Overview of the Unit:
The Mayas of the Classic Period left detailed records of their history in the form of sculptures on monuments and buildings, decorations on vessels, and writings in codices (books). By examining these monuments and texts, scholars have been able to identify the leaders and important events of these societies and learn about the beliefs and practices of their cultures. However, these sources have often been misinterpreted in popular culture leading to misunderstandings about ancient Maya societies.

In this unit, students will examine examples of ancient Maya murals in order to learn about some Pre-Columbian societies of Mesoamerica and to gain insights into how public monuments and works of art are used to create historical narrative and establish identities. Students will also examine the Maya writing system to gain a sense of its complexity. Spanish vocabulary will emphasize physical description, seasons and weather, family, and colors. In addition, vocabulary will be introduced to help students talk about ancient Maya culture and history, including terms needed to talk about the works of art. Finally, students will create a personal narrative by writing and illustrating a codex in Spanish.

The teacher can adapt the activities in this unit to accommodate the readiness level of students studying Spanish at the elementary or intermediate level, according to the proficiency guidelines of the course.

Unit Teaching Objects:
Students will develop an understanding of the following concepts:

- The history of a people is developed through the creation of historical narratives which present an established interpretation of events of the present or the past.
• The rulers of a society create public monuments and works of art to validate their
terpretation of historical events.
• Myth and narrative play an important role in creating the identity of a people.
• The culture of a people is a complex creation of shared beliefs, practices, and products
which may be transmitted in a variety of ways.
• Effective communication in Spanish depends on the appropriate selection of vocabulary,
accurate use of verb tenses, and control of grammar structures and syntax.

Unit Essentials Questions:
Students will explore the following questions:
• How is history created?
  • How do historical narratives shape our understanding of historical figures and events?
  • How are historical figures and events presented in the public sphere?
  • What can we learn about history from examining authentic sources?
• How are identities created?
  • What is the importance of myth and narrative in creating the identity of a people?
  • How do the products of a society, including works of art and written texts, reflect the
beliefs and practices of a people?
• What are the elements of effective communication in Spanish?
  • What thematic vocabulary is appropriate to present information on a specific topic?
  • Which verb tenses are appropriate to relate events in the present, past, or future?
  • How does the correct use of grammar structures and syntax support clear and coherent
communication?
Curricular Lessons

Lesson 1: Todos cuentan historias

Lesson Specific Objectives:
Upon examining the mural art from Bonampak and San Bartolo students will:

- Examine the figures and activities in the murals and describe what they see in order to gain knowledge of historical events and mythological narratives from a primary source.
- Respond to questions in order to interpret the significance of the events depicted in the murals.
- Make inferences and share their ideas about the cultural values and beliefs of the society depicted in the murals in a class discussion and in a follow-up writing task.
- Examine the Maya writing system and construct a glyph of their name.
- Write a narrative in Spanish about themselves in order to practice presenting information and ideas in the target language.
- Construct a codex in order to present their personal narrative in an authentic Maya form.

Lesson Specific Essential Questions:
Students will explore the following questions:

- How do historical narratives shape our understanding of historical events?
- How are historical figures and events presented in the public sphere?
- What can we learn about history from examining authentic sources?
- What is the importance of myth and narrative in creating the identity of a people?
- How do the products of a society, including works of art and written texts, reflect the beliefs and practices of a people?
- What are the elements of effective communication in Spanish?
Lesson 1, Warm-up Activity:

K’ínich Janaab Pakal

King Pakal

The Linda Schele Drawings Collection, FAMSI

Detail of Sarcophagus Lid, Alieneight.com

Show students the animation, “PAKAL, The Ancient Astronaut,” in order to demonstrate how an image can be interpreted in different ways, depending on what we “see,” or what we expect to see. (See: Primary Source, Warm-up Activity for the source of the animation.) Ask students to think about how our point of view can influence our interpretation of an image and how we can gain a better understanding of a work of art by learning about the people who produced it. Who was Pakal? When and where did he live? What did he do that made him an important figure in his society? What was the reason for creating this image depicting him?
Lesson 1: Todos cuentan historias, Activity 1: La narrativa histórica: Leyendo las imágenes

Primary Sources:
Images for the Bonampak murals:

Video: <http://peabody.harvard.edu/node/612>

(Note: Scroll down to select “Bonampak murals.”)

