

CULTURE & IDENTITY



Essential Question

How does culture inform identity?



Presenting Sponsors





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Essential Question

How does culture inform identity? Explore this question with students using the artwork reproductions, art historical descriptions, and student discussion prompts provided. Then, transition from talking about art to making art using the following student reflection prompts:

1. What is culture?
2. How do people express their culture?
3. How do people inherit their culture from others, such as family or community members?
4. How do people change culture and cultural symbols to make them their own?
5. How have these artists used symbols from their cultures to express their identity?

Classroom Activity

Create a dual-identity portrait that expresses two sides of you.

First, with what cultures do you identify? Consider your home, family, and cultural heritage, but also contemporary youth culture. What symbols or iconography are associated with these cultures? How do you code-switch, or alternate back and forth, between cultures depending on where you are or who you are with?

Next, how will these cultures meet in a self-portrait? Will they merge, fuse, or crash? How will you represent the relationship between the two? Sketch your vision for a composition.

Then, choose a medium for your portrait. Whether you are drawing, photographing, or filming, think about how your choice of medium will express or enhance the vision for your work.

After creating your self-portrait, write an artist statement recalling an experience of code-switching between two cultures and how this experience has impacted who you are.

Vocabulary List

Culture (heritage, family, contemporary), symbol, identity, code-switch, composition, portrait, medium

California State Content Standards for Visual & Performing Arts

Connections, Relationships, Applications: Visual Literacy

Grade 8	Standard 5.3	Demonstrate an understanding of the effects of visual communication media (for example, television, music videos, film, Internet) on all aspects of society.
Grades 9–12	Standard 5.2	Compare and contrast works of art, probing beyond the obvious and identifying psychological content found in the symbols and images.

California Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

College & Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration

Grades 6–12	Standard 1	Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
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Pair of Ear Ornaments, Winged Runners

AD 400–700

Moche, Peru

Gold, turquoise, sodalite, shell

Diam.: 8 cm (3 3/16 in.)

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1966, 1977 [66.196.40–66.196.41]



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Pair of Ear Ornaments, Winged Runners

Moche Culture

Cultural iconography and symbolism are rooted in ancient expressions of identity. Earflares, the ancient version of the popular earplug earring, were once important markers of rank and affiliation in Andean society. This pair of earflares comes from the Moche culture—a civilization on the north coast of Peru whose artisans displayed mastery of gold work and precious-metal mosaics through the production of ornaments.

The winged runners depicted on these earflares are likely anthropomorphic owls. In Moche cosmology, owls may have been seen as messengers between the sky and the earth and as symbols of the underworld or afterlife. These mosaic messengers are rendered in turquoise, with eyes and beaks of gold and feet made of the royal blue mineral sodalite. They wear bracelets and loincloths made of the bright orange spondylus shell, elaborate headdresses, and body paint (note the dark turquoise kneecaps). The figures are framed in gold, hammered into thin sheets and carefully sculptured into decorative spheres. These materials were sourced from land and ocean as far away as present-day Chile and Ecuador—their value an expression of the wearer's wealth, status, and power.

Earflares became so important to Moche identity that when the Moche took high-status prisoners in battle their earflares were removed as a sign of stripping them of their humanity. Droopy earlobes, stretched from years of wearing earflares, also became a sign of status. Later, when Spaniards met the Inca—descendants of the ancient Moche—they referred to Inca nobility as *orejones*, or “big ears.”

Discussion Prompts for Students

- What do you see?
- How do you think these objects might have been used?
- What kind of person might have worn them?
- What might the materials have said about the wearer?
- Extend the discussion with a Smarthistory video of this artwork (visit YouTube and search “Pair of Earflares, Winged Messengers”)

See this artwork in the exhibition *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas* at the J. Paul Getty Museum

This major international loan exhibition explores the idea of luxury in the pre-Columbian Americas, particularly as seen in the associations between materials and meanings, from about 1000 BC to the arrival of Europeans in the early sixteenth century. The exhibition traces the development of metallurgy in the Andes and its expansion northward into Mexico. In contrast with people in other parts of the world, ancient Americans first used metals not for weaponry, tools, or coinage but for objects of ritual and ornament, resulting in works of extraordinary creativity. In addition to objects of gold and silver, the exhibition features works of art made from shell, jade, and textiles, materials that would have been considered even more valuable than noble metals. The exhibition casts new light on the most precious works of art from the ancient Americas and provides new ways of thinking about materials, luxury, and the visual arts in a global perspective. The exhibition is coorganized with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which will present the exhibition following the Getty's presentation.



Albert Chong (Jamaica, b. 1958)
Aunt Winnie, 1995
Archival inkjet print on canvas
Courtesy of the artist
© Albert Chong



CULTURE & IDENTITY

Aunt Winnie

Albert Chong

Rituals are imbued with narratives that define cultural experience. When rituals are shared with and shaped by intersecting cultures, they create unique mixtures of customs and practices. The work of artist Albert Chong explores such intersections, using his own family as source material for the creation of his photo-collage portraits.

