

Aztec Codex

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Students learn about the Aztecs and the role of codices in preserving indigenous culture and history in Mexico in the 1500s. The post-colonial revival of the codex as a recording tool ensured that important information survived, although for Spanish aims. Each student will make a simple codex reflecting aspects of Aztec history, daily life, or religion.

Overview

This project was designed as a simple exercise to focus students on pre-conquest Aztec culture through a hands-on project. Students learn about the Aztecs and the effects of the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica in the 1500s, including the destruction of written and pictorial history. The subsequent revival of the indigenous codex by Spanish friars for their own reasons allowed much cultural knowledge to be recorded again. Using a variety of images available online, students examine early postcolonial examples informed by native contributors. They create a simple codex reflecting aspects of Aztec life.

Grade levels

6-7, but easily modified for other grades studying Mesoamerican culture, archaeology, and history by changing the detail and complexity of the teacher's presentation and requiring more student research.

Goals

Students will:

- learn basic information about Aztec culture, the Spanish conquest, and the colonial codices that reveal native precolonial practices and the impact of the conquerors.
- create a new codex of their own revealing understanding of an aspect of Aztec culture or the Spanish conquest.
- represent Aztec representational art and symbolism in a two-dimensional artwork based on surviving models.
- consider how a codex might reflect the goals of both native people and Spanish rulers.

Time needed

The teacher will first need to present basic information about the Aztecs, codices, and Aztec representational art (45 minutes). After looking at a variety of codex pages and choosing

topics, students can draw practice versions of their illustrated pages during class (45 minutes) before creating the final codex. This can be completed in class, or the teacher may choose to make this a take-home assignment once the blank codices have been prepared.

Cultural/historical context

This project references Aztec culture from about 1300-1600 CE in central and southern Mexico, roughly around the area of present-day Mexico City. The Aztecs called themselves Mexica or Tenochca, and they spoke the Náhuatl language. The name Aztec (people of Aztlán, a legendary place of origin) was given by Alexander von Humboldt in 1810 to include all Mesoamerican people who claimed a connection to the mythical origin site of Aztlán. This name came into common scholarly and then public use.

According to their own tradition, the Aztecs had wandered until founding the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325. The area was marshy, and the people became highly expert in an agricultural system that maximized the use of wet land using **chinampas**, long, narrow gardens built over marshland or water and fertilized with decaying vegetation. Together with the Tlacopan and Texcoco people, the Mexica created an empire within a short time in the 1400s. It was still growing when the Spanish arrived in 1519, but the Mexica were now the dominant culture under their king Montezuma (Moctezuma, and other variants).

Hernán Cortés and Spanish soldiers besieged Tenochtitlán, took Montezuma hostage, and conquered the city in a decisive battle in 1521. Not only did the Spanish have effective weapons such as muskets and steel swords, but many of the tribes the Aztecs had conquered rebelled against them and joined the Spanish. As well as dying in battle, many indigenous people perished from hunger and from Spanish smallpox, against which they had no immunity. (see *Florentine Codex*, book 12).

The Aztec codex

Codex (plural **codices** CODE-ih-sees) is the term for a medieval European manuscript, handwritten on prepared animal skin and bound in pages to make a book. Indigenous “books” from the time before and after the Spanish conquest are quite different, but they are also called codices. Aztec codices were made from many different materials, often long strips of bark or cured animal skin, such as deer, cut in rectangles of various dimensions, and accordion-folded (screen-folded) into books that likely had wooden covers. There were other forms of books as well, such as long scrolls that were rolled instead of folded.

Examples of Aztec codices exist in museums and libraries around the world, often named today after the place where they now are kept or the Spanish person who is credited with commissioning them. Scholars today acknowledge the indigenous culture and contribution to these codices despite the earlier focus on the named Spanish overseer or museum/library. Codex scribes (*tlacuilos*) were educated and trained artisans, skilled in painting human figures and writing glyphs. A **glyph** is a symbol or **pictograph** that can serve different functions—as a

word, concept, letter, number, or guide to pronunciation. Rather than recounting stories, the images and glyphs on codices were a memory guide, a reminder of actions, concepts, battles, professions, good and bad behavior, rituals, stories, and songs. They were an important record of local history, culture, and religion. As the Catholics gained control and attempted to Christianize the local people, however, they feared the codices as the works of the devil. The church and soldiers initially destroyed vast numbers of these books, largely by burning.

