

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Painted Worlds: Color and Culture in Mesoamerican Art explores the use of color in the art of Mesoamerica, a cultural region comprising most of what is now Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador.

Drawn from collections across Mexico, Europe, and the United States, the 250 objects featured in *Painted Worlds* represent a rich variety of artforms and span 3,000 years of Mesoamerican history, from the ancient past to contemporary practices. Paintings, textiles, ceramics, sculptures, and mosaics provide a window into Mesoamerican worldviews while also revealing the technical sophistication of Indigenous artists who created colors by manipulating an array of natural materials.

Painted Worlds marks the first time in forty years that the Nelson-Atkins has presented an exhibition showcasing the art of ancient Mesoamerica, and several rarely-seen works of art from the Nelson-Atkins' own collections are included in the display.



USING THIS GUIDE

This guide can help educators incorporate *Painted Worlds* into their students' learning. Look inside for background information on the exhibition and its contents, questions and activities to engage your students with the exhibition, and suggestions for where to learn more.

Docent-led tours, teacher-led tours, and artmaking workshops that incorporate a visit to *Painted Worlds* are available for school groups. For groups planning a teacher-led tour, the "In the Exhibition" section of this guide offers questions and looking strategies to guide students' exploration.

To schedule a school tour or workshop, please visit nelson-atkins.org/learn/field-trips.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through the activities outlined in this guide:

- Students will look closely at art objects and will make observations and interpretations about the use of color, natural materials, and symbolism in Mesoamerican art.
- Students will analyze art objects as primary sources that reflect aspects of Mesoamerican history and culture.
- Students will consider how artistic traditions and art-making communities can experience both continuity and change over time.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Most of the works of art featured in *Painted Worlds* were made in Mexico and Central America between about 1200 B.C.E and 1521 C.E. The exhibition also presents samples of the various mineral sources used in the production of Mesoamerican pigments, along with works made by contemporary Indigenous artists who draw on traditional techniques and recipes.

The exhibition is organized into seven thematic sections:



Painter and Sage

Learn about the semi-divine power ascribed to artists in Mesoamerican societies and their role in producing colorful works of art using natural materials, thereby sustaining cosmic order through their artistic creations.

Cosmos, Casa, Cuerpo

Discover how Mesoamerican art reflects a cosmological worldview centered on five spatial directions aligned with five primary colors – white, black, red, yellow, and blue-green. This fundamental order repeats at every scale, with the human body, the home, and the cosmos each embodying the wholeness of the universe.



In the Beginning: White

Consider Mesoamerican associations between the color white and notions of creative potential and new beginnings, with white materials (such as paper, cotton, and plaster) serving as surfaces to receive colored pigments.

The Science of Color

See how modern scientific investigations into ancient artistic practices have shed light on the materials and techniques that Mesoamerican artists used to create colors.



Yax-K'an: Blue-Green and Yellow

Examine the duality represented by blue-green and yellow within Mesoamerican worldviews, where this color pairing represented the complete agricultural cycle and its associated concepts of preciousness, vitality, and abundance.

