Using Art to Promote Dignity and Human Rights for Indigenous Women and Men

Rita E. Moran, City College of San Francisco

English Composition Lessons Using the Maya Woman Collection

These paintings by contemporary Tz’utuhil and Kaqchikel Maya painters of Guatemala can serve as powerful prompts for discussion and composition. For more information on specific paintings, go to MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html and double-click on the image in question. See the commentary provided below the picture.

You are also invited to schedule an exhibition of 12 to 60 paintings from the Maya Woman collection at your college or university. Fees are waived for educational institutions.

Lesson 1: How Do We Read a Portrait?

Go to www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html. Find the artist Felipe Ujpan Mendoza, and display his painting El Viajero / The Traveler.

a. Present the vocabulary:

- **portrait**: a representation of a person or group of people
- **facial expression**: the way the different parts of the face work together to show emotion
- **gesture**: what the person does with his or her hands
- **posture**: the position of the body
- **setting**: the place or environment in which the sitter is shown
- **attire**: the clothing the person in the portrait is wearing
- **props**: the things the person is holding or is surrounded by

NOTE: Some of these lessons have been adapted from *Language through Art: An ESL Enrichment Curriculum*, Education Department of the J. Paul Getty Museum.
b. Explain to students that they can “read” the story of this portrait by examining each of these six aspects.

   c. Ask students to work in pairs and discuss each aspect of the portrait. Write a few sentences to describe how each word relates to something they see in the picture.

   d. Finally, ask them to talk about the story that is being presented in the portrait, and then briefly write the story.

   e. Ask volunteers to share their story with the class.

Lesson 2: Writing an Interview

Go to www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html. Find the artist Mario González Chavajay, and display his painting *Los Sin Tierra / The Landless Ones.*

   a. Have students, working in pairs, imagine that they are newspaper reporters and that their assignment is to interview this woman. Students can imagine possible answers based on careful observation of the people, the setting, and the props.

   b. Ask students to research displacement of indigenous peoples in Central America, and then rewrite the interview, including details from actual incidents. Have them provide references to the news stories or other sources from which they drew their information.

   Alternatively, have the students read the article, “Violent Evictions in Polochic,” at www.ghrc-usa.org/Resources/2011/Violent_evictions_in_Polochic.htm, and then write the interview.

   c. Ask students to perform their interviews for the class.
Lesson 3: Writing a Love Letter

Go to www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html. Find the artist Domingo García Criado, and display his painting Pedrana Trabajadora / Hardworking Woman of San Pedro la Laguna.

Imagine that you are this woman. What is her life like? Where is her husband? Write a love letter that she might send to him.

- Tell him where you are, and what time it is.
- Describe your surroundings. What do you see and smell and hear?
- What are the children doing?
- How do you feel?
- What do you hope for the future?
Lesson 4: How Does a Painting Tell a Story?

Go to www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html. Find the artist Juanita López and display her painting *El Rapto / The Kidnapping*.

A. What’s the End of the Story?

   a. In small groups, have the students select one person to be the recorder, and one the reporter. The others are the detectives.

   b. Explain that the group needs to figure out what’s going on in this story, and make up an ending for it. The detectives should come up with a list of three questions they would ask the artist to learn more about the story. The recorder should take notes on the discussion. The reporter will present the group’s findings to the class.

   c. Discussion questions:
      - What do you think is happening in this work of art?
      - What do you see that makes you think that?
      - Describe the relationship between the different characters.
      - Where does the scene take place?
      - What do you think happened ten minutes before this scene?
      - What do you think will happen ten minutes later?
      - What are three questions you could ask the artist who made this picture to find out more about the story?

   d. Ask reporters to present their findings to the class.

B. Follow-up Research

Have the students research and write about violence against women in Central America and Mexico. For example, they can visit web sites of any of these organizations:

- Amnesty International
- Guatemala Human Rights Commission
- Network in Support of the People of Guatemala
- Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador
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ESL Lessons Using the Maya Woman Collection

These paintings by contemporary Tz’utuhil and Kaqchikel Maya painters of Guatemala can serve as powerful prompts for communication. For more information on specific paintings, go to MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html and double-click on the image in question. See the commentary provided below the picture.