Codices were eventually commissioned again by Spanish friars and leaders, and much of what we know about the Aztecs today comes from records written after the arrival of the Spanish. To the friars, making a codex was a way of recording the lives and understanding the culture of people who were being taught to become Christians. Learning about the Aztecs' beliefs and language was thought to make it easier to counteract their pagan ideas. The codices were also a form of report about indigenous people for the Spanish king, Charles V, who wanted information about politics and tribute. The Spanish goals for the books and the inevitable European influence on them cannot be ignored, but the codices are nevertheless an invaluable resource about Aztec practices and beliefs.

Around 500 codices were created after the Spanish conquered the Aztecs. Some included accounts by local people in pictographs and their own Náhuatl language (written in the Spanish alphabet), as well as translations and explanatory texts in Spanish. Eventually, however, the Church again feared these sources of information about non-Christian practices, especially in a language few Spaniards could read. The codices were banned or ignored. Copies survived, but by the seventeenth century they were essentially forgotten, and for centuries they were no longer studied.

Aztec codices as resources

It can be helpful to focus on a few examples of codices that include substantial information from indigenous people and are available online today with useful resources.

The **Florentine Codex** (called this because it ended up in Florence) is the best preserved of several copies of an encyclopedic codex commissioned and overseen by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún from 1545-1569 (and then copied and emended). Sahagún himself learned Náhuatl, interviewed people, and translated some of their accounts. For the huge undertaking, indigenous elders, artists, and native seminary students provided cultural information in the Náhuatl language and created more than 2,000 images. Translations and additional comments were in Spanish.

The **Codex Mendoza** is named after Don Antonio de Mendoza, appointed the first viceroy of Mexico ("New Spain") in 1535 by the Spanish king. He was tasked with gaining information about the conquered peoples. The codex dates to 1541-1542 and contains a history of Aztec rulers, Aztec conquests, and information about daily life, provided in pictographs by Aztec scribes with translations and explanations in Spanish.

The Codex Azcatitlan most likely dates from soon after the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico. It recounts the history of the Aztecs: their migration from their legendary origin site Aztlán to Tenochtitlan, their creation of an empire, and their conquest by the Spanish. The codex has substantial European pictorial influence but is a valuable and visually legible account.

Making a codex

Aztec screen-fold codices are relatively easy for students to create, and the subject matter is of inherent interest, presenting in picture form so many different aspects of Aztec civilization, especially dress and daily activities.

Artists used combinations of figurative drawings and glyphs/pictographs to represent their ideas. Drawing a black outline and adding color afterward is an approach of Aztec artists that students can mimic. While there are some consistent features of Aztec figurative images, there is not a universal artistic style, and individual artists' hands can be identified.

Stylistic markers of many but not all human figures:

- Face, arms, and legs are generally shown in profile or $\frac{3}{4}$ view, but sometimes with a frontal torso.
- Feet are often bare, and heels and toes may be clearly articulated.
- Faces are drawn in profile with a frontal eye, and (with variations) a single line forming a straight nose and nostril, an undercut lower lip, and a strong chin.
- Men have straight hair hanging down to below the ears. Women have long hair in a variety of styles. Married women's hair is often bound up and has two short flat-topped "horns" on the crown of the head. Young women may let their hair down.
- Typical male dress includes a loin cloth with ends of knotted fabric hanging down, and a tunic or a cloak knotted over one shoulder.
- Typical female dress includes a tunic or long blouse falling below the waist with sleeves to the elbow, and a long skirt reaching below the knee or to the ankle.
- Gods, priests, and high-status figures dress in a variety of clothing; students should examine a selection of clothing types in codices.

Sample topics for student illustrations:

- Building a chinampa (floating garden) for farming
- Aspects of daily life
- Professions
- The conquest of the Aztecs

Materials

- Card stock paper strips about 22" x 4" long (students cut an 8 ½ sheet of paper in half lengthwise and tape two pieces together at the seam)
- Colored pencils
- Sample Aztec designs and glyphs, and reprints of pages from Aztec codices
- Paper collage materials for background and added texture

The classroom process

The teacher should discuss Aztec history and the Spanish conquest, the destruction of codices pre-conquest, and the revival and then abandonment of the form under the Spanish. After providing examples of images and links to codices online, students can explore categories of information. The teacher should become familiar with the online resources and learn how to navigate them. An illustration of folio 70 of the Mendoza Codex is provided below, and links to codex examples can be found in *Resources*.