Red and Black

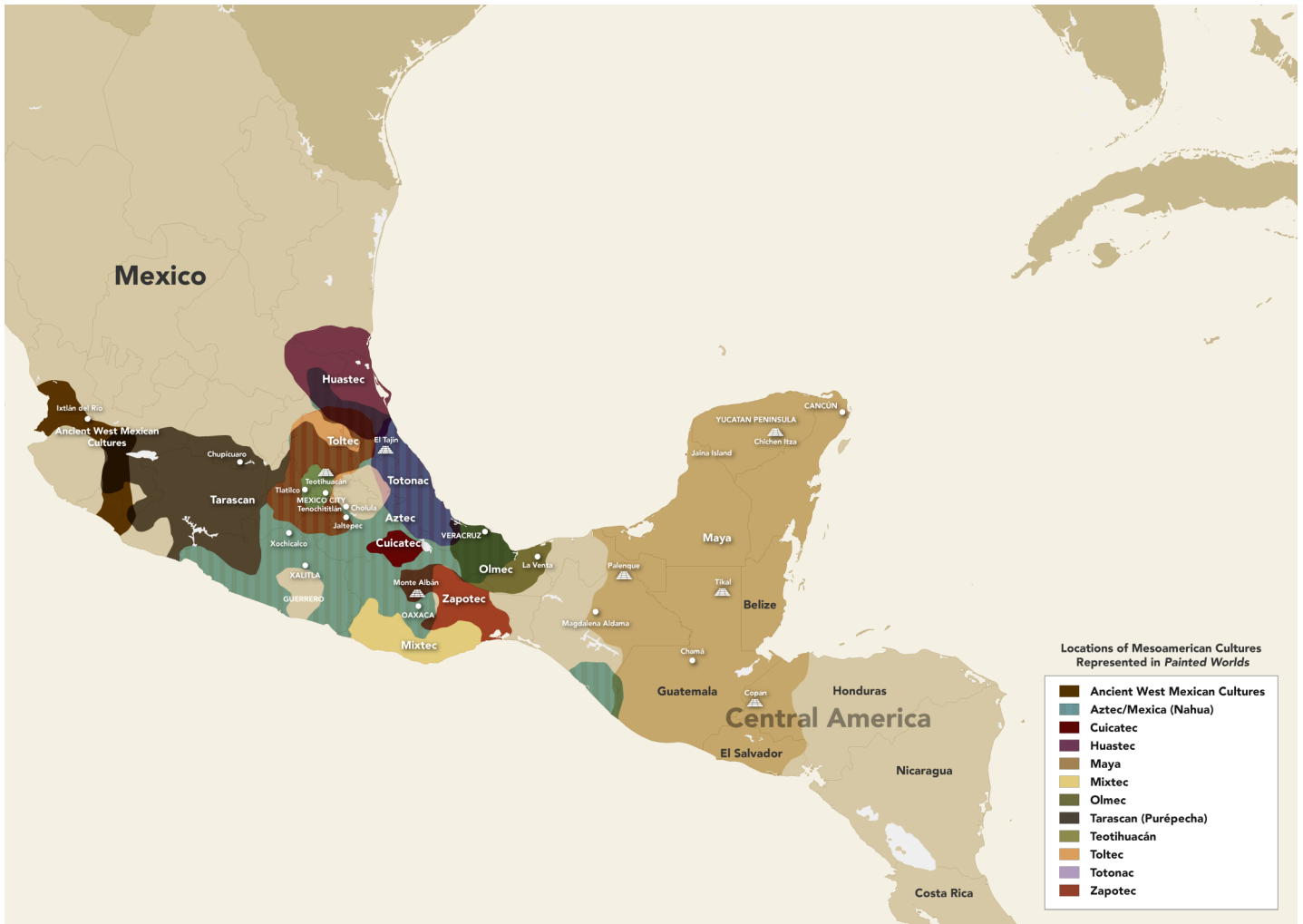
View art objects that employ red and black to depict primordial or supernatural subjects, to signify recorded knowledge, or to imbue objects with life-giving power and energy.



Image and Being

Explore a diverse selection of ancient and contemporary works of art that demonstrate the animating force of color in Mesoamerican art, in which an image embodies the very essence of the living being it represents.

MAP OF MESOAMERICA



BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Get to Know Mesoamerica

If students are unfamiliar with the term “Mesoamerica,” introduce it to them as the historical and cultural region encompassing large parts of Mexico and Central America, notably including the ancient Olmec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations, among others.

Ask students to brainstorm what they already know about the time, places, and/or peoples of Mesoamerica. What do they still want to learn? Have students research the answers to their questions using resources available at school or online (suggested resources are listed at the end of this guide).

You might also consider borrowing the Mesoamerican Art Connection Kit, available from the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins, which contains books and multisensory items that can enhance students’ exploration of Mesoamerican art and culture.

Consider Color and Culture

Encourage students to observe colors in the natural world and in their everyday lives by keeping a “color journal.” Each day, they can make notes or take photos that document the colors that they see in their environment at different times of day. Other prompts for them to consider:

- Which colors are more prominent outdoors in nature? Which are more prominent indoors?
- How might the colors around you change in a different season of the year or under different weather conditions?
- Do you think the colors of a particular environment affect your mood? Do you associate any colors with certain feelings or ideas?

After students track their observations of color, have them compare their journals with one another. What similarities and differences can they identify among their peers? How might this experience look different for students living in a different part of the world?

IN THE EXHIBITION

Observe an Artwork

Encourage students to choose one work in the exhibition to observe carefully. Before they read any of the posted information about the object, ask them to write or talk about the following questions:

- What might this object be made from?
- What do you notice about the color(s) used in the object?
- What do you notice about the shapes, forms, and patterns used in the object?
- Are there any symbols or images included in the object? If so, what might they mean?
- What might this object’s function or purpose have been?
- What are you still wondering about?

Next, students can read the label next to their chosen object. Does the information provided change their understanding or answer any of the questions they had?

