flores-medina.html>

## VIDEOS

2018 CultureTrip  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAV8oLU-FmI>

2015 Corazón Valiente  
[https://www.youtube.com/watchv=FX7l1FlA\\_hU](https://www.youtube.com/watchv=FX7l1FlA_hU)

2001 Berkshire Museum  
[https://youtu.be/a0ZsnDf\\_I4s](https://youtu.be/a0ZsnDf_I4s)

2015 Visit  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rju\\_8s5n1Nw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rju_8s5n1Nw)