Creating the codex

Students should create their own new images, not copy existing ones, and they should document images that influenced their themes and style.

1. Students discuss and finalize their ideas for illustrations of Aztec culture. Images can be drawn on five single-sided pages, or the codex can be decorated on both sides.
2. When they are satisfied with their ideas, students write a sentence or two to explain each of their images and record the original source that influenced them.
3. They then construct their books. Students fold two 8 1/2" x 11" pieces of card stock paper in half vertically, pressing a careful crease down the center. They cut the paper lengthwise down the center and tape the two halves together by joining two short (4 1/4" -wide) ends to form a 22" - long codex.
4. To create the final accordion-folded book, students carefully fold each 11" book half into three pages, allowing a title page and five pages of illustrations.
5. The first square of the book is a title page, followed by a picture on the remaining pages. The images can be drawn on the codex pages directly or designed on separate sheets, cut out, and glued to the codex pages. The illustrations should be colorful as well as accurate, and students may glue decorative elements on as well.
6. Lastly, students write or attach an explanation on the back of each page, if the codex is single-sided, or provide a one-page addition to a two-sided codex.

Assessment

This rubric can be adapted as appropriate:

Aztec Codex Project Rubric (50 points)

5 themes are depicted with details (10 pts.) _____ (if the codex has 5 illustrated pages)

Figures and objects are accurate stylistically/historically (10 pts) _____

Aztec story, aspect of daily life, historical event is accurate (10 pts.) _____

Codex reflects an Aztec scene but does not copy one (10 pts.) _____

Codex shows neatness, care, and creativity (5 pts.) _____

Influential images are cited (5 pts.) _____

Total points _____ / 25

Explanation of Folio 70r, Codex Mendoza: Fathers training Aztec youths in trades

Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1. CC-BY-NC 4.0:

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2fea788e-2aa2-4f08-b6d9-648c00486220/surfaces/52f1fe22-b2c6-4621-a59e-7c18aa320e6a/>

Row 1

Center: **A father and son sit.** The father, left, seated on a woven box, warns his son who squats opposite him to be virtuous and not roam about as a vagabond. Speech glyphs come from his mouth. They look like scrolls being pulled open with the unrolled (and so readable) part in front of the mouth.

Images to left and right show desirable occupations and behaviors.

- **Left:** an emperor's **messenger** stands holding badges of office: fan and staff.
- **Right:** a **singer/ musician** with a drum performs for a high-status client. The payment is shown between them, top down: folded loincloth and cape, basket of tamales on a ceramic stand with short legs, flower bouquet, smoking tube.

Row 2

On the left an **overseer of reed craftsmen admonishes two men** whose work or behavior has been inferior. They sit crying next to digging sticks and baskets.

Behind each man are two more images of people who have made bad choices.

- Behind the top weeping man stands a **vagabond** with badly twisted limbs. He wandered at night and fell prey to angry spirits. The **ball player** next to him must have become addicted to playing ball.
- Behind the lower weeping man, a **thief** steals from a woven reed container. To his right a **gambler** has thrown off his cape and plays with four bean-dice.

Rows 3 and 4

On the far right, a large figure stands spanning two rows. He represents another bad choice. He is a **gossip**, a person of an evil tongue, with a two-headed snake glyph above his head. The gossip's cape has an elaborate border of multi-colored rectangles.

To the left, artisan fathers teach their sons who are seated watching them.