Image for the San Bartolo mural:

Working in small groups, students will examine details of the murals from Bonampak and San Bartolo in order to gain practice in observing images and talking about what they see in Spanish. (See: Primary Sources, Activity 1 for sources to access images of the murals.) In addition, by using a primary source, students will gain an understanding of how the Mayas presented their history in monumental art.
Depending on the readiness level of the students, the teacher can choose to select specific sections of the murals to assign to the small groups for this task or lead a discussion with the whole class on one section of a mural before assigning the remaining sections to the small groups. The teacher should review the comprehension questions to ensure that students understand the activity. (See: Handout 1.)
After responding to guiding questions, which will help them focus their observations, the small groups of students will share their ideas and interpretations in a discussion about Maya culture as depicted in the murals. After the class discussion, each student will write a narrative in Spanish to summarize the events depicted in the murals. The teacher can provide a vocabulary list for the
discussion and writing task to supplement thematic vocabulary from the students’ text. (See: List of Key Places, People and Vocabulary.)

Method of Assessment:
- Guiding questions for talking about the images: Informal assessment (optional)
- Small group discussion of the images: Informal assessment (optional)
- Writing task: Informal assessment (homework assignment) or formal assessment (Performance Assessment Rubric for scoring the writing)
Mira el mural y contesta las preguntas que siguen.

1. ¿Qué ves en el mural? ¿Personas? ¿Objetos? Haz una lista de adjetivos para describirlos.

2. Al examinar el mural ¿qué observas? ¿Hay grupos de personas? ¿Qué hacen?

3. ¿Quiénes son estas personas? ¿Qué está pasando en las escenas? ¿Cuál es la narrativa que se presenta en las imágenes?

4. En tu opinión ¿por qué ocurren los eventos que se presentan en el mural? Muestra ejemplos entre las imágenes para explicar tus ideas.

5. Después de examinar los murales ¿qué puedes inferir sobre la sociedad de los mayas?

Después de contestar las preguntas, escribe una narrativa para resumir los eventos que se presentan en el mural. Tú puedes describir a las personas e indicar tus opiniones sobre sus actividades.
Lesson 1: Todos cuentan historias, Activity 2: La narrativa escrita: los glifos mayas

Primary Sources:
Syllabary Charts and Numbers:

Explanation of the Maya Writing System, Syllabary Charts, and Numbers:

Students will be introduced to Maya glyphs and numbers to help them understand how the Maya the writing system works. By examining the glyphs and their use in the codices and on important monuments, students will gain insights into the nature of the information that was recorded, including key dates and events, as well as narratives about powerful rulers. Students will also have an opportunity to write some numbers and word glyphs and to construct their own glyphs for names and places familiar to them.

The teacher should begin the activity by using examples of the glyphs found in the syllabary chart to demonstrate that the writing system relies on word glyphs, as well as phonetic syllables. (See: Primary Sources, Activity 2 for sources to access syllabary charts and numbers.) Some common glyphs, such as those for names, animals, places, directions, colors, days, and months, can be used to show examples of words that were important in ancient Maya culture. The teacher can show the students some glyphs and ask them to identify the words or ask them to find glyphs in a text. The teacher can also explain that the Mayas had a base 20 number system and show students how to write some numbers, using a chart of the numbering system.

Next, the students will use the syllabary chart to create a glyph of their name. (See: Handout 2.) They can also create glyphs for the name of their school or town. Since the glyphs can be constructed using phonetic syllables or word glyphs, or a combination of both, students can use their imagination to create more than one glyph for the same name, as did Maya scribes. Students will use the glyphs they create for the writing project (Activity 3).

Method of Assessment:
- Creating a Name Glyph: Informal assessment as homework or class assignment (optional)
Lesson 1: *Todos cuentan historias*, Activity 2: *La narrativa escrita: los glifos mayas*

Handout 2: *Using Maya Glyphs to Write Your Name*

Adapted from *Writing in Maya Glyphs, Book 1* by Mark Pitts and Lynn Matson and *Hieroglyphic Decipherment Guide* compiled by Inga E. Calvin

*Follow the steps to construct a glyph of your name.*

1. Divide your name into syllables with each one ending in a vowel. This may result in more syllables than your name has in English. If your name ends in a consonant, add one more syllable which has the same vowel as the previous one. This syllable is considered to be “silent.”

