**Sacred Gold Lesson Plan**

Pre-Hispanic Art of Mesoamerica

From: Sites of Encounter: Empires, Dave Neumann (The History Project at CSULB), 2012

**History Standards: 7.7**

2. Study the roles of people in each society, including class structures, family life, warfare, religious beliefs and practices, and slavery.

4, Describe the artistic and oral traditions and architecture in the three civilizations.

**CCSS Standards: Reading, Grade 6-8**

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

7. Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

**Writing, Grade 6-8**

1. Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

2. Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes.

9. Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis reflection, and research.

**Guiding Question:**How does the gold artistry of the Mesoamericans reveal their cultural and religious beliefs?

**Overview of Lesson:**

*The narrative in this lesson is adapted from the text on the website of the Banco de la Republica’s Museo del Oro:* [*http://www.banrepcultural.org/gold-museum*](http://www.banrepcultural.org/gold-museum)

Students will complete the reading and examine the artifacts shown n each section. Working in partners or groups, they will answer each set of questions using full sentences. Teachers should model the first set of questions in their entirety with the whole class, giving students an example to work from.

**Sacred Gold Lesson**

**Introduction: Art as a Symbol of the World**

Each civilization in the Americas developed its own “cosmology,” or belief about the universe and its laws. People viewed all of life through their society’s cosmology. The whole universe was believed to be part of one sacred, or holy, order. Traditional beliefs about death, illness, and the meaning of life were passed from one generation to the next.

Political and religious were trained from childhood about myths, sacred plants, astronomy, and important rituals. Using words, gestures, and objects, they guaranteed the well-being of society. They made sure that the natural order would continue each spring. By sitting in special positions, meditating, dancing, and practicing rituals they communicated with spirits and ancestors.

Since the entire universe was part of one sacred order, everything had meaning—plants, animals, people, and the natural environment. People used symbols to represent the meaning of particular objects. Their artistic works were filled with symbolism of their cosmology. For example, skilled metal workers often created objects of gold to symbolize the powers of the sun—as well as the idea that the power held by the rulers came from the gods.

Color, shine, texture and smell all had symbolic meanings. To control the appearance and smell of precious metals, goldsmiths developed various techniques. They mixed metals together to create alloys in many colors. They added salt or acid to part of a gold object to change its texture and make it dull. Goldsmiths carefully polished some objects with stones so they would reflect the light.

**The Cosmos**

Pre-Hispanic cosmologies told about how the universe began and how it developed. The universe had a particular order. Every living being had a place and a meaning in the universe.

In many cosmologies, the universe was made up of three worlds. Gods, ancestors, and other supernatural beings resided either in either the upper world or the underworld. These two worlds were viewed as opposites. For example, the upper world was light, while the underworld was dark. Mankind lived in the intermediate world, which combined elements from the other two worlds. The intermediate world was visible and could be touched. Though the upper world and the underworld were powerful, they were hidden from most people.

Plants and animals were classified into one of these worlds based on their shape, habitat, food, and culture. Birds symbolized the upper world. People, jaguars, and deer personified the intermediate world. The underworld was represented by bats, snakes and other creatures that lived in openings in the earth. Certain colors and smells were also associated with each level.

**Votive figure in the shape of a human being**

*This is an image shows a votive object made by craftsmen sometime between 600 and 1600 AD. A votive is an object dedicated to a god in a religious ceremony. The object is roughly 2 inches x 5 inches.*

1. What features make it look like a human being? In what ways does it not look human?
2. Why do you think it doesn’t look more like an actual human?
3. Because the design of votives like this is very rough, scholars think craftsmen produced large numbers of these objects. What does that tell you about who used votives?
4. Why might people have given votives to gods?
5. How do votive objects like this one reflect beliefs about the cosmos?

**Votive figure in the shape of a human being**

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Anthropomorphous votive figure. 13,5 x 5,5 cm. Muisca Region – Muisca Period. 600 A.D. – 1600 A.D. Cast using the lost wax method.

**Rulers**

In Indian societies, rulers were viewed as superior people. They developed many traditions to protect their honor. Looking rulers in the face was forbidden. Their feet were not allowed to touch the ground, so they were always carried by servants. They had many wives and servants. Their large homes surrounded by protective walls. When they died, they were mummified and their tombs became holy places.

Rulers were also the only ones who could wear certain ornaments. Emeralds, macaw feathers, sea shells, resins, and other foreign items gave the chiefs honor. These goods arrived from distant places through complicated trade networks. These places were unknown to most people in the society, so these trade goods seemed mysterious.

Gold was one of the most important decorative materials reserved for rulers. Because of its color, intense shine and unchanging quality, gold was associated with the sun. Gold ornaments expressed the idea that the ruler’s power came from the gods. When the chief covered himself in gold, he borrowed the life-giving power of the sun.

**Circular breastplate depicting an old man**

*This is a breastplate made by craftsmen sometime between 200 BCE and 1200 AD. A breastplate is an object that covers the chest, either for protection or for decoration. The object is nearly a foot in diameter.*

1. Scholars think the person depicted is an old man. Why might a craftsman have created that depiction for the breastplate?
2. The old man seems to be wearing an elaborate nose ring. Why might he have worn something like this?
3. Do you think this breastplate was more for protection or decoration? Why?
4. Who would have worn a breastplate like this?
5. What message would someone send by wearing this breastplate? Explain your answer.

