



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

A Fellow Human Being



"He's using the fragility and the clarity of glass to talk about things that are often concealed, like the lives of immigrants and other migrants coming over the border."

– Susie J. Silbert, curator

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will view the work of Magdalena Pedro Martínez and Jaime Guerrero in the *Craft in America: NEIGHBORS* episode. Afterwards, students explore the way each artist uses the figure to portray significant aspects of Mexican and Mexican-American life. In studio work, students will generate ideas for how the figure can represent important ideas. Finally, they will sculpt a clay figure that embodies a meaningful concept. Note: While Jaime Guerrero works in glass, his figures and ideas nevertheless provide inspiration for studio work in clay.

Note: The title of this lesson, "A Fellow Human Being," comes from one widely used definition of "neighbor."

Grade Level: 9 - 12

Estimated Time: One or two 45 minute class periods of discussion and five 45 minute class periods of research, idea generation, and studio production

Craft In America Theme/Episode: *NEIGHBORS*

Background Information



Magdalena Pedro Martínez is an outstanding barro negro ceramist, in the tradition of her family in San Bartolo Coyotepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. Trained as a medical doctor, she also devotes time to ceramics, specializing in female figures dressed in the traditional costumes of the regions of the state of Oaxaca. She views this as her particular contribution to the broader cause of preserving the culture.



Jaime Guerrero skillfully crafts the ethereal transparent medium of glass to mirror human experience and focuses on subject matter that would normally remain mute, addressing issues of social inequality and the need for change, often focusing on urban and Latino culture. For several years, in addition to his studio practice, he has helmed a glassblowing program for at-risk youth in South Central Los Angeles. His current work embraces the juxtaposition between ancient ideas and contemporary symbols.

Key Concepts

- Artists communicate ideas in clay.
- Art has political significance.
- People can experience new ideas through viewing art.

Critical Questions

- How do artists communicate ideas in clay?
- How can art have political significance?
- What are some ways people experience new ideas through viewing art?

Objectives

Students will:

- Create a clay figure that communicates an idea.
- Explain the ways in which art can have political significance.
- Articulate how they may experience new ideas through viewing art.

Vocabulary

Calavera (skull); calaca (skeleton); La Calavera Catrina (an iconic, satirical depiction of a wealthy female skeleton created by the late 19th C artist José Guadalupe Posada) resonate, embody.

Interdisciplinary Connection

- History/Social Studies: The origins and uses of La Calavera Catrina images provide a fascinating entry point for studying an era of Mexican history. The Wikipedia entry for La Calavera Catrina contains valuable content for such an exploration. Studying images of skeletal art from Mexico also enriches students' understanding of the very popular forms of this style in the U.S. (as seen in toys and fashion dolls, cartoons, tattoos, and the current prevalence of the skull as a common image.)

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

This lesson addresses the following standards. The performance standards listed here are directly related to the lesson's goals.

- Visual Arts/Connecting #VA:Cn10.1
Process Component: Interpret
Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- Visual Arts/Creating #VA:Cr2.2
Process Component: Investigate
Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Visual Arts/Presenting #VA:Pr6.1
Process Component: Analyze
Anchor Standard: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Visual Arts/Responding #VA:Re8.1
Process Component: Perceive
Anchor Standard: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *NEIGHBORS*.
Also viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/neighbors
- The Craft in America website has bonus videos, images, and more information on both artists, www.craftinamerica.org
- Learn more about Magdalena Pedro Martínez: www.mexicoartshow.com/magdalena.html
- Jaime Guerrero's site: www.guerreroglass.com
- Wikipedia on Oaxacan textiles: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textiles_of_Oaxaca
- More on Oaxacan traditional dress:
things-to-do-in-oaxaca.mx/home/oaxacan-products/handicrafts/textiles/traditional-dress-oaxaca
- Wikipedia on La Calavera Catrina:en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Calavera_Catrina

Worksheets

- *Ideas from Art*
- *Something to Say*

Materials

- Access to online resources for research
- Sketchbooks
- Clay (While Pedro Martínez uses local black clay, commonly available red clay is a good choice to achieve an attractive finish without glazes.)
- Slip and brushes
- Clay tools including metal spoons for burnishing, needle tools, fettling knives, etc.
- Plastic bags and paper towels for keeping work moist.
- Kiln

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

After viewing the segments on Mexican doctor and artist Magdalena Pedro Martínez and Los Angeles artist Jaime Guerrero in the *Craft in America: NEIGHBORS* episode, the class will discuss and explore each artist's use of the figure, and how their work embodies ideas about people and culture. Students will generate ideas for a clay figure that similarly embodies an important concept.

