



# Exploring Symbolism in Landscapes Lesson Plan

Utah Museum of Fine Arts • [www.umfa.utah.edu](http://www.umfa.utah.edu)  
Educator Resources and Lesson Plans  
Fall 2015

## *Plant Offering and Blue Deer, unknown Huichol artist*



The Huichol People live in the remote regions of the Sierra Madre Mountains in Western Mexico, and are among the last of the world’s indigenous cultures that have been able to maintain their practices, lifestyle, and spiritual traditions into the new millennium (Endredy 31). Art is important to Huichol culture because of its narrative and decorative features. Their artworks are recognized for being ornate, colorful, and incorporating traditional patterns and symbols that have been used for centuries to represent and communicate with the gods. One of the most beloved and recognized techniques used by the Huichol People is “yarn painting.”

Yarn paintings consist of yarn pressed into boards coated with wax and resin and are derived from a ceremonial tablet called a “neirika.” Yarn paintings were originally produced by shamans to represent the visions they experienced during religious ceremonies, and then left as offerings to the gods (Barnette).

unknown Huichol artist  
**Plant Offering**  
yarn painting  
ED2011.2.15

Plant Offering and Blue Deer (artists unknown) are yarn paintings created by Huichol Indians. Like many cultures, past and present, the Huichol people have used symbols within their art to convey ideas and messages. Depictions of creatures, objects, and designs have been used as sacred symbols to represent important practices within



their culture. In Plant Offering, some of the symbols that are depicted include fire, a butterfly, and flowers. In Huichol culture, fire is considered a valuable gift from the gods, and believed to enable the Huichol to have visions. The butterfly is symbolic of transformation and progression, and flowers are symbolic of healing, and often used in sacred healing rituals. Blue Deer is a yarn painting that focuses on the symbol of the blue deer. The deer is one of the most commonly seen symbols in these motifs and represents the spirit guide, “Kauyumari,” who leads the shamans on their visionary pathways and teaches them how to gain special knowledge (Valadez).

\*These artworks along with additional yarn paintings can be checked out from the UMFA Education Collection for up to two weeks. For more information, see “Additional Resources.”

unknown Huichol artist  
**Blue Deer**  
yarn painting  
ED2011.2.9

## ***Exploring Symbolism in Landscapes***

Logan Meyers

### **Objectives**

Using Huichol yarn paintings as inspiration, students will:

1. Examine the importance of using symbols in artworks.
2. Interpret symbols used to convey thoughts, ideas, and messages in artworks.
3. Identify symbols in art and how they support composition.
4. Explore “yarn painting” motif techniques used by the Huichol Indians.
5. Create a yarn painting that depicts a landscape and incorporates personal symbols.

**Intended Audiences/Grade Levels** 4th grade

**State Core Links** (see State Core Links at the end of this lesson plan)

### **Materials**

1. Images of Huichol yarn paintings from the UMFA Education Collection
2. Pencil
3. Scissors
4. Glue
5. Yarn (multiple colors)
6. Chipboard (recommended 8”x8”)
7. Paper plates/palette paper

**Duration** 60-90 minutes

### **Vocabulary/Key Terms**

- Landscape** An image or artwork that portrays a location or scene.
- Symbol** A letter, character, or sign that represents a message or idea.
- Tradition** A belief or custom handed down from one generation to the next.
- Motif** A decorative design or pattern.
- Huichol** Native Mexicans living in the Sierra Madre Occidental range in the Mexican states of Nayarit, Jalisco, Zacatecas, and Durango.

## **Activity**

**Part One: Introduction.** Explain the significance that symbols can have when used in artworks: “In art, a symbol is usually an identifiable thing- animal, plant, object, shape, design, etc.- that represents something that would be difficult to show in an artwork otherwise. Symbols can represent ideas, feelings, beliefs, and a wide range of other things, and can help an artist convey a message or present a story.”

- Who can help me describe what a symbol is?
- What are some of the symbols you can see in our classroom?
- Can you think of any symbols you see or use every day?
- Why are symbols important in everyday life?

“Every day we interact with more symbols than we probably recognize. For example, when we turn on the faucet, symbols are used to show us which handle will give us hot water and which handle will give us cold water. If you counted all the symbols you saw in a single day, how many things do you think you’d have on your list? “

Using the sketchbook provided to students during their UMFA tour (or on a small piece of scratch paper), have the students complete the following prompt: “Draw three symbols that help describe you, and write down why the symbols are important to you.”

Open a classroom discussion, having students share the symbols they drew in their sketchbook and explaining how the symbols connect to their lives. For example, a student may have drawn a heart to represent their love for their family, a student may draw a smiley face because they are happy, or a student may draw a football because they enjoy playing sports.