2. Use one of the charts of phonetic syllables to find the glyphs for the syllables in your name. If there is no glyph for a syllable, use the glyph for the consonant + “a” and the glyph for the vowel. If you have a consonant in your name that is not represented by a phonetic syllable, substitute another syllable. For example, substitute “t” for “d,” “p” for “f,” “l” for “r,” etc.

3. Before constructing a glyph block for your name, select one syllable to be the “main” syllable. This should be the syllable that is stressed when you pronounce your name. If your name has three or more syllables, select a syllable from the middle of your name.

4. Organize the glyph block by placing the main syllable in the center of the block. This is the main sign. If possible, select a square-shaped glyph for the main sign, and try to select smaller glyphs for the other syllables. Place the other syllables around the main sign, starting with the prefix block for the first syllable. The next syllable should be placed in the superfix block (if needed). The syllables in the first two blocks should precede the main syllable in your name. Then place the syllables that follow the main sign in the postfix and subfix blocks (if needed).

5. Variations on the organization of the glyph block are possible, but it should be relatively compact and square. The glyph should be read from left to right and top to bottom.
Lesson 1: Todos cuentan historias, Activity 3: La narrativa personal: Contando mi historia

Primary Source:

In order to practice the communication of information and ideas in the target language, students will write a personal narrative in Spanish. (Tell them to think about creating a Facebook page, for example.) Following guiding questions, students will identify themselves and explain who they are and what they do. (See: Handout 3.)

Before writing their own narrative, the students should learn how codices were used in Mesoamerica to present historical narratives and biographies of powerful dynasties. They should be able see to how the narratives were organized and illustrated in codices and what the rulers chose to represent in their narratives. They can also see examples of historical narrative from some Mixtec codices. (See: Primary Source, Activity 3 to learn about Mesoamerican codices and read the narratives.) As with the murals, the teacher can ask the students to relate the narratives from the codices in their own words in Spanish.

The personal narrative for the writing project will be presented in the form of a codex with text and illustrations on each panel. The illustrations could include name glyphs, numbers, or dates, along with images drawn by the students.

To make a codex glue two sheets of 11”x17” paper together along the 11” side. Fold the double sheet in half lengthwise to make one long strip (5.5”x17”), and then fold the strip into six equal panels. The two end panels can be folded back and taped or glued down to make a front and back cover for the book. The codex can also be opened to reveal all of the panels at once, as shown in the Mixtec examples, with images and text displayed in two rows, top and bottom, across the page.

Method of Assessment:
- Personal Narrative: Performance Assessment Rubric for scoring the codex writing project
  (See: Handout 4.)
Nombre: _____________________________________________

Lesson 1: Todos cuentan historias, Activity 3: La narrativa personal: Contando mi historia
Handout 3: El códice: Preguntas para la narrativa personal

Contesta las preguntas antes de escribir la narrativa personal.

Primer cuadro:
1. ¿Quién eres tú? ¿Cuál es tu nombre? ¿Cuándo es tu cumpleaños? ¿Qué haces?

2. ¿Cómo eres tú? Escribe una descripción física.

3. ¿Cómo eres tú? ¿Cómo es tu personalidad?

Segundo cuadro:
4. ¿Dónde vives? Escribe una descripción de tu pueblo o ciudad.

5. ¿Cómo es tu país? Escribe una descripción de la geografía y el clima de tu región.

Tercer cuadro:
6. ¿Qué pasó? Cuenta brevemente una experiencia interesante o importante de tu vida.

Cuarto cuadro:
7. ¿Qué harás en el futuro? ¿Quieres continuar los estudios, trabajar, viajar? Cuenta brevemente tus planes para el futuro.

Después de contestar las preguntas, escribe las respuestas en forma de párrafos en las páginas de tu códice, un cuadro para cada página. Además, tú puedes hacer un dibujo en cada página o poner unos glifos mayas para representar los nombres.