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Communication

Levels 1-3:

These exercises are for pair or small group communication. Students should choose a painting that they find interesting, and talk about it.

FOR EXAMPLE: In the Gallery, find the artist María Teodora Mendez de González and click on her painting Convivio Familiar / Family Gathering.

1. Happy or sad?
   - Is this a happy painting?
   - Is it a sad painting?
   - Is it an angry painting?
   - What is beautiful?
   - What is ugly?
2. What are they doing?
   - Point to a man. What is he doing?
   - Point to a woman. What is she doing?
   - Point to an animal. What is it doing?

3. Count:
   - How many people are in the painting?
   - How many animals are in the painting? What kind of animals are they?
   - How many houses are in the painting? What are the houses made of?

4. Look at the people:
   - What are they wearing?
   - Are they wearing traditional clothes?
   - Are they wearing modern clothes?
   - What are they wearing on their feet?
   - Are there old people in the painting?
   - Are there children in the painting?
   - Are there babies in the painting?

5. Colors:
   - Point to something blue. How do you say this in English?
   - Point to something red. How do you say this in English?
   - Point to something yellow. How do you say this in English?
   - Point to something green. How do you say this in English?

6. The same or different:
   - What is the same as in your country?
   - What is different?

**Level 4 and above:**

A. Make up a conversation.

1. In the Gallery, find the artist Matías González Chavajay. Look at the painting in which a young man and a young woman are sitting at a table with their families. The name of this painting is *La Pedida / The Request.*
2. In a small group, have each student choose a person in the picture.
   - Who is the young man? The young woman? What is their request?
   - Who are their parents? Who is the person in the middle?
   - Imagine the conversation that these people are having. What does each person say?
     
     Perform your conversation for the class.

B. Work with a partner.

1. Student 1: Choose a painting that you like. Describe the painting to your partner, but
don’t tell your partner which one it is.
2. Student 2: Draw the picture that your partner describes.
3. Now compare the drawing with the original painting.
4. Change roles. Student 2 describes a painting, and Student 1 draws.

**Level 6 and above**

A. Choose a painting that reminds you of daily life, or a celebration, or a problem in your
own culture. What is different in your culture? What is the same? Write about it, or
discuss it with a partner.

B. What do these paintings reveal about the lives of indigenous women in Central America?
   - Do women in your country have similar problems?
   - Do they have similar joys?
   - How is life different for women in the U.S.?
   - How is it similar?

**Writing**

A. In the Gallery, find a painting that you like. Choose a person in the painting who looks
interesting. Imagine this person’s life. Make up a story about the person:
   - Who is this person? Describe him/her.
   - What is this person doing now? How does he/she feel?
   - What did this person do yesterday?
   - What will the person do tomorrow?

B. Teacher chooses an artist with several paintings in the collection.

1. Individual students write descriptions of particular paintings.
2. Individuals read the descriptions one by one, and the class figures out which painting
is being described.
Grammar

In the Gallery, find the artist Pedro Rafaél González Chavajay. Look at all of his paintings. Find the one that shows a whole town of people with lots of corn. The name of this painting is *Blessing of the Corn*.

![Image of a painting showing a town with people and corn]

**A. Present Continuous**

What are the people doing? Write 8 sentences about things they are doing right now.

Example: The women are carrying baskets.

**B. Prepositions of Location**

For each question, use one of these words to write a complete sentence:

above behind over in
below in front of under on

Example: Where are the houses?
The houses are behind the people.

1. Where is the soup?
2. Where are the water jugs?
3. Where are the musicians?
4. Where are the cooks?
5. Where is the fire?
6. Where is the yellow corn?
7. Where is the red corn?
8. Where are the candles?

**C. There is / There are**

What do you see in this painting? Write 8 sentences, using there is / there are.

Example: There are four candles in the painting.