**Part Two: Artwork discussion.** Show the students *Plant Offering* and *Blue Deer* (artists unknown). Have a discussion about the artworks, using the following questions to help guide the dialogue:

- What do you see?
- What colors do you see? (Bright, dark, etc.)
- What materials do you think this is made out of?
- Do you consider this artwork a landscape? Why?
- How can a landscape tell a story?
- What can landscapes tell you about a culture?
- What can landscapes tell you about an artist?
- What symbols do you see in this artwork?
- What do you think the symbols might represent?
- Do you think the colors are a symbol?

- Why do you think the artist chose these colors?
- Why do you think these symbols are important to the artist?

**Part Three: Art-making Activity:** Now that the students have identified symbols that are important to them in their sketchbook, and have examined how symbols can be used in artworks, they will create a landscape of their favorite place that uses symbols and colors that show why the location is important to them, or helps portray their identity in some way.

**Prep work:** Each student will need a piece of chipboard (recommended: 8”x8”), a pencil, a paper plate or piece of palette paper, access to a pair of scissors, access to a bottle of glue, and access to yarn in a variety of colors (recommended: red, yellow, blue, green, and brown).

**Step 1:** On the pre-cut piece of chipboard, have the students use a pencil to sketch an outline for their composition. Their composition should be a literal or metaphoric landscape of their favorite location that includes symbols that depicts their identity or something that is important to them. Students should be able to identify the symbols in their sketch and explain why it will be significant to their final artwork.

**Step 2:** Students will determine what colors of yarn they would like to use in their artwork. Cut the yarn to the desired length (using longer pieces in areas that will require more coverage and shorter pieces in areas that are more intricate), and sort each piece of yarn by color.

**Step 3:** Students will use glue to arrange and attach the yarn to the chipboard. There are two techniques for applying the glue and yarn to the chipboard: (1) apply the glue to the chipboard in the desired location and place the yarn on top of the glue, sticking the yarn in the desired position and pattern on the composition. (2) Pour the glue onto the paper plate or palette paper and run the yarn through the glue, coating the yarn in a thin layer of glue, and then place the yarn on the composition in the desired location, position, and pattern (method two is potentially messier than method one).

**Step 4:** Once all of the yarn has been placed, allow the artwork to sit and dry for up to two hours (or until glue has completely dried). If any artworks have yarn that hangs over the edge of the scratchboard, that yarn can be trimmed, using scissors, once the glue has dried.

### **Method(s) for Assessment**

**Formative assessment:** Students should respond appropriately to the question in the introduction and successfully identify symbols that hold personal significance. Students should participate in classroom discussion, while identifying and verbalizing visual elements of the selected artwork.

**Summative assessment:** The yarn painting may act as a summative assessment, evaluating the students’ ability to refine the application of art techniques and apply visual arts concepts associated with particular cultures, times, or places.

## **State Core Links**

### **Fine Arts**

*Standard 1 (Making):*The student will explore and refine the application of media, techniques, and artistic processes.

- Objective 1 Explore a variety of art materials while learning new techniques and processes.
- Objective 2 Handle art materials in a safe and responsible manner.

*Standard 3 (Expressing):*The student will choose and evaluate artistic subject matter, themes, symbols, ideas, meanings, and purposes.

- Objective 1 Explore possible content in art prints or works of art.
- Objective 2 Discuss, evaluate, and choose symbols, ideas, subject matter, meanings, and purposes for artworks.

*Standard 4 (Contextualizing):*The student will interpret and apply visual arts in relation to cultures, history, and all learning.

- Objective 2 Connect various kinds of art with particular cultures, times, or places.

### **English Language Arts**

*Speaking and Listening Standard 1:* Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- Objective b Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.
- Objective c Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.

*Speaking and Listening Standard 5:* Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

## **Additional Resources**

- Barnett, Ronald A. "Huichol art, a matter of survival III: Motifs and symbolism." Mexconnect. ISSN 1028-9089. Web. 23 September 2015.
- Endredy, James. The Journey of Tunuri and the Blue Deer. Rochester, Vermont: Bear Cub Books, 2003. Print.
- Valadez, Susana. "A Glossary of Huichol Symbols." The Huichol Center for Cultural Survival. Web. 23 September 2015.

To check out yarn paintings from the UMFA Education Collection please email [schoolprograms@umfa.utah.edu](mailto:schoolprograms@umfa.utah.edu) or call 801.581.3580. See page 7 for images of available objects.



*Offering Bowl*  
ED2011.2.13



*Blue Deer*  
ED2011.2.9



*Purple Deer*  
ED2011.2.10



*Deer Horn Ceremony*  
ED2011.2.14



*Humming Bird*  
ED2011.2.12



*Plant Offering*  
ED2011.2.15



*Shaman*  
ED2011.2.11