

# **The Nahual in Mesoamerican Art**

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, humans have embraced animals as part of their identity. This idea is shared amongst various cultures as evidenced through different forms of artistic expression. In Greek mythology, gods and goddesses would take on an animal form to interact with humans. In African dance rituals, humans take on an animal persona through contortions and the donning of animal masks. In Mesoamerica, the nahual tradition is a present-day manifestation of this perceived interconnectedness between humans and animals. In certain Mesoamerican beliefs, the nahual is a person, such as shaman, endowed with the extraordinary power to transform into an animal as a way to transcend and engage the supernatural world. Some Mesoamerican rulers and leaders wielded political power through association of a nahual identity. In postclassical creation myths, Mesoamerican gods, such as Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, were depicted as nahuals. In other customs the nahual is a guiding/protective animal spirit all children attain as a rite of passage. This belief implies that humans potentially have an animal self in common. I hope to highlight this interpretation of the nahual with my students as they search for their own “nahual.” Throughout the unit, students in third through fifth grade will exercise their listening and observation skills as a part of the creative process. Expressing their “nahual” in an artistic form will allow students to establish a meaningful connection to nature and foster a respect for all living beings. As a result, students will be able to understand art, not only as a form of expression, but also as a vehicle for self-discovery and identity formation.

## **Guiding Questions**

How is identity presented in ancient Mesoamerican art?

What is a nahual?

How did ancient Mesoamericans attain a nahual?

How do artists in the past and present depict human and animal as one?

What animal features are emphasized?

What traits are associated with certain animals?

What animal is my other self?

How can I express my “nahual” or animal self?

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will understand what a nahual is.

Students will observe and identify stylization of animal features adapted for human form in ancient Mesoamerican art such as sculptures, vessels, and codices. Students will understand humans associate themselves with animals through their own traits and characteristics.

Students will create an art piece that depicts their animal self.

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Activity One: Introduction of Mesoamerican culture**

Begin the lesson by having students pair up and share ideas about what identity means. Have a few students discuss what they shared. As a class, determine a working definition of identity. Introduce students to Mesoamerica and its art by presenting the Nahual Introduction Powerpoint.

### **Activity Two: Making the human-animal connection**

Hold a class discussion about which animals might have human traits and why. Have students use the matching activity cards, individually or as a group, to match animals with human traits. Discuss whether having an animal identity is useful. Why or why not? Students can also begin contemplating which animal they might feel an affinity to.

### **Activity Three: Listening and Observing for Self Discovery**

Explain to the students that they are going to complete a listening activity at home. They will ask three different people, preferably all of different ages, which animal they might resemble and why. Once students have completed this assignment, they will choose their animal. At school, students will use observation skills to understand their animal's movements, habits and other characteristics by looking at videos of animals online via Discovery Education Streaming or Pebble Go. Students can begin sketching at this point.

### **Activity Four: Making the Animal Art Project**

See individual art lesson plans that are geared at student's different grade levels.

### **Activity Five: Presentation of Artistic Expression**

Students can use a rubric as a guideline to present their art project. They will communicate ideas on why they chose the specific animal. What features of the animal are present on their piece? Why did they choose those specific features? How did the artist emphasize the animal?