Lesson 1: Todos cuentan historias, Activity 3: La narrativa personal: Contando mi historia
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>The writing clearly and concisely defines the topic. Well-developed concepts present a point of view or relate a narrative. Main ideas are supported with relevant, accurate, and detailed information. Ideas are synthesized to form thoughtful insights.</td>
<td>The writing clearly defines the topic. Specific concepts present a point of view or relate a narrative. Main ideas are supported with relevant and accurate information. Ideas are synthesized to form insights.</td>
<td>The writing attempts to define the topic. Some specific concepts present a point of view or relate a narrative. Main ideas are supported with some relevant and accurate information. Ideas are analyzed without forming insights.</td>
<td>The writing ineffectively defines the topic. Specific concepts are insufficiently developed to present a point of view or relate a narrative. Main ideas are not supported by relevant information, and there may be inaccuracies. Ideas are not analyzed and no insights are formulated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>The writing is logically and thoughtfully structured and reaches a coherent conclusion. It is interesting and creative, and promotes a clear understanding of the topic.</td>
<td>The writing is logically structured and reaches a coherent conclusion. It is interesting and promotes an understanding of the topic.</td>
<td>The writing has a generally logical structure and reaches a conclusion. It is somewhat interesting and attempts to promote an understanding of the topic.</td>
<td>The writing does not have a logical structure and does not reach a conclusion. There may be some interesting points, but it does not promote an understanding of the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication and Fluency</strong></td>
<td>Written expression is clear and comprehensible. Sentences connect coherently to each other and support the development of the themes. The text can be read quickly and without difficulty.</td>
<td>Written expression is comprehensible. Sentences connect coherently to each other. The text can be read with minimal difficulty.</td>
<td>Written expression is generally comprehensible. Sentences connect somewhat coherently to each other. The text can be read with some difficulty.</td>
<td>Written expression is generally not comprehensible. Sentences do not connect coherently to each other. The text is difficult to read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target Language: Vocabulary</strong></td>
<td>The writing contains rich, precise, and idiomatic vocabulary which is used effectively and creatively in the context and attains an appropriate level of proficiency.</td>
<td>The writing contains accurate vocabulary which is used correctly in the context and approaches an appropriate level of proficiency.</td>
<td>The writing contains generally correct but limited vocabulary with some errors of word usage for the context. There may be some instances of second language interference.</td>
<td>The writing contains very limited vocabulary with numerous errors of word usage for the context. There may be many instances of second language interference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target Language: Grammar and Syntax</strong></td>
<td>The writing demonstrates a superior command of grammar usage with virtually no errors and an ease of expression.</td>
<td>The writing demonstrates correct grammar usage. Any errors do not impede comprehension.</td>
<td>The writing demonstrates a basic command of grammar usage. There may be some instances of second language interference and/or errors which impede comprehension.</td>
<td>The writing demonstrates a limited command of grammar usage. There may be many instances of second language interference and/or numerous errors which impede comprehension.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Key Places, People and Vocabulary

Key Places:
*Sites for the murals in this lesson:*
México: Chiapas, Bonampak (Selva Lacandona, el río Usumacinta).
Guatemala: Petén, San Bartolo.
*Some Additional Maya Sites of Interest:*
Mexico: Palenque, Toniná, Yaxchilán, Chichén Itzá.
Guatemala: Tikal, Piedras Negras.
Honduras: Copán.

Key People:
K’ínich Janaab Pakal (Pakal, el rey de Palenque), el rey (*ajaw*), la reina, el noble, el sacerdote, el escriba, el guerrero, el prisionero, el músico, el bailador, el dios, la diosa

Vocabulary:
See textbook vocabulary for: physical description (tall/short, old/young, dark/light eyes, short/long hair, etc.), seasons and weather, family, colors, etc.

To supplement textbook vocabulary for the activities:
*Geography*: el norte, el este, el sur, el oeste, la montaña, la llanura, la selva, la caverna, el río
*Structures at the Sites*: la plaza, el edificio, la pirámide, el templo, el salón, la escalera, la entrada, la pared, el techo
*Works of Art*: el mural, los murales, la pintura, la escultura, los glifos, la figura, las prendas, los adornos, el casco, las plumas, los instrumentos musicales, el desfile, el baile, la guerra, las armas, la lanza, el cuchillo, el vaso, la olla, el cesto, la ofrenda, el sacrificio, la serpiente, la boca, el maíz, a la derecha, a la izquierda, encima de, debajo de, al primer plano, al fondo
Resource List

List of Key Places, People, and Vocabulary:

FAMSI.org provides maps of Mesoamerica which show cultural and linguistic areas, as well as countries. These interactive maps also have links to reports on the specific sites in each region.