Compare Old & New

Painted Worlds includes both historical Mesoamerican works and pieces made by contemporary Indigenous artists working with similar techniques, imagery, and/or materials. Have students consider the impact of continuity and change in Mesoamerican art by comparing an ancient object with a contemporary counterpart. Suggested pairings:



Articulated Figurine, Mexico, Veracruz, Tierra Blanca, Nopiloa, 600-900 C.E. —and—
Epifanía Cruz López (weaver), Pinotepa de Don Luis, Oaxaca, Mixtec; Elsa López San Luis (weaver), Pinotepa de Don Luis, Oaxaca, Mixtec; Glafira Olmedo Mendoza (embroiderer), Pinotepa de Don Luis, Oaxaca, Mixtec; Carlos Barrera Reyes (dyer), Mexico City, Mexico, *Wedding Huipil*, 2023.

House Group, Mexico, Nayarit, 200 B.C.E. – 500 C.E. —and—

Gisela Martínez Morales, Xalitla, Guerrero, Nahua, *Cosmic Tree (Mesquite)*, 2023 and Jesús Lozano Paredes, Xalitla, Guerrero, Nahua, *Cosmic Tree (Pochote)*, 2023.



Codex Selden (Codex Añute), Facsimile, Mexico, Mixtec Highlands, Añute, Mixtec, 1556. —and—

Maria Martínez Pedro, Jesús Lozano Paredes, Alfonso Nava Larios, Gisela Martínez Morales, Rodolfo Rojas Bello, and Eva Perez Martínez, Xalitla, Guerrero, Nahua, *Map of Xalitla*, 2022.

Explore Color

Within the exhibition space, students will find galleries organized around the five primary colors of Mesoamerican art: white, red, black, yellow, and blue-green. Challenge students to choose one of these color sections and explore the works on view there. They can discuss or write about:

- What natural materials did Mesoamerican artists use to create this color?
- What kinds of objects or imagery did artists make using this color?
- What did this color represent within Mesoamerican cultures? Why was it important?

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

Self-Expression Through Color

Now that students have learned about Mesoamerican art's five primary colors and their meanings, challenge them to create original works of art incorporating their own color symbolism. What are their personal associations for the colors red, white, black, yellow, and blue-green? Once students establish their individual color "keys," they could use a variety of materials and formats to make a work of art that expresses an idea through the five colors. For example, they could use pony beads to create patterned bracelets, air-dry clay to make sculptures, or paint to create a collaborative mural.



Elementary students with beaded bracelets they created using the five primary colors of Mesoamerican art.

This activity was developed and tested by students at Guadalupe Centers High School's Impact Academy.

Art from Natural Materials

Encourage students to experiment with making colors using natural sources. They might try using fruits and vegetables, flowers, or minerals found in the local environment. You can find instructions and ideas in some of the books listed in the Suggested Resources section of this guide. Discuss: *What was challenging about working with natural materials? What was rewarding? Based on this experience with using natural materials for art-making, what might you infer about the skill and expertise of Mesoamerican artists?*

TERMS TO KNOW

Backstrap Loom	A loom used in Mesoamerican weaving. It is made of simple wooden sticks and wraps around the weaver's waist with a strap, making it lightweight and portable.
Ceramic	An object made of clay that has been hardened by heat.
Codex	A type of illustrated manuscript produced in Mesoamerica.
Copal	An aromatic tree resin that was burned as incense in Mesoamerica.
Cosmos	The universe, usually in the sense of a harmonious universal order.
Glyph	A symbolic character that is part of a writing system.
Huipil	A traditional Mesoamerican garment for women; it is a loose-fitting rectangular tunic that can vary in length and may contain woven or embroidered designs.
Mesoamerica	The cultural and historical region comprising much of modern-day Mexico and Central America. United by shared cultural characteristics, Mesoamerican peoples include the Aztec (or Mexica), Maya, Mixtec, Nahuatl, Olmec, Toltec, Totonac, and Zapotec cultures, among others.
Pigment	A substance that imparts color to another material.
Stela	An upright, carved stone slab or pillar, often made in commemoration.
Textile	Cloth or other fiber-based material.
Vignette	A small illustration or brief scene.
Zoomorphic	Having the form of an animal.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

The activities described in this guide can engage students with the following learning standards:

Visual Arts

Anchor Standard #7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard #11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Social Studies

KS Standard 4: Societies experience continuity and change over time.

KS Standard 5: Relationships among people, places, ideas, and environments are dynamic.

MO 4.RI.6.D.A: Analyze the preservation of cultural life, celebrations, traditions, and commemorations over time.

MO 6-8.WH.4.PC.A: Analyze scientific, technological, intellectual, and artistic advancements to determine the legacy of European, African and Mesoamerican civilizations.

MO 6-8.GEO.2.PC.E: Describe how a people's culture is expressed through their art, architecture and literature.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Books

We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art, edited by Diana Magaloni, Davide Domenici, and Alyce de Carteret, 2024. Available in the ERC.