Note: The entire episode has important and exciting content to explore with students. This lesson focuses on two segments, clay artist Magdalena Pedro Martínez (approximately 13:20 to 17:20) and Jaime Guerrero (approximately 20:00 to 31:10.) You may also want to show students the segment before Magdalena Pedro Martínez's, that features her brother, Carlomagno Pedro Martínez (approximately 11:04 to 13:20) creating many versions of calacas and calaveras in clay. This segment has several instructive close-ups of clay sculpting.

(Video and discussion: one 45 minute class period)

Before Viewing

Introduce the scope of the lesson to students, sharing the key concepts, critical questions, and objectives. Post or print the following questions for students to consider as they take notes during viewing. Allow students to work together so they can collaboratively gather the information as the video plays. They will be listening and looking for the following:

- Why did Magdalena Pedro Martínez decide to recreate the Oaxacan folk dresses in clay rather than fabric?
- Why does Magdalena Pedro Martínez believe it is important to create the figures she makes?
- What does she say about the purposes of her work as a doctor?
- What does she say about the purposes of her work as an artist?
- How does Magdalena Pedro Martínez achieve her detail and “color” in the clay without using paint or glaze?
- What does the piñata represent in Jaime Guerrero sculpture?
- What does Jaime Guerrero say about the importance of his glass working team?
- Jaime Guerrero gives credit to artists that he learned from. How does he appear to pass on his craft knowledge to others?
- What does he say about Mexican immigrants? What evidence does he have to support his opinions?
- How does curator Susie Silbert describe the importance of glass in Jaime Guerrero’s work?
- What does Jaime Guerrero claim is the role of the artist?

After Viewing

Begin a discussion of the video. What did students find noteworthy? What questions do they have? Have students share their notes to add to the discussion. Following are discussion ideas and possible answers to the questions above.

Discussion

- Why did Magdalena Pedro Martínez decide to recreate the folk dresses in clay rather than fabric?
As she stated, “because fabric deteriorates with time but clay remains.”
- Why does Magdalena Pedro Martínez believe it is important to create the figures she makes?
Pedro Martínez was concerned that traditional dress was disappearing. She believes it is important to record this cultural beauty.
- What does she say about the purposes for her work as a doctor?
Pedro Martínez said it is rewarding to ease people’s pain.
- What does she say about the purposes of her work as an artist?
Pedro Martínez obviously finds community value in her artwork as well, as she states, “... being an artisan means helping to safeguard my people’s traditions.”

- How does Magdalena Pedro Martínez achieve her detail and “color” in the clay without using paint or glaze?
She and her family use pieces of quartz to burnish, or make shiny by rubbing, areas of design. They incise designs in the clay. They achieve “shades” of gray by using different burnishing techniques. And the careful firing heightens the shiny areas, as she says, “...the contrast of matte and gloss.”
- What does the piñata represent in sculpture?
He says, “...when you’re a little kid and you need a piñata, you love what’s in that piñata. It’s hope.”
- What does Jaime Guerrero about the importance of his glass working team?
Glasswork is tricky, so Guerrero states, “It takes a lot of skill and technical ability so working with a skilled team is very important.”
- Jaime Guerrero gives credit to artists that he learned from. How does he appear to pass on his craft knowledge to others?
Guerrero hires and trains young studio assistants such as Tyler Straight. He also runs workshops for high school students who may not have the opportunity or access to pursue this expensive medium.
- What does he say about Mexican immigrants? What evidence does he have to support his opinions?
Guerrero is frustrated by the prejudice many U.S. citizens have for Mexican immigrants. He says, “There’s a lot of misinformation out there that says that a lot of these people are terrorists or that these people are criminals coming here...Not the people that I know... I feel that these people have come here to find an honest living and to work hard and they’re being looked down upon.” His evidence includes his neighbors in Boyle Heights, and his own parents, who he says, “...came to this country to work and find a livelihood and create an honest living for themselves.”
- How does curator Susie Silbert describe the importance of glass in Jaime Guerrero’s work?
She states that “He’s using the fragility and the clarity of glass to talk about things that are often concealed, like the lives of immigrants and other migrants coming over the border.”
- What does Jaime Guerrero claim is the role of the artist?
“I think that it’s important for artists to talk about the things that other people aren’t talking about. To address issues that are not being addressed...”
- You might also ask students in what ways each artist’s work is political. Have students look at the definition of politics. While Guerrero’s political content is more evident, Pedro Martínez’s work has political significance too, in its preservation and representation of a people and their culture. How might viewers react to their work? Can students imagine viewers considering a new idea upon viewing either artist’s work? Did students have this experience when seeing the artists’ work?



