

Explore More—The Oral Traditions and Architecture of the Mesoamerican Empires

Directions: Listen to your teacher talk about the oral and artistic traditions and architecture of the people of Mesoamerica—the Maya, Aztecs, and Inca. Refer to the world map in your Explore Geography Picture Dictionary to locate Mesoamerica. Circle any words in the text that you don't understand. Underline or highlight important ideas in the text. Write notes in the margins to help you understand key points. Then answer the questions in your own words.

Mesoamerican Oral Traditions

Each Mesoamerican civilization had its own wealth of oral traditions. One important source for the oral traditions of the Maya is the *Popul Vuh*, which means “Council Book.” The *Popul Vuh* is a 9,000-line poem of songs and stories that describes the Maya belief system and way of life, beginning with their account of creation. The *Popul Vuh* wasn't written down until 30 years after the Spanish arrived in the area.

Aztecs used pictures to record stories and events in their history. They painted these pictures on long strips of bark paper that were made into books called codices. The writings of the Aztecs did not provide word-for-word accounts of stories and events, but gave a general outline of important points. Aztec storytellers would fill in the details when they told the stories aloud.

The Inca did not have a system of writing so they relied on oral language to pass on values and traditions. Descendants of the ancient Inca still follow many of the traditions that were orally passed down to them through the generations.

Mesoamerican Artistic Traditions

The people of Mesoamerica were very creative. There were Maya craft makers who produced pottery and baskets. They used colorful feathers from the quetzal bird to decorate Maya shields, headdresses, and other objects. Archaeologists also have found carvings of important people, like Lady Kanal-Ikal, who was ahau (ruler) of Palenque.

The Aztecs used art, literature, music, and dance to enhance religious ceremonies and events. They also created stone sculptures, wrote stories that

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were told by storytellers, and wrote songs. Some of the songs told about the power of the Aztec empire. The Aztec way of life, including the Aztecs' social structure, culture, and religious rituals, is depicted in the drawings and paintings they left behind.

Inca artisans produced beautiful cloth and jewelry. Sometimes they used these items to dress the mummies of Inca nobles. All three civilizations, the Maya, Aztecs, and Inca, played musical instruments such as drums, rattles, gongs, bells, and cymbals.

Mesoamerican Architectural Traditions

Maya builders created massive stone structures such as the palace in Palenque. These beautiful buildings were constructed without the benefit of iron tools.

Find Palenque on the map in your textbook. (HINT: Use the Index to find the pages that relate to Palenque.)

The houses where most people lived were simple one-room dwellings built with palm leaves or other plants. In the center of town, however, there were plazas, stone temples, and superb structures where priests and nobles lived.

In the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs built impressive temples and palaces in bright colors—red, blue, and orange-yellow.

Look in the historical anthology for a map that shows where the ancient city of Tenochtitlan was located.

Archaeologists can tell that the Aztecs used advanced technology to build their structures. Aztec builders needed to know about mathematics and construction to prepare the building materials and fit them together so that the structures were strong and stable. Aztec builders also needed precise tools to cut the stones the right way.

The Inca city of Machu Picchu is a grand maze of stone structures built high up in the mountains in modern-day Peru. People who study Machu Picchu are still amazed by how well Inca architects and builders were able to fit the stones of the buildings together so well.

Find a picture of Machu Picchu in the historical anthology.

In the Inca city of Cuzco, Inca builders created observatories to watch the stars and planets. Cuzco was protected from invaders by a huge fort that Incas built into a hill by the city. ❖

YOUR TURN!

Write your answers to the following questions.

1. Describe Mesoamerican oral traditions.

2. Describe Mesoamerican artistic traditions.

3. Describe Mesoamerican architectural traditions.

Questions for further discussion:

- Using your textbook, historical anthology, and the *Explore Geography Picture Dictionary*, explain the historical expansion and disintegration of the Mesoamerican civilizations you have learned about.
- Discuss the sources of historical continuity in Mesoamerica. How did the combination of ideas and events explain the emergence of new patterns?
- What would you like to know more about in terms of Mesoamerican art, oral traditions, and architecture? Frame questions that you can answer by historical study and research. Conduct this research and discuss your findings.