**Circular breastplate depicting an old man**



Circular breastplate. 27,7 cm. Calima-Malagana Region – Yotoco Period. 200 B.C. – 1300 A.D.. Hammered and embossed.

**Religious Leaders**

Indians viewed many events as supernatural. A disaster was caused by an angry spirit and sickness was sent by an enemy. To control these dangerous forces, people looked to a *shaman*, sometimes called a priest or medicine man.

Shamans were responsible for making offerings in holy places. The spirits revealed the appropriate time and place for the gift, as well as the kind of gift they expected. Offerings included gold, emeralds, coca, birds, and human beings. These sacrifices were seen as spiritual food that pleased the gods.

Shamans used gold objects as offerings to the gods. These gold objects were extremely important religious symbols. The shaman offered them up in lakes and caves, where communication was possible with other worlds. These offerings helped to restore balance in the world. The metal cycle was completed: metal had been taken from the earth, shaped by humans, and then returned to the earth as a gift to the gods.

**Pendant in the shape of a person-animal**

*This is a pendant made by craftsmen sometime between 900 and 1600 AD. A pendant is an object that hangs from a necklace. The object is roughly 4 inches horizontally and vertically.*

1. How would you describe the pendant?
2. What features make him seem like he is not entirely human?
3. Why might this pendant have been uncomfortable to wear?
4. Who would have worn an object like this? Why would someone have worn this?
5. Scholars think the person depicted here is a shaman. If so, what message does this pendant communicate about shamans?

**Pendant in the shape of a person-animal**



Anthropo-zoomorphous pendant. 9,5 x 11,90 cm. Tairona Region – Tairona Period. 900 A.D. – 1600 A.D.. Cast using the lost wax method.

**Life after Death**

Death was believed to be either a rebirth or a change into another being. In some traditions, people's souls were reincarnated in a descendant, an animal, tree, or stone. According to other traditions, the dead were reborn in tombs, caves or burial mounds. The dead remained near their relatives and were involved in their lives. Living relatives talked to the dead and looked after them, for example by leaving food.

Dead rulers, covered in gold and sometimes mummified, were kept under small mounds or in temples or caves. These visible sites reminded people that the living ruler was related to his memorable ancestors. Gold funeral masks and ornaments covered the ruler’s remains.

Since this metal never changed appearance, it symbolically showed the immortality and power of the ruler. Dead rulers could go on taking part in the life of their community. The mummies of some chieftains were displayed at ceremonies and in wars, where their powers protected the community and instilled courage in the warriors.

**Heart-shaped breastplate**

*This is a breastplate made by craftsmen sometime between 200 BCE and 1600 AD. A breastplate is an object that covers the chest, either for protection or for decoration. The object is roughly 5 inches by 7 inches.*

1. How would you describe this object?
2. Scholars think that it was designed to look like a heart. Why might the craftsman have used this shape for this object?
3. This was buried with a leader. Why do you think everyday people weren’t buried this way?
4. What does this object communicate about the dead ruler?
5. What does this object communicate about the religious beliefs of the people who created it?

**Heart-shaped breastplate**

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Heart-shaped breastplate. 13,6 x 17,9 cm. Zenú Region –Zenú Tradition. 200 B.C. – 1600 A.D.. Cast using the lost wax method and hammered.

**Animal-Human Relations**

There is no major difference in many Amerindian cosmologies between humans and non-humans. Animals, plants, rocks and objects are “people.” They all have a soul or spirit. They live in communities, harvest food, live in homes, and dance like men.

Each “people” type has its own unique way of viewing the world. This unique perspective is determined by its body. Amerindians viewed animal bodies as clothing that could be removed or changed whenever the animal chose.

Shamans could become other “people” or animals by putting a "second skin" of feathers, paint, or special clothing. In this way, they received the abilities of crocodiles, humming birds, plants, ancestors or gods. For example, by changing themselves into birds like condors, they acquired sharp eyesight, the ability to fly, and hunting skills.

The jaguar has long been a symbol of power in Amerindian societies. The jaguar-shaman wore jaguar skins, painted his body to imitate animal spots, wore a tail, and let his nails grow long. As a jaguar, he received strength, speed, and aggressiveness. He protected and healed his people, or took revenge on his enemies.

**Breastplate in the shape of a person-animal**

*This is a breastplate made by craftsmen sometime between 200 BCE and 1600 AD. A breastplate is an object that covers the chest, either for protection or for decoration. The object is roughly 5 inches by 7 inches.*

1. How would you describe this object?
2. Scholars think that it was designed to look like a jaguar. Why might the craftsman have depicted the jaguar this way?
3. Why might a shaman have worn an object like this?
4. What does this object communicate about the shaman who wore it?
5. What does this object communicate about the religious beliefs of the people who created it?

**Breastplate in the shape of a person-animal**

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Anthropo-zoomorphous breastplate. 28,5 x 15 cm. Tolima Region – Middle Tolima Period. 1 A.D. – 700 A.D. Cast using the lost wax method and hammered.