**Mesoamerican Traditions: Community and the Ballgame**

**Essential Question** Inspired by the dynamic scenes found in early Mesoamerican ballgame models, how can we create our own three-dimensional athletic setting using recyclable cardboard materials and art supplies?

**Grade** 6–8

**Time** 60–90 minutes

**Art Concepts** aesthetic, ceramic, circular, clay, coil, composition, consistency, construct, cut, fire, form, horizontal, kiln, mold, mood, movement, paste, scene, sculpture, shape, sloping, texture, three-dimensional, vertical

**Materials** cardboard box or slabs, thin cardboard (from cereal or snack boxes) or card stock, pencil, construction paper, glue, scissor, foil, and toothpicks. For adding color: either watercolor, markers, color pencils, or crayons

**Artwork in Focus** [Ball Court Model](https://collections.lacma.org/node/253572), Nayarit, Mexico, 200 BCE–500 CE, [Vessel with Ballgame Scene](https://collections.lacma.org/node/1903380), Maya, 600–900, and the [3-D Model of the Ballcourt Model](https://skfb.ly/6TL6M)

**Talking about Art** Take a moment to observe…what can you describe about Ball Court Model? Is there anything that pops out for you about this sculpture? What are three words you can use to describe it? Can you distinguish some important features? What do you wonder about this art object?

This ball-court model from Nayarit, Mexico, depicts a lively ballgame, in which players and spectators take part in the community fun. The spectators line the side walls; some play music, cheer, and watch in anticipation. The players in the middle represent five of perhaps seven or eight other players who go after the ball like action figures suspended in time. Full of movement and play, the artist or artists uniquely sculpted every character to create a story within this dynamic setting.

What shapes and colors do you see? What does this tell you about the materials the artist might have used? Think about what things in nature form these colors and textures. How do you imagine the artist formed these shapes? What techniques may have been involved?

This three-dimensional sculpture is made of ceramic, which is a clay body that has been fired in a kiln to permanently hold its shape. Clay is composed of natural minerals, soil, and water, creating a sticky yet malleable texture. The red, white, and yellow colors are made of a type of natural clay paint called slip. Different colors in slip are created through mixing in oxides.

When observing the scene portrayed, what kind of story do you think is being told? What activity do you think is taking place? What clues about the story pop out for you? How might this event have been important to Mesoamerican cultures? Who is taking part in this type of activity? What type of characters do you see? How might the characters play a role in the composition?

The Mesoamerican ballgame has a rich history throughout the early Ancestral Americas and is still practiced today. Known as Ulama, Poktatok, and/or Tlachtli to Indigenous cultures, the game involved two teams, a rubber ball, and an open “I”-shaped construction called a ball court. Players manipulate the ball by hitting it only with their elbows, hips, or knees. The game was originally designed as a ceremonial ritual, representing the battle between day and night, but was also played for political and recreational purposes. Through primary sources and remnants of ancient ball courts, we see that different versions of the game have developed and existed over time.

Can you think of events or social activities that are important in your culture? Do people wear specific clothing for these events? How might you see people dressed during the activities? What types of celebrations occur throughout the event? Can you recall a time when you or someone you know was involved in an event like this?

**Making Art** Now that we have examined this ancient ceramic sculpture, let’s use our thoughts and imaginations and create our own athletic scene! What activity would you choose? Would you pick a sport like gymnastics, Capoeira, or football? Or perhaps you would select another group activity, such as a ballet performance on a stage, or a flash dance in an outdoor market? When thinking of your scene, what components of the activity would you need to portray? What is important to show and represent in your sculpture? How would you design these props and visuals? Allow yourself time to brainstorm ideas.

While you are making your artwork, think about:

* What shapes and structure do you need to create for your sculpture to give it a 3-D look? How can we make these shapes in a simple, fun way? Explore your options and possibilities.
* How can you create standing figures with cardboard? Experiment with making stands for your characters. In what ways can folding cardboard and/or paper help you? Think about board games, pop-up books, or models you have seen.
* What are some ways that you can create the feeling of dynamism in your artwork? How might you use 3-D components to show movement and play? How can you portray excitement in the scene?

Follow these steps for art-making:

1. Prepare your cardboard for the base of your scene
   1. Using a cardboard box or cardboard pieces, decide if you need to cut, divide, or add to your base
   2. Once pieces are prepared, use tape, glue, or even a stapler to attach the important parts of the base
   3. Consider the shapes and forms that are important to the composition when cutting and shaping
2. Decorate the base with construction paper, markers, and/or watercolor. In fact, any medium for adding color can work great!
3. If using construction paper, draw out the shapes you want to attach, cut them out with scissors then paste onto base
4. If using watercolor, play with texture by experimenting with brush strokes like swiping, splotching, dabbing, etc.
5. Prepare your thin cardboard or cardstock for the characters
6. Cut your cardboard material into small squares (a little bigger than what your characters will be and with some space for a stand). Each square will represent a character or figurine
7. Draw out a basic shape for your characters’ bodies along with their stands—the simpler the shape, the easier it will be to cut out
8. Cut out your drawn-out characters and stands
9. To cut multiple figures at a time, stack two to three pieces of cardboard/cardstock together. Make sure you pick characters that can be made as multiples
10. Decorate your characters with the medium of your choice (markers, crayons, color pencils)
11. Keep in mind who they are in relation to your storyline
12. Create details like hats, jewelry, articles of clothing, or body paint
13. Attach stands to characters
14. Use tape or paste with glue
15. If using a toothpick as a stand, tape the top of the stick to the back of your character, or paste with a piece of paper with the toothpick in the middle
16. If attached with glue, be sure to allow time to dry
17. Create any other props, structures, or decorations needed for your scene and storyline.
18. If making a ball, you can use foil or paper and crumple up in a circular shape; paste construction paper pieces onto ball with appropriate colors

Use thicker cardboard for base structures to maintain strength. Let dry and enjoy!

**Reflection** How was this process of art-making for you? What part of the project was your favorite? What did you find a bit difficult to get through? What did you learn from this activity? If you were to create something like this again, what would you do differently? How did this project relate to other subjects in school?

After learning about the early Mesoamerican ballgame, let’s reflect on similar traditions that may exist in our modern world. What community activities do you know about that involve athletics? Or what types of physical activities involve groups and working in teams? What makes traditional community events important in society? Can you think of any sports or athletic events that are common in the modern world?

**Curriculum**

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

6.VA:Cr2.1 Organize and develop artistic ideas and work

7.VA:Cn10 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

7.VA:Cn11 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with, and analysis of, art. Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and its cultural uses.

8.VA:Re8 People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism. Interpret art by analyzing how the interaction of subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, use of media, art-making approaches, and relevant contextual information contribute to understanding messages or ideas and mood conveyed.

California Common Core State Standards History—Social Science

HSS-7.7 Students compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations

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