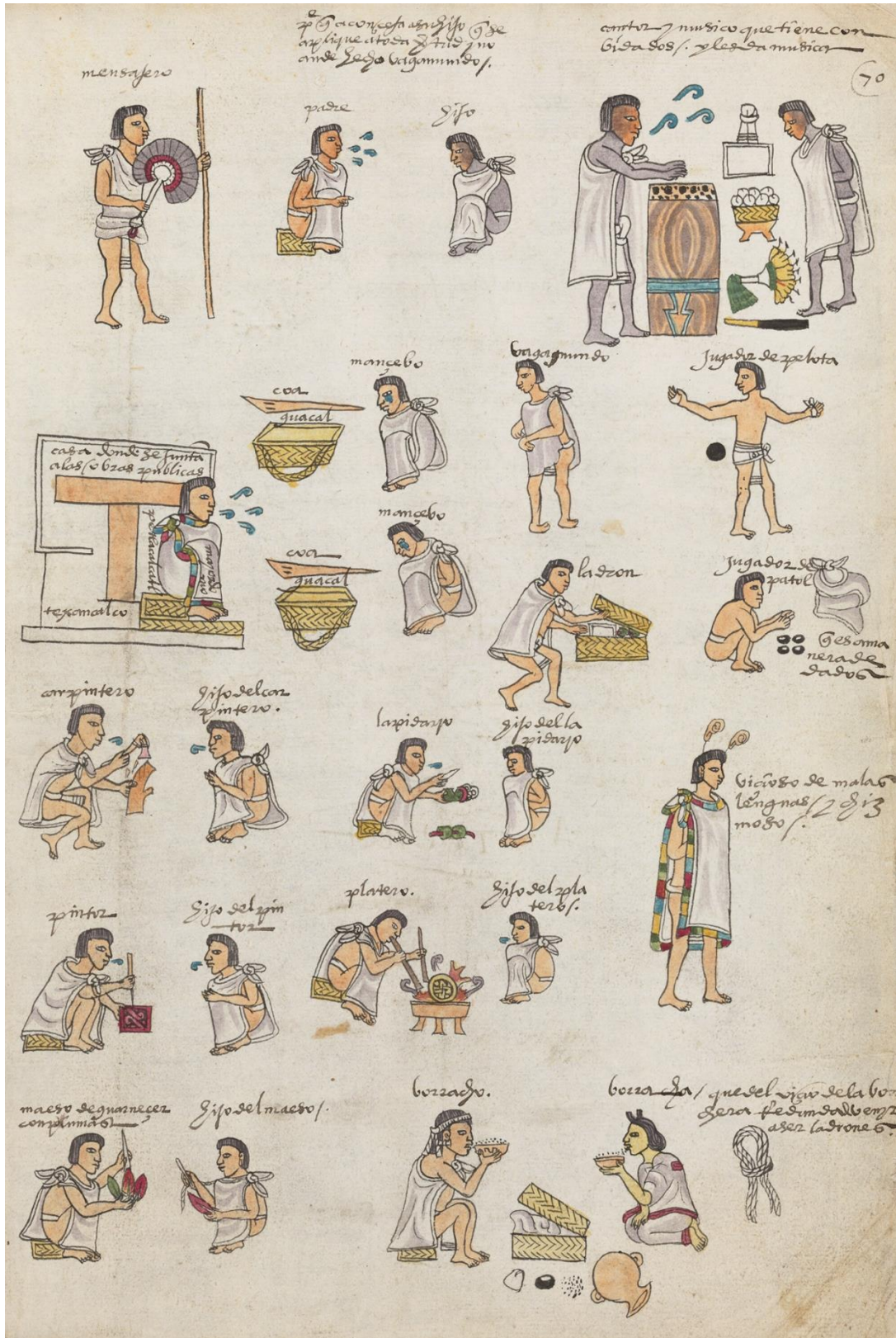
- In row 3: a **carpenter** splits off pieces from a branch or small tree trunk, and next to him a **lapidary** polishes a green stone attached to a floral finial. At his feet lies a red cord strung with two beads of the same green color.
- In row 4: a **painter/scribe** seated on a woven box draws glyphs in red and black. He would have known how to mix colors and how to draw figures as well as glyphs. Next to him a **goldsmith** blows with a pipe into a brazier to heat the coals and raise the temperature. The glyph in the crucible symbolizes gold, so he is melting gold to pour it into a mold.

Row 5

In the last row is one final illustration of useful work and one of bad behavior.

- The good artisan on the left is a **feather worker**, and the son is working with his father instead of just observing. The elder holds a blade and the son a needle strung with thread. They prepare feathers for attachment to an unknown artifact, perhaps a head ornament.
- The two **drunk thieves** on the right probably drink pulque, fermented sap from the agave (maguey) plant, with foam indicated here by dots. The woman sits back on her heels, the pose of a female in a skirt. A spilled jug lies near more foam dots. Nearby, a black bean and maize kernel suggest gambling and divination. The woven box between the two drinkers looks rummaged through, and the text to the right of the woman suggests that drunkenness leads to thieving. The rope behind her may be a plant root placed in pulque to make it more powerful.