After Discussion: Investigation

Worksheet: Ideas From Art

Worksheet: Something to Say

Studio Production

(four 45 minute class periods)

"Making those colors with black clay is a difficult task for me. But I try to represent them as faithfully as I can using the different tones of gray, the contrast of matte and gloss."

– Magdalena Pedro Martínez

"To make these pieces I utilize a lot of different techniques that I've learned over the years. It's pretty much whatever you need to do to get the effect you want."

– Jaime Guerrero

You may want to provide still images of both artists' work for students to which students may refer for inspiration. Share the quotes above to encourage students' experimentation to achieve their sculptural ideas. It may also be helpful to play the video silently while students work, so that the artists are "present" in the studio and the students can watch them demonstrating forming the figures. (While Guerrero works in glass, his images can inspire students' figural work in clay.) Provide clay, and share demonstrations for sculpting techniques, for connecting clay with scoring and slip, and for wrapping the sculptures with damp towels and plastic bags at the end of each class. Magdalena Pedro Martínez's work provides a useful idea for successful sculpting: that is starting with a cone or bell shape skirt or body to give the figure a sturdy base. Demonstrate incising clay with a sharp pencil or a needle tool. Burnishing is done on clay that is leather hard or slightly more firm and dry: Rub clay with the back of a spoon (other tools may work) to achieve a sanded, smooth, and shiny look. When completely dried, fire clay figures.



CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection:

"These intersecting experiences come in many different forms and tap into our subconscious in different ways. My work seeks to connect to an audience on this level."

– Jaime Guerrero

You may want to allow students to create a plan for the display of their figures. Encourage them to provide artist's statements for their work, and to consider how best to arrange the figures—Will the figures "interact" in any way? Students can consider how arranging and rearranging the figures may create new meanings or connections among the works.

Assessment:

In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; by examining the students' worksheets; and by witnessing the students' studio work, it should be evident that the student:

- Created a clay figure that communicates an idea.
- Is able to explain some ways in which art can have political significance.
- Can articulate how they encountered a new idea through viewing art.

Extensions:

- California ceramic artist Gerardo Monterrubio, featured first in this episode, is another clay artist who students will find interesting. He covers his vessels with thought-provoking, graffiti-like drawings. The *Craft in America: BORDERS* episode provides related content and can be used for an extended lesson with the theme of exploring Mexican and Mexican-American crafts and culture.

Authors:

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Worksheet: Ideas from Art

"I try to represent them as faithfully as I can."
– Magdalena Pedro Martínez

"On clear glass you have to look a little harder to see the silhouette."
– Jaime Guerrero

You may want to work with a partner to share ideas and thoughts and to answer the questions below.

1. After watching Magdalena Pedro Martínez and Jaime Guerrero, who both create sculptures of people that represent a meaningful idea, what are three things that resonate with you? Maybe the artist's artwork, something they said, or the reasons behind their work captured your attention. List these thoughts below.

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2. How do the artists' work compare and contrast? Consider the quotes at the beginning of this worksheet. Is one way of approaching art more appealing to you than the other?

3. Choose one of those thoughts, and consider why it caught your attention. Then go further, choosing some descriptive words that come to mind, and write them below.

4. Using your thoughts from 1 and 2, write a one paragraph "review" of some aspect of either artist. Include some of your generated ideas. If you do not feel like you have enough to work with, go back to step one and start again. You may need some further research about their work, or you may need to revisit the videos. You can also ask your teacher or a fellow student to review the content with you.

5. Finally, think about a figural sculpture that you will make. What idea might it represent, or embody? Will it have a political view? Make quick brainstorm sketches on this paper to capture your ideas.

Worksheet: *Something to Say*

"The politics, in my mind, was always married to something creative."

– Abel M. Salas, Editor and Publisher, speaking about activism and art in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles

Looking at your sketches from worksheet: *Ideas from Art*, choose one or two that you believe have the potential to be a successful sculpture. See if they meet the following criteria:

- The design represents a human figure, or some version of a figure (for example, it has an animal head.)
- The design embodies an idea or a message. (Note: your idea might be political, or cultural, or another category.)
- The design can be made of clay. (Be careful of parts that are too thin or fragile.)
- The design has features that allow you to experiment with achieving value and texture on an unglazed clay sculpture.

Draw your chosen design on this sheet in more detail. Label it with enough information so that your classmates and your teacher can tell what your intentions are. How does it embody the idea? By gesture, or dress? By facial expression? Then share it with a classmate. What suggestions do they have?

Finally, when your sketch is detailed and you feel it will be successful, draw separately all the parts you will need (such as head, hands, skirt, feet, etc.) This can help you visualize the steps of construction. Keep your sketch handy and use it as a reference as you build the figure.