

**Description:** This is a shortened version of basic research done for a larger process journal which surrounded a personal study into Mexican folk art. This was done for a course, which also included lesson planning, budgeting, and a few weeks of classes conducted with elementary school students. This was situated as a section of personal research within the planning of an educational program, the schedule, and photographs of the project, and an overview of the course, research, planning, and overall process. This was for the ART 410 class, and my professor was Katherine Smith.

When doing research and brainstorming ideas for a project surrounding Oakhurst Elementary and the theme of animals, I wanted to turn towards folk art. It's a form of art that interests me, especially in terms of the process of creation. As I was brainstorming, I worked with my personal experiences. One of the most formative experiences I had was at the Chalk the Block, right near the line between El Paso Texas and Juarez, and I feel that communities around art and the creation of art are some of my key interests, and this project became a way to develop my interests. For this study, I will be studying the creation and presentation of alebrijes, as they relate to themes of community and education.

An alebrije is a Mexican, Oaxacan specifically, type of sculpture or painting that centers around animals and their depiction in colorful and imaginative ways. This practice of sculpture began being sold in a very widespread way in the 1960s, and is mythically known for being the result of a literal fever dream. An artist, known for pioneering the stylings and creation of alebrijes, dreamed while feverish, of a multitude of colorful animals. These animals loomed out of a darkened forest, and were seemingly tormenting the artist, calling "*alebrije, alebrije!*" From this, the artist created a wide practice of combining animals, colors, elements, and many other themes. Traditionally two categories, known as tonas y nahuales (Weaving and Sustainability),

the newer and most widely recognized form of the art, the alebrijes, are an “alliance between the modern and traditional” in artesanía, artisan work in Oaxaca.

Woodcarving as a whole is a tradition that spans across time, as well as many different groups. Each group may have had their own ideas to work with, and a good space to create something unique, but all end up with a meaningful trinket to use, admire, or advertise with. Wood carving is something that can have a wide variation of styles and skill levels, as the practice can be taught in occupational therapy, as well as to younger audiences or to untrained artists. The wood is brought to life in an artist's hands, as an ornamental piece on a ship, a sign, or a carved figurine to be bought, sold, and traded. A special interest in relation to alebrijes are the simplistic carved figures, human and animals, that are used as children's toys. Typically from an older era, these toys are typically simplistic, allowing the imagination of the child to take hold of the small carved figures. The artists strive to achieve simple, blunt edges to allow for safe play. The care in the details and in the safety of these makes them unique art pieces, especially when comparing them to alebrijes.

Woodcarving in alebrijes, especially in those made of wood rather than paper mache, is a fairly clear link. In addition, when referencing specifically wood carving in children's toys, there is a stronger bond between wood carving and alebrijes. This is because, at the art's center, its primary themes are centered around imagination and a childlike wonder with the way the world works and the way we perceive it. Woodcarving requires an artist to look at their materials, and to assess what they can do with it, and how they plan to shape their creations, as do alebrijes. While imagination of the audience comes into play with children's toys in their validity and role as an animal, or other living creature, usually anthropomorphized, an alebrije is brought to life in color, detail, and addition of natural elements, as well as the imagination of the artist. This can be

interpreted as an exertion of the will of the audience on the piece, as each person comes to observe the piece with new interpretations, new stories, and new aspects of life for these inanimate objects. As each creature becomes its own being, the audience breathes their lives and stories into these creatures. In addition, whether through the audience's eyes and play, or through artistic intention, both are a reflection of sorts of the natural world. Wooden carved figures commonly represent people or animals that an audience would know, and find special and noteworthy. The animals are found in nature, and typically have a few defining features that allow their audience to identify them. Alebrijes have a different kind of natural connection, through a set of animals, cultural markings that relate back to the natural world, and colors and elements that are related back to a natural world. While the alebrijes have a more complex and nuanced relationship to the natural world, both have a solid connection to nature and representations of our perception of the natural world.

Some artists have moved to other forms of wood as the supply of copal wood becomes more scarce in neighboring communities. Some still use the limited amounts of copal left, and outsource from people stealing from reserves, while others switch to more ethical means of production, focusing on other forms of wood while replenishing areas of copal forest. There are even branches of alebrije production that promote themselves as ethically sourced with tags, something growing in popularity, with tropical cedar and tzompantli at the forefront of this movement. There are multiple organizations, such as Palo Que Habla that are community outreach programs that take volunteers to keep copal trees protected and growing, while also educating people in their community about preservation. These organizations can cater to anyone, whether they are adults, travelers, or even children.

Connecting back to themes of community and education, is the conservation of copal wood in communal spaces. There have been many groups operating in Mexico in areas where copal wood grows that band their communities together to support the conservation of copal. These people tend to notice the changes in their community and their natural landscape, and observe the historical trends of depletion of copal and forest recovery, and work to save their natural landscape. This is something that students can grow to learn and appreciate from the simplistic imagination of the alebrijes: behind these movements are communities that work together and support each other in meaningful ways and come together, not in a cultural way that can be observed from afar, but from the unifying sense of understanding between people working to preserve the environment in whatever way possible. As one of the commonly cited drawbacks of a focus on cultures can be alienation, this serves as a point of common understanding and connection. While “othering” can be a common pitfall of many forms of art, a common point of understanding with a community can be valuable to seeing and understanding another culture for many students.

Storytelling also allows for the establishment and understanding of identity and culture. This is particularly important for students, and can be utilized not only to allow for a focus on white students, but can be extended to students of color as well. When considering specifically Mexican and Zapotec cultures, storytelling and oral tradition are a large part of the culture and the community to be shared. In addition, there tends to be a notion of understanding one’s ancestors, and what they might have wanted or imagined for their children. It is considered a part of understanding one’s legacy. From storybooks and storytelling to popular movies about hispanic culture and heritage, students are able to access wider and wider amounts of cultural understanding and information as these stories become more and more widely distributed, and

cater to a wider audience. The introduction of alebrijes into a learning environment highlights not only imaginative stories, writing, and speaking, but also connects students of color, particularly Latine students, to their roots and their culture at an early age. This would allow for a greater educational connection, particularly for these students.

One of the largest foreseeable benefits to these types of programs is the greater acceptance and lessening of discrimination that nonwhite students face. As many classroom studies show, there is a much higher rate of bias towards nonwhite students in classrooms, which leads to both an institutional placement problem as well as a lack of motivation in students that pick up on and understand this bias. The bias can take the form of a teacher, as they assume less of their students of color, or give them less attention, or even choose to show another type of body language towards the children. This can all impact a child's mental health, and also is less than encouraging in the classroom. As these children are given up on, or forced into special education programs that may or may not help, the need for teachers to understand their implicit and explicit bias grows. One of the many types of study that can help to analyze these impacts is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which forms image and word associations to assess a level of bias present in teachers and students. This test allows others to understand the implicit bias that the teacher approaches with, and to address and mitigate behavior towards students. While the test itself is not a solution, the implementation of a program explaining the benefits and beauty of art from another culture and perspective can be relevant and important. When teaching Mexican folk art, the students easily have a connection, but it also provides the teacher an opportunity to understand their students, their learning style, and to take time to unpack any preconceived biases about themselves and their students.