This catalog that accompanies *Painted Worlds* contains images of the works featured in the exhibition alongside articles that explore various aspects of Mesoamerican art, with a special focus on color.

The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec, by Mary Ellen Miller, 2019. Available in the ERC.
A thorough, illustrated introduction to the artistic achievements of Mesoamerican civilizations.

Aztec & Maya: An Illustrated History, by Charles Phillips, 2019.
A visual encyclopedia filled with detailed photographs and information about Mesoamerican history.

DK Eyewitness: Aztec, Inca & Maya, published by DK, 2011.
Extensive illustrations, diagrams, and facts make this a student-friendly introduction to Mesoamerica.

Make Art with Nature, by Pippa Pixley, 2024. Available in the ERC.
Learn how to make your own natural paints and pigments with this easy-to-follow guide.

Book of Earth: A Guide to Ochre, Pigment, and Raw Color, by Heidi Gustafson, 2023.
This book explores the historical and cultural aspects of earth pigments while also providing practical tips for creating color from natural materials.

Web

StoryMaps: Color in Mesoamerican Art / arcg.is/0mqqeX

This digital learning resource, created by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, provides background information, featured artworks, discussion questions, and vocabulary related to themes of *Painted Worlds*.

FAMSI: Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. / famsi.org
Find teacher resources, maps, videos, and more on the website of this research institute.

EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

This guide was produced by the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins. The ERC is available to support educators with a variety of programs and resources. If you are interested in learning more about ways to link museum works with classroom learning, we invite you to connect with the ERC to access:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit nelson-atkins.org/learn/educator-resources for more information.



CREDITS

Artwork credits:

Page 1: *Urna funeraria*, Mixtec, Mexico, Oaxaca, 300–600 C.E. Ceramic with pigment, 13 3/8 × 6 3/4 inches (34 × 17 cm). Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca. Photo courtesy of Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca/Ex Convento de Santo Domingo Guzmán.

Page 2, from top left: *Figurine Whistle of a Woman with a Backstrap Loom*, Maya, Northern Guatemala or Southeastern Mexico, 600–900 C.E. Ceramic with post-fire pigment, 7 1/4 × 3 5/8 × 5 5/8 inches (18.42 × 9.21 × 14.29 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. / *Cajete estucado policromo*, Teotihuacan, Mexico, Basin of Mexico, Teotihuacan, 200–650 C.E. Ceramic, 2 3/4 × 8 1/4 inches (7 × 21 cm). Acervo de la Zona de Teotihuacan. / *Articulated Figurine*, Mexico, Veracruz, Tierra Blanco, Nopiloa, 600–900 C.E. Ceramic, Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, 00282. / *Fragmento de pintura mural "personajes con tocado"*, Teotihuacan, Mexico, Basin of Mexico, Teotihuacan Tetitla, 350–450 C.E. Lime plaster with pigment, 11 1/4 × 14 7/8 × 3 5/8 inches (28.5 × 37.8 × 9.3 cm). Acervo de la Zona de Teotihuacan. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA, by Javier Hinojosa. / *Tripod Vessel Decorated with Headdress and Shield*, Mexico, Basin of Mexico, Teotihuacan, 400–650 C.E. Ceramic with post-fire stucco and pigment, 6 3/8 × 5 3/4 inches (14.6 × 16.2 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Constance McCormick Fearing (AC1993.217.15). / *Plate with Teotihuacan War Serpent on White and Black Backgrounds*, Maya, Guatemala or Mexico, Northern Petén or Southern Campeche, 650–800 C.E. Slip-painted ceramic, 16 × 15 1/2 × 3 inches (40.6 × 39.4 × 7.6 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. / *Figural Urn*, Zapotec, 500–600 C.E. Clay and pigment, 25 × 25 × 12 1/2 inches (63.5 × 63.5 × 31.75 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 61-16.

Page 3: *Articulated Figurine*, Mexico, Veracruz, Tierra Blanco, Nopiloa, 600–900 C.E. Ceramic, Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, 00282.

Page 5, from top right: *House Group*, Mexico, Nayarit, 200 B.C.E.-500 C.E. Slip-painted ceramic, 11 1/2 × 8 × 6 inches (29.2 × 20.3 × 15.2 cm). The Proctor Stafford Collection, purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Allan C. Balch, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.86.296.38). / *Codex Selden (Codex Añute)*, Facsimile, Mexico, Mixtec Highlands, Añute, 1556 (detail). Deerskin, gesso, and pigment. Bodleian Library, Oxford University (Ms Arch. Selden A.2). UCLA, Charles Young Research Library, F1219.098cs 1964a.

Exhibition credits:

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