



## OVERVIEW

**GRADE 4/5 ARTIST: ERNA METZGER**

## MEXICAN ARTS: Paper Retablos

Students will learn about *retablos* (small portable homemade alters) and their significance in Hispanic cultures. Using inspiration from original Peruvian and Mexican retablos, they will design paper retablos that signify what is important and meaningful in their own lives. These personal symbols will combine to form a self-portrait. Students will carefully decorate the paper retablos, creating a symmetrical design on the doors, inside and outside.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- students will learn about the historical significance of the retablo.
- students will create a 3-D retablo using simple classroom materials.
- students will make a personal statement with their retablo, using design elements of originals as a guide.

## LESSON BACKGROUND

*Retablos*, better known as *laminas* in Mexico, are small oil paintings on tin, zinc, wood, or copper which were used in home altars to venerate Catholic saints. The literal translation for “retablo” is “behind the altar.” A retablo was contained in a “little cupboard of treasures” which held objects and images of importance. At first retablos were used as traveling altars by people of the Andes mountains in Peru when they moved from place to place. Retablos are made of painted wood, and have small doors with symmetrical patterns, usually reflecting nature. Later, religious retablos were replaced by a family retablo built in the same way but with different themes such as representations of the family, ancestors, or important possessions.

## MATERIALS

Oak tag cut 6" x 6", with 1/2" scored around all edges so students can easily fold them to make a 3-D box. Depending on grade level, students may be able to do this.

### Papers

1. Colored construction paper cut 5" x 3" (these become the "doors" of the retablos)
2. Colored construction paper cut 5 x 5" cut in half diagonally to create triangular top pieces of retablos. (teachers can pre-cut triangles or have students cut them)
3. 5" x 5" white paper
4. Construction paper scraps, fancy (foil) papers
5. Black construction paper cut 8" x 11" for background

Rulers (teacher may want to make 1/2" templates if students have trouble measuring) to lay out edges

Crayons, pencils, black markers (Sharpies recommended), markers for drawing inside "treasures"

Elmer's glue

Scissors for scoring

Tape

## RESOURCES

Indigo Arts Gallery. "Peruvian Folk Art, Retablos by the Jimenez Family and Others." [Online] Available. [http://www.indigoarts.com/gallery\\_peru\\_retablo1.html](http://www.indigoarts.com/gallery_peru_retablo1.html), October, 2006.

Lucuma Designs. "Peruvian Retablo Tradition, Ayacucho, Peru." [Online] Available. [http://lucuma.com/wholesale/contentmaterials/Retablo\\_Story\\_Nov04.pdf](http://lucuma.com/wholesale/contentmaterials/Retablo_Story_Nov04.pdf), October, 2006.

Panyella, Augusto. *Folk Art of the Americas*. New York: Abrams, 1981. p. 251.

The Folk Art Gallery, "The Evolution of the Retablo." [Online] Available. <http://www.thefolkartgallery.com/retablo.htm>, October, 2006.

## VOCABULARY

**Retablo:** a small portable homemade alter.

**Symmetry:** the property of being the same or corresponding on both sides of a central dividing line.

**Symbolism:** the use of symbols to invest things with meaning or to represent something abstract by something concrete (such as love with a heart). The artistic method of revealing ideas through the use of symbols.

**Score:** a line (as a scratch or incision) made with a sharp instrument to help when folding.

## INTRODUCTION

Show pictures of retablos and discuss their significance in Hispanic culture. Discuss symbolism and ask students to identify the symbols in the retablo examples. Ask students what people and things are important in their lives and what symbols they would use to represent those people and things. If possible, show students a pre-made example. Explain symbolism in the example. This is most effective if the example is made by the teacher and he or she can discuss the symbolism as being important to his or her own life.