Folio 70r, Codex Mendoza, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford



Resources

General

Afanador-Pujol, Angela J. published online 2020. *Indigenous Manuscripts of Ancient and Early Colonial Mesoamerica: 13th—16th Centuries*. Oxford Research Libraries.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1149>

Garibay, K. Angel Maria, translator (from Nahuatl). 2006 edition. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Foreword by J. Jorge Flor de Alva. Illustrations adapted from original codices. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Kilroy, Ewbank, Lauren. *Introduction to the Aztecs*. SmartHistory:

<https://smarthistory.org/introduction-mexica/>

Rajagopalan, Angela Herren. 2018. *Portraying the Aztec Past: The Codices Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Aubin*. Austin: University of Texas.

Florentine Codex

This project description is a good place to start for an overview of the codex, its contributors, history, and significance today: *LatinX Project with the Florentine Codex*:

<https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervenxions/digital-florentine-codex>

Digital Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of 16th-Century Indigenous Mexico. Getty Museum

<https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/>

Florentine Codex: Library of Congress World Digital Library:

[https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-digital-](https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-digital-library/?q=general+history+of+the+things+of+new+spain+by+fray+bernardino+de+sahagu%CC)

[library/?q=general+history+of+the+things+of+new+spain+by+fray+bernardino+de+sahagu%CC%81n:+the+florentine+codex.+introduction,+indices,+and+book+i:+the+gods.](https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-digital-library/?q=general+history+of+the+things+of+new+spain+by+fray+bernardino+de+sahagu%CC%81n:+the+florentine+codex.+introduction,+indices,+and+book+i:+the+gods.)

Codex Mendoza

Codex Mendoza: Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2fea788e-2aa2-4f08-b6d9-648c00486220/>

Berda, Frances F. and Patricia R. Anawalt. 1997. *The Essential Codex Mendoza. Inscriptions and Translations of the Spanish Commentaries and Translations of the Spanish Glosses*. Los Angeles and Berkeley, University of California. Black and white images and translated text:

https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_JQeAQZHv0IC/page/n9/mode/2up

Hart, Dana. "A Book to Die For," *The Met* blog about the Codex Mendoza, May 11, 2016:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/articles/book-to-die-for>

Codex Azcatitlan

Codex Azcatitlan: Library of Congress World Digital Library:

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668122/>

National Standards**World History Content Standards: UCLA History: Public History Initiative:**

<https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/world-history-content-standards/world-history-era-5/#section-6>

Standard 6: the expansion of states and civilizations in the Americas, 1000-1500

- Grades 5-12 Standard 6A: Therefore, the student is able to analyze how the Aztec empire arose in the 14th and 15th centuries and explain major aspects of Aztec government, society, religion, and culture (interrogate historical data).

National Council for the Social Studies Standards (NCSS):

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands>

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, Change: Id, If, IIb, IIc, IId

Theme 4. Individual Development and Identity: IVd

Theme V: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions: Vc, Vf, Vg

Theme VI: Power, Authority, and Governance: VIc, VIh

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

Standards Grades 6-8: <http://www.ncte.org/standards>

NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts

- Standard 1: Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the U.S. and the world.
- Standard 4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g. conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Standard 7: Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, and people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

National Standards for Arts Education: <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>

7th grade

- Creating VA: Cr1.2.7a: Develop criteria to guide making a work of art or design to meet an identified goal.
- Creating VA: Cr2.2.7a: Demonstrate persistence in developing skills with various materials, methods, and approaches in creating works of art or design.
- Creating VA: Cr2.3.7a: Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art, design, or media that clearly communicates information or ideas.
- Creating VA: Cr3.1.7a: Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.
- Presenting VA: Pr4.1.7a: Compare and contrast how technologies have changed the way artwork is preserved, presented, and experienced.
- Responding VA: Re9.1.7a: Compare and explain the difference between an evaluation of an artwork based on personal criteria and an artwork based on a set of established criteria.
- Connecting VA: Cn11.1.7a: Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