Lesson 1, Warm-up Activity:

This website presents an animation of the sarcophagus lid from Pakal’s tomb identifying symbols from ancient Maya culture and interpreting the sculpture as an astronaut in a modern spacecraft.

Lesson 1, Activity 1:

This website presents information on numerous Maya archeological sites with maps, photos, and links to articles and videos on Maya civilization. It also has information on other Mesoamerican civilizations.


This webpage from Storied Walls, an exhibition at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, presents a study of wall art in the Americas, including Bonampak and San Bartolo. There are links to the online brochure for the exhibition and a video which uses a reproduction of the mural from Room 1 at Bonampak to explain some aspects of the narrative and iconography.


This webpage presents numerous images of the Bonampak murals from Rooms 1, 2, and 3. The database contains photos of structures, paintings, objects, and photographic documentation of archeological projects from many sites in Mesoamerica. In addition, Mesoweb and PARI provide links to a variety of resources on Mesoamerican cultures, including reports, articles, books, and other websites.


This webpage presents information on the discovery of the murals at the San Bartolo archeological site in Guatemala and has an interactive image of the mural which explains the Maya iconography in the painting.
Lesson 1, Activity 2:
This guide provides tables to decipher phonetic syllables, nouns, verbs, and number glyphs. The glyphs are large and easy for students to copy.

This guide explains the Maya writing system, including phonetic syllables and word glyphs. It also provides directions for constructing glyphs for names and titles and for writing simple sentences.

Lesson 1, Activity 3:
This article explains in detail the history of Mesoamerican codices and distinguishes their ritual function from Western history texts. The article also provides excellent images from the codices, information about the materials used in making codices, and examples of historical narrative.

Photo Credits
Lesson 1, Warm-up Activity:
This drawing from a tablet in Palenque depicts Lady Sak K’uk offering the headdress of rulership to her son, K’inich Janaab Pakal.

This image shows a detail of the sarcophagus lid from Pakal’s tomb. This is the image which has been interpreted as showing Pakal as an astronaut.

Lesson 1, Activity 3:
These images of a battle scene and a meeting with an oracle are examples of the types of events, including, births, deaths, marriages, and sacrifices, that were recorded in Mixtec codices.
Additional Resources

This article describes some Mixtec codices and explains their narratives.

This glossary provides an explanation of words from Mesoamerican culture and Spanish colonial society, as well as general terms used in the study of history and archeology.

This article discusses new evidence from La Corona, a site in Guatemala, that debunks the popular notion that the Mayas predicted the world would end on December 21, 2012.

This video presents the long history of the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs and discusses the important revelations gained through the ability to read ancient Maya texts. This is an excellent resource for helping students understand Maya society and the process of studying an ancient culture.

This website shows details of the murals of Bonampak with explanations of the images, as well as photos of the archeological site.

This workbook explains in detail the Maya hieroglyphic writing system, including the glyphs, syntax, grammar, text composition, interpretation of texts, etc.

Kaufmann, Carol. “Sistine Chapel of the Early Maya.” National Geographic 204. 6, December 2003: 72-77.
This article gives an update on the ongoing excavation of the San Bartolo site and provides images of the mural, including an artist’s rendering of one section of the mural.

This article provides details of the life of Pakal the Great, identifies important events of his reign, and describes some of the monumental construction projects he undertook in Palenque.
<http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/codices/marhenke.html>
This article presents an introduction to the Maya codices and discussions of each of the four major surviving codices.

This article, written by one of the lead archeologists of the San Bartolo site, discusses the process of excavating the pyramid and the murals. The article includes images of the mural and an explanation of some elements of the iconography, as shown in an artist’s rendering of the mural.

<http://www.mesoweb.com/reports/pakal.html>
This article discusses the discovery of Pakal’s tomb and the controversy surrounding the analysis and interpretation of data from the tomb and its temple by various researchers.

In this discussion Dr. Stuart explains that the Mayas did not predict that the world would end on December 21, 2012 and that this date comes from the “Long Count” calendar, which the Mayas used to measure time by hundreds and thousands of years. The article also offers an explanation for why there is confusion about this date.

This web page provides several interactive images of the murals of Bonampak.

This website presents an explanation of the history and cultural significance of the Maya codices, along with information about the Maya calendar. It is written in language that is appropriate for students. Drawings and images from the codices are presented.