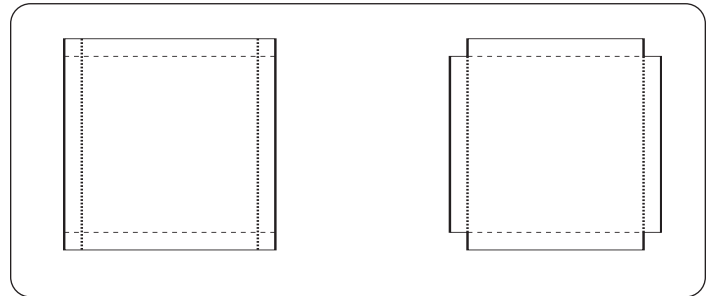
What is symbolism? Do we use symbols in our daily lives? What is an abstract idea and how can a symbol help us to represent an idea that we cannot see or touch? An abstract idea can be a feeling or emotion, which is something that we cannot see or touch. A heart is a symbol that we use to represent the feeling of love. Can you think of other symbols?

What symbols will you use in your own retablo? Think of someone who is very important to you. How will you represent that person without drawing a picture of him or her? Think of what that person does, or what he or she wears. For example, if she wears glasses you might draw glasses on your retablo to symbolize that person. If he or she cooks dinner for you, you might draw a plate of food or a cooking person or a cooking spoon to represent that person.

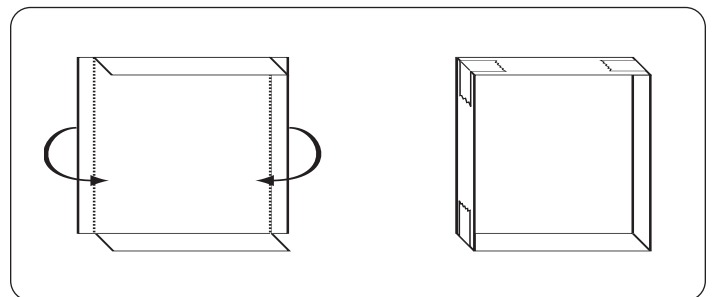
Talk about symmetry and ask for examples. Symmetrical objects are the same on both sides; if you draw an imaginary line down the middle of a symmetrical object and pretend to fold it in half the designs on each side will match up. Can you think of anything that is symmetrical? Butterflies and faces are symmetrical.

## STEP BY STEP

1. Demonstrate how to measure, score and fold, and tape the edges of the retablo box.
2. Distribute oak tag (6" x 6").
3. Students measure 1/2" around edges and score them using the ruler edge.

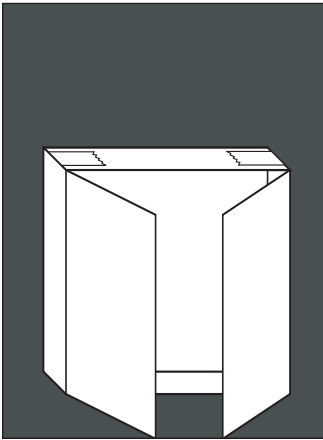
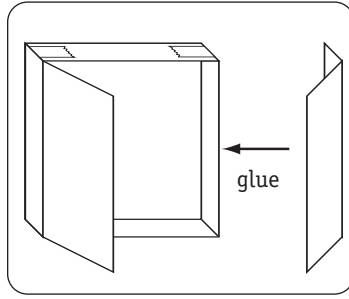
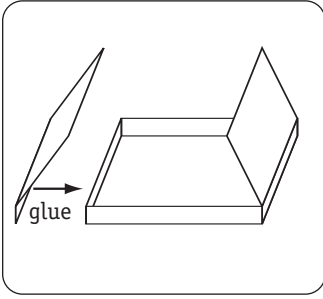


