

## My Spirit Animal Companion

<b>Essential Question</b>	What are spirit animal companions? If you could choose to have a spirit animal companion, what would it be? Would it be an animal that already exists, or a new kind of animal from your imagination?
<b>Grade</b>	4th
<b>Time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Art Concepts</b>	Figurine, funeral offering, sculpting, incising, carving
<b>Materials</b>	2 cups hot coffee, 2 cups all-purpose flour, ½ cup salt, one cup coffee grounds, 2 tablespoons cream of tartar, 2 tablespoons cooking oil, mixing bowl, scissors, toothpick, pen, spoon
<b>Artworks in Focus</b>	<a href="#">Dog, 200 B.C. - A.D. 500 by Artist Unknown</a> <a href="#">Dog Vessel, 200 BCE–500 CE by Artist Unknown</a>
<b>Talking about Art</b>	<p>The Nahua peoples lived in what is today west Mexico from 200 BCE to 500 CE. In their worldview, death occupied a place of utmost importance, so they were dedicated to honoring their dead.</p> <p>A distinctive feature of the cult of the dead is evident in the <b>figurines</b>, or small sculptures, found inside the tombs that abound in that area. According to Mesoamerican scholars, who study the Nahua and other cultures from this time and place, the dog figurines found in tombs</p>

were made specially for **funeral offerings**, which are art objects made specifically to be buried with people when they die.

In the tombs, dogs functioned as “guard dogs” who accompanied the deceased on their journey to the Underworld. Dogs were considered nocturnal beings that knew their way in the dark and could see spirits. The Nahua believed that upon reaching the great river of the Underworld, the spirit of the deceased person found its dog and climbed onto its back to cross the river. Dogs may be considered spirit animal companions in the afterlife because of their unique loyalty to their humans, a true sense of the phrase, “man’s best friend.”

These figurines were **sculpted** out of clay, with details added by **incising**, or **carving**, lines into the surface to give the dogs expression and feeling.

## **Making Art**

Now that we have learned about the ceramic dogs from Colima, Mexico, and their role as spirit animal companions, let’s get creative and sculpt our own version of an animal companion.

First, we will make a textured playdough that resembles a grainy, rough clay.

1. In a mixing bowl, add the all-purpose flour, salt, cooking oil, and cream of tartar.
2. Mix ingredients together.

3. Have an adult brew two cups of coffee and slowly pour the hot coffee in the mixing bowl with the rest of the ingredients.
4. Add a cup of the used coffee grounds to the mixture.
5. Using a wooden spoon, have an adult mix the hot coffee with all the ingredients in the bowl until they are completely combined. If the mixture is too sticky, add more flour in small amounts. If the mixture is too lumpy, add more water in small amounts.
6. Have an adult carefully pour the warm dough out of the mixing bowl onto a clean tabletop, and begin to knead the dough by hand until you reach a consistency similar to playdough.
7. Let the dough cool before you begin to form your spirit animal companion.

We learned that, to the Nahua, dogs were believed to be spirit animal companions to the afterlife. If you had a spirit animal companion today, what would it be? What are some of the characteristics that make your animal companion unique?

Start by kneading (or working moistened flour or clay into dough or paste with the hands); make a few small balls with the dough and begin to give your figure a head(s), a body, limbs, etc. As your figure starts taking shape, you can add textures and details like eyebrows, eyes, and mouth using scissors, toothpick, pen, and/or spoon.

**Reflection**

Now that you have created your own spirit animal companion, let's reflect on the art-making process.

What was the most challenging part about sculpting your spirit animal companion figurine? If you could make your animal again, what would you have done differently? How did you decide what your spirit companion should look like? What made you choose the animal you did? What do you like about your sculpture?

**Curriculum Connections** California Arts Standards for Public Schools—Visual Arts

4.VA:Cr2.1: Explore and invent art-making techniques and approaches. 4.VA:Re7.2: Analyze components in visual imagery that convey messages. 4.VA:Cn10: Create works of art that reflect community cultural traditions.

Prepared by Wenceslao Quiroz with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)  
Education Department

