

CITY OF SAN JOSE'S Arts Express Program Presents:

Aztlan Academy

Nuestra Navidad

Teacher Guide

Grades 4-8

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About the Artist

The Aztlan Academy is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to the advancement of Mexican and Chicano Folk Arts. Aztlan Academy's artistic vision is to nurture Mexican and Chicano Folk Arts, provide opportunities and the environment where they can be learned, performed, and appreciated by people of all ages. Aztlan's performance program professionally showcases the artists of Aztlan Dance Troupe, founded in 1966 in Tulare County, and guest performers. The Academy also runs classes and workshops in Mexican and Chicano Folk Arts, offers workshops in the schools, and encourages the exploration and exchange of artistic knowledge on the international level through lectures and seminars.

The Academy was founded in 1972 by Javier H. Salazar, a folklorist, dancer, choreographer, designer, singer, writer, and community activist born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. He studied for the priesthood as a youth, later traveled extensively and learned to dance in the rural communities of 14 regions of Mexico while working as a secretary, fisherman, cane cutter, sanitary inspector, rural teacher, vocalist, and percussionist. Without formal dance training, Javier has composed over 300 folk dance pieces since 1960. He has produced hundreds of dance workshops and concerts in the United States.

About the Program

"Nuestra Navidad-A Family Christmas", a suite of songs and dances from diverse regions of Mexico, depicts the celebration of Christmas through distinct regional cultural traditions. Christmas fandangos, or celebrations, are the manifestations of the diversity of the Mexican community and culture. "Nuestra Navidad" celebrates the importance of family.

Learning Objectives

Students will--

- Develop an understanding of the diverse cultural traditions of Mexico through ritual, celebration, music, and dance;
- Learn how the Christmas tradition evolved in Mexico as a mixture of Christian traditions introduced by the Spanish and rituals of the indigenous Mexican people;
- Reflect on the meaning of the winter holidays as a celebration of family, community, and culture.

Historical and Cultural Context

A History of the Christmas Tradition in Mexico

- The Spanish converted millions of Mexicans to Christianity in the 16th Century. Christmas, a religious ritual of central importance in Christian Europe, became a holiday celebrated in Mexico.
- The Christmas celebration in Mexico was rooted in the Spanish tradition, but absorbed elements of the rituals of the indigenous (native) cultures. Mexican yuletide festivities today are an integrated expression of regional folk customs: the indigenous cultures have influenced the Christian faith.
- The celebration of the Birth of Jesus (El Nacimiento del Niño Dios) has been interpreted by diverse cultures within Mexico according to their local environments and natural resources.
- In villages and urban neighborhoods throughout Mexico youngsters gather each afternoon to reenact the holy family's quest for lodging in Bethlehem. The procession is headed by the *Virgen María* (Virgin Mary), often perched on a live burro, led by a San José (Joseph). They are followed by other children portraying angels, the *Santos Reyes* (Three Kings), and a host of *pastores y pastoras* (shepherds and shepherdesses), all usually decked out in colorful handmade costumes and carrying brightly decorated *báculos* (walking staffs) or *faroles* (paper lanterns). The parade goes from house to house asking for shelter, and are turned away; at the third house they are told that while there is no room in the *posada* (inn), they are welcome to take refuge in the stable. The doors are flung open and all are invited to enter.
- Holiday festivities culminate on *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve) with the celebration of a late-night *Misa de Gallo* (Rooster's Mass). Afterwards families head home for a traditional Christmas supper. The evening ends with the opening of gifts and, for the children, *piñatas* and *lucos de Belen* (sparklers). December 25th is set aside as a day to rest .
- Santa Claus and his reindeer are not a part of Mexican Navidad. Mexican children ask *el Niño Dios* (the Holy Child) for Christmas Eve gifts.

History of the Poinsettia

- The Poinsettia flower, which is now a common symbol of Christmas in the United States, originated in Mexico.
- Poinsettias (which are called Flor de Noche Buena, or “Christmas Eve Flower” in Spanish, and Cuetlaxochitl, or star flower, in Nahuatl, a native language of Central Mexico) have been cultivated in the Mexico’s Central Valley. Among pre-Hispanic tribes of ancient Mexico, the *Cuietlaxochitl*’s petals were often placed on the chests of those suffering afflictions of the heart to help stimulate circulation. They were also sometimes crushed to a pulp to be used for the treatment of skin infections.
- When the Spanish introduced Christianity, and the Christmas holiday, to Mexico, Mexican people introduced the tradition of filling churches with Poinsettia flowers. Today the flower is a symbol of the development of Mexican cultural and religious traditions as an amalgamation of European Christian traditions and indigenous celebration and ritual.

Preparation for the Program

1. Review “A History of the Christmas Tradition in Mexico” with your students. Ask them the following questions:

- Do you celebrate a winter holiday? If so, which one?
- Which traditions or rituals are part of that celebration for you and your family?
- Which rituals do you have in common with your classmates? Which are different or unique?

2. Ask students if they are familiar with the Poinsettia flower. Ask them where they think it came from. Review the “History of the Poinsettia” with them, and pass around pictures of various Mexican holiday ornaments/decorations. Have students look out for different flower arrangements during the presentation.

3. Locate the states of Mexico on the map. Talk about the indigenous and mestizo cultural traditions from these areas. Invite Mexican students in the class to share information about their culture (what part of Mexico they or their families came from, traditions) if they would like.

4. Have the students create a class pinata. Blow up a large balloon and cover with strips of newspaper soaked in a flour and water paste (papier mache), leaving a small opening. Create four construction paper cones and attach to the outside of the balloon shape. Cover the cones with papier mache. Let dry, then pop the balloon inside. Fill the pinata with candy, fruit, or toys, and cover the opening with more papier mache. Paint the outside, and hang up so that students can take turns trying to break the pinata.

Curriculum Connections

Note: The California Visual and Performing Arts Standards were created based on the premise that each student is receiving comprehensive and sequential arts instruction in all four major arts disciplines.

Standards for “Nuestra Navidad” are taken from the music and dance disciplines.

Historical and Cultural Context

3.1 (Grade 2) Identify the uses of specific music in daily or special events.

3.2 (Grade 4) Name the musical accompaniment and explain how it relates to the dances they have studied.

3.3 (Grade 5) Select traditional dances that men, women, or children perform and explain the purpose(s) of the dances.

3.4 (Grade 2) Describe dances seen in celebrations and community events.

3.4 (Grade 3) Describe how costumes and shoes influence dance movement.

Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 (Grade 3) Explain and demonstrate what it means to be a good audience member.

Connections, Relationships, Applications

5.1 (Grade 5) Explain the role of music in community events.

5.1 (Grade 5) Describe how historical events relate to dance forms.