

Illuminated Skeleton Sculptures: Celebrating Mexican El Día de los Muertos
Hamilton International Middle School, Seattle, with Nathan Kumar Scott

Arts Area: visual arts

Grade level: grades 6 – 8, in mixed grade groupings

Time frame: 6 sessions of 90 minutes each (80 minutes instruction; 10 minutes transition), to include one session of cultural introduction and five sessions of arts instruction. The time frame for this project has been adapted to fit the HIMS schedule and budget. This time frame is the minimum required to complete this project; it could be extended for 1-2 additional instructional sessions.

Project focus: In this class, students will make sculptural lanterns, using colors and images from the Mexican celebration of El Día de los Muertos. They will create 3D sculptural forms out of bamboo, wire, tissue paper and acrylic emulsion/white glue, and illuminate them with low-watt electric light bulbs.

Resources and Materials Needed*:

Slide projector & screen for introduction	
Bamboo slats / split bamboo (different widths)	plenty
Tissue paper (or hand made/ decorative paper)	all colors
Acrylic emulsion (better alternative)	1-2 gal
Or white glue (cheaper)	1-2 gal
Sumi brushes (4-5 “shaft,” about 2” wide)	one per person
Low-watt lightbulbs (15 or 40 watts)	1-2 per sculpture
Outdoor floodlight kits (with plug, wire, and light socket attached; URL-rated)	1 per bulb
Tape (electrical/ strapping/ duct)	several rolls
Balloons (different sizes - optional)	several bags
Scissors	1 per person
Tarps/ table covering	several
Wire-cutters/ tin snips	2-3
Needle-nose pliers	2-3
Salsa containers/ plastic cups	1-2 per person
Clothes line	several

*This project will serve approximately two hundred students, in six classes, who will work in collaborative groups to produce five sculptures (6’ – 7’ high) per class. Modify this list if students are working in smaller groups or on individual sculptures.

Learning Goals, keyed to Arts EALRs and Frameworks for grades 6/8:

Goal 1: Students will learn about traditions associated with Días de los Muertos [4.4] and will apply techniques from Mexican folk arts [1.3].

- A. Students will learn about the use of warm, intense colors in this tradition.
- B. Students will learn about the impact of a seminal artist, José Guadalupe Posada, and his immediately popular, reproducible images.

- C. Students will learn how 2D techniques of graphic arts were translated into the Mexican papier maché 3D tradition.
- D. Students will understand the difference between participation in a tradition and plagiarism [3.1].
- E. Students will learn how personal aesthetic choices are affected by the context of a tradition [3.3]

Goal 2: Students will identify color attributes (hue, value, and intensity) and will learn how value is affected by source and variables of illumination [1.1.1] Students will learn how to illuminate a lantern safely.

Goal 3: Students will apply a creative process [2.1] by making a sculptural form [1.1.1].

- A. Students will use techniques of layering [1.1.1].
- B. Students will explore proportion in creating skeletal forms of humans and animals [1.1.2].
- C. Students will use balance, exaggeration, and simplification in developing the sculptural figure [1.2].
- D. Students will use a variety of media in combination [1.2].
- E. Students will present work for display [1.2].

Goal 4: Students will demonstrate collaborative skills in creating a group sculpture [4.5].

Residency Plan:

Session one: introduction to El Día de los Muertos

The teaching artist, Nathan Kumar Scott, will introduce students to illuminated sculptural arts through a slide presentation of lantern building techniques and Mexican Días de los Muertos aesthetics. Groups will be established, and students will then begin designing the armature of their skeletal sculptures on paper.

Session two: construction

Student groups will begin construction of the armature.

Session three: construction and modeling

Student groups will finish construction of the armature and will begin adding tissue paper “skin” to the sculpture.

Session four: modeling and decoration

Student groups will continue adding layers of tissue paper, and will decorate with detailed patterns on final layer.

Session five: completion of sculptures

Session six: rigging and hanging the sculptures for display.

Assessment Strategies

- Instructor assessment: the teaching artist and the visual arts teacher will mutually develop a simple checklist/rubric to assess the formal and practical (durability, rigging) success of each group's sculpture (see separate document).
- Student assessment: each group will use the checklist/rubric (above) to assess the formal and practical success of its own sculpture, and that of one other group.

Key Vocabulary

color terms, above (hue, value intensity)

armature: frame

dimension (2D vs 3D): depth (can the sculpture be viewed from the side and still be recognizable?)

functionality: 3D structure is built so that it holds together

inversion: layered colors replied in inverse order, because of internal rather than external source of illumination

proportion: body parts in relation to each other

vantage point: point from which the sculpture is intended to be viewed (are eyes visible, and directed toward the viewer?)

Teaching artist: Nathan Kumar Scott

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