Aunt Winnie memorializes the life of Chong's maternal aunt, as told to him by his older sister in a letter. The tale of Aunt Winnie's life is like a novella. Born in 1914 in Clarendon, Jamaica, to a Chinese mother and Jamaican father, hers is a Cinderella story with a web of characters and a turn of events (and even a mysterious poisoning). After her mother died giving birth to her brother, Winnie lived under the care of her Aunt Lou and Papa Tom, who endured constant questioning about Winnie's biological father. Although she eventually married, Winnie never had children and always talked of adopting Chong and his older sister.

Chong honored Aunt Winnie in a photo-collage shrine by transforming an old photograph of her. He reproduced the photograph on canvas and layered a pattern of petals on top. The series of photo-collage portraits, adorned with flowers, shells, and pebbles, each recognize a different family member. The materials and technique draw on Chinese customs, as well as Obeah and Santería religious practices. His heritage is distinctly Caribbean—a mixture of cultures that have merged through the forces of colonization, trade, and industry that expresses the diversity of the Latin American experience.

Discussion Prompts for Students

- What do you see?
- What materials do you notice?
- How do the materials change and enhance the portrait?
- What do you think the relationship is between this woman and the artist?

See this artwork in the exhibition *Circles and Circuits: Chinese Caribbean Art at the Chinese American Museum*

Circles and Circuits explores the art of the Chinese Caribbean diaspora from the early twentieth century to the present day. By examining the contributions of artists of Chinese descent in Cuba, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and beyond, the exhibition reveals the hidden complexities of the transcultural art of the Caribbean. The exhibition is presented by two venues, the Chinese American Museum (CAM) and the California African American Museum (CAAM). The presentation at CAAM traces the history of Chinese Caribbean art from the 1930s through the period of the region's independence movements, showcasing the contributions of artists little known outside their own countries, such as Sybil Atteck (Trinidad and Tobago) and Manuel Chong-Neto (Panama), and providing a new context for understanding the better-known work of Wifredo Lam (Cuba). At CAM, the exhibition focuses on the work of contemporary artists such as Albert Chong and María Magdalena Campos-Pons, as well as artists of the ongoing Chinese Caribbean diaspora. The contemporary works featured explore issues of postcolonial history, popular culture, personal history, and the body.



Tlacolulokos
Tehuana 13/Woman from Tehuantepec 13, 2013
Photography: Oliver Santana
Courtesy of MUAC



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Tehuana 13/Woman from Tehuantepec 13

Tlacolulokos

Culture is a process—a continuous adaptation of traditional symbols and customs for a new generation. This couldn't be truer than for the Oaxacan culture. The food, art, clothing, and celebrations have been exported both nationally, within Mexico as a touchstone of national pride, and internationally, with strong ties to Los Angeles, home to the largest Oaxacan community outside of Oaxaca.

The Oaxacan artist collective Tlacolulokos explored the dual reality of Oaxacan culture through a summer residency with the Library Foundation of Los Angeles at the Los Angeles Public Library. The artists met Oaxacan people on the streets, learned about their migratory paths, and recorded their oral histories. They used their interviews as inspiration for portraits, such as this oil on canvas painting of a woman whose floral dress and white, fanned headpiece identify her as from the Isthmus region of Oaxaca. Traditional symbols are juxtaposed with tattoos, a bandana, and low-rider sunglasses—a nod to Chicano or Latino culture.

Portraits such as these are featured in the mural by Tlacolulokos at the Los Angeles Central Library, commissioned specifically for the library's iconic grand rotunda. The new mural is installed below and in dialogue with the rotunda's historic murals by American muralist Dean Cornwell. While the historic murals depict the pervasive narrative of the discovery of California and the founding of Los Angeles, the Tlacolulokos mural depicts the diversity of contemporary Latino, Mexican, and Oaxacan culture.

Discussion Prompts for Students

- What do you see?
- What do you notice about the woman's dress?
- What symbols or images do you see in her tattoos?
- How does her choice of style communicate something about her identity?

See this artwork in the exhibition *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in L.A.* at the Los Angeles Central Library

The Library Foundation of Los Angeles (LFLA) presents *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in L.A.*, an exhibition and associated public programs celebrating Zapotec languages and cultures as key lifelines sustaining shared cultural experience in Mexico, Los Angeles, and beyond. Zapotec is the most widely spoken indigenous language in Mexico's southern state of Oaxaca, and Los Angeles is home to the largest population of indigenous Oaxacans outside of Mexico. *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in L.A.* recognizes the importance of the Oaxacan presence in Southern California and explores contemporary realities of indigenous culture. The project includes an installation in the Los Angeles Central Library's Rotunda by Oaxacan artist collective Tlacolulokos, a short documentary by Oaxacan filmmaker Yolanda Cruz, and a series of sixty public programs across Los Angeles with visual artists, scholars, poets, and writers. Programs, many of which are multilingual, are presented as part of LFLA's acclaimed ALOUD literary and performance series and as community workshops in select locations of the Los Angeles Public Library.