4. Students cut out corners then fold up edges and tape them.



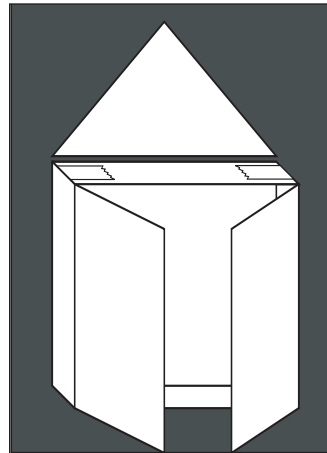
5. Distribute "doors".
6. Cut 5 triangles or 5" x 5" colored squares to make 2 triangles. (If students cut squares, demonstrate how to cut diagonally to form two triangles).
7. Decorate doors and top triangle piece with black markers. Small construction paper pieces and foil papers can be folded in half, have shapes cut out, and unfolded to create symmetrical designs. Triangle top and doors should have coordinated designs.

8. Fold the doors over the 1/2" edge of the retablo box on the left and right sides and glue doors on.



10. Glue the oak tag box with doors onto black construction paper. Demonstrate how to center the box between the left and right hand sides of the black background paper. Remind students to leave enough space above the top of the box to glue the triangular top piece.

11. Glue the triangle top piece slightly above (about 1/4") the top of the oak tag box. Demonstrate how to center the triangle so that the corners line up with the left and right sides of the box.



12. Distribute 5" x 5" white paper.

13. Students make "shelves" and begin to draw in items significant to them. They should have some symbolism if student grasps this idea. (Retablo becomes like a self-portrait).

14. Glue the "shelf paper" into the back of the retablo box.



Student drawn shelves

### During the lesson

Some students may need help creating the 3-D box correctly. Either instruct students in small groups during this step or tell them to partner up so that they can check each other as their work progresses. If students are looking at each other's work, they are more likely to notice errors and correct their own or suggest that their partner correct his or her piece.

Make sure students are designing their retablos using symmetry as a guide. Remind them that if the piece were folded down the center each side should be a mirror image of the other.

Encourage and review the concept of symbolism as students decorate the interior of their retablo. Symbolism can be a difficult concept for some students to grasp. When most students are ready to decorate their retablos, review the discussion topic on symbolism (in the introduction above).

### Clean up:

Allow 10 minutes for cleanup.

*Post Project Discussion:*

Ask students to share their retablos discussing the symbols he/she used to represent things important in his/her life. Depending on class dynamics, the teacher may show one retablo and ask if students can figure out which student it belongs to.

*Other Comments:*

It may be helpful to break this lesson down into multiple parts of 1/2 hour to 1 hour. The lesson

can also be simplified and shortened if students make 2-D retablos by eliminating the construction of the oak tag box. Simply cut "doors" in one sheet of paper and glue them down onto another uncut sheet. The paper doors will open and students can decorate all areas of the piece.

*Variations:*

Poetry extension: write Latin American indigenous style riddle poem.

## STANDARDS

### Grade 5

- 1.1 Identify and describe the principles of design in visual compositions, emphasizing unity and harmony.
- 2.7 Communicate values, opinions, or personal insights through an original work of art.
- 3.2 Identify and describe various fine, traditional, and folk arts from historical periods worldwide.
- 3.4 View selected works of art from a major culture and observe changes in materials and styles over a period of time.
- 4.3 Develop and use specific criteria as individuals and in groups to assess works of art.
- 4.4 Assess their own works of art, using specific criteria, and describe what changes they would make for improvement.

**NOTES**

*Cultural Kaleidoscope is made possible by grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and by the National Endowment for the Arts, federal agencies, and by Cisco Systems Foundation, Citigroup Foundation, Hewlett-Packard Company Foundation, Washington Mutual Foundation, Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund, Adobe Systems Action Grant, Arts Council Silicon Valley's Community Art Fund, California Arts Council's Youth Education in the Arts, Fenwick & West LLP, Fidelity Investments, Morrison & Foerster LLP, the Palo Alto Art Center, City of Palo Alto, and private donations.*

*Cultural Kaleidoscope is a program of the Palo Alto Art Center Foundation. Cultural Kaleidoscope is provided to classrooms free of charge.*

