The Aztecs built their capital city, called Tenochtitlan, in the center of enormous Lake Texcoco. The Aztecs believed they were the “chosen people” of Huitzilopochtli and did everything that he desired of them. "During the fourteenth century, Huitzilopochtli told the Aztec chieftain that their new homeland would be on the island in Lake Toxcoco, and when they reached the island they were to look for an eagle eating a snake perched on a cactus growing from a rock or cave surrounded by water. This would be the location where they were to build their city and honor him.”

They found this location and began to build their city around the year AD 1325. The city of Tenochtitlan continued to grow, having an estimated population of 200,000. The city grew to a point where there was no more room for expansion on the island and they were forced to move out into the lake areas.

The agricultural portion of this expansion was successful because of the invention of the chinampas or floating gardens. The floating gardens were constructed by bunching twigs together then stacking mud on top of the twigs. They were not anchored at first and could be towed until the plants roots anchored into the lake floor.

The Aztecs connected the island to the mainland by three causeways that ran next to dikes that were built to keep the fresh water of Lake Texcoco separate from other salty lakes of the area. The dikes also protected the agricultural chinampas. Canals ran between the chinampas; they were used to convey traffic through the city, including to and from the market of Tlatelolco.

The city flourished until the year 1521 when Hernandez Cortes and his Spanish army invaded and captured the city. (Gruzinski 2001)
ART AND ARTIFACTS

The Aztec Empire: Warriors of the Gods

“And such were the marvels we saw that we knew not what to say, or whether to believe what was before our eyes, for on the one hand were great cities on the land, and on the lake many more, and we saw canoes everywhere and along the causeway were many bridges at regular intervals, and before us stood the great city of Mexico.”

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, 8 November 1519

With these words, soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo described his experience accompanying Hernán Cortés as the Spaniards first approached the Aztec capital of Méxíco Tenochtitlán, on November 8, 1519. Less than two years after this first awe-inspiring view of the Aztec citadel, the city was destroyed by the Spanish intruders.

Tenochtitlán, or “The Place of the Prickly Pear Cactus”, is covered today by downtown Mexico City. The well-organized island city stood in the shallow Texcoco Lake; it was linked to the mainland by four large causeways. With a total area of approximately 20 square miles and at least 300,000 inhabitants, it was five times the size of the contemporary London of Henry VIII. Tenochtitlán was not only one of the most extensive cities of the world, but with its public toilets, aqueducts, and schools, it was also one of the most modern. A political arrangement linked Tenochtitlán with the other large cities of Tlacopán and Texcoco to form the Triple Alliance, the base of the Aztec empire. Triple Alliance armies of professionally trained soldiers controlled a large territory with more than 11 million inhabitants, an empire whose main purpose was to provide tribute to the capital. While Aztec priests worshipped their gods with human sacrifice in richly decorated temples, Aztec kings dwelt in magnificent three-story palaces, with flower-filled gardens, fountains, zoos, and dwellings for dwarfs and hunchbacks.

From 1464 to 1505, the city of Texcoco was ruled by Nezahualpilli, a poet and philosopher whose name means “The Lord of Fasting”. Nezahualpilli was one of the most famous kings of Texcoco, with 2000 wives and concubines and 144 children. According to the chronicles, Nezahualpilli sometimes mingled with the crowds dressed as commoner.

The reconstruction shows him recently returned from such a trip still holding the simple cloak of a commoner made of Maguey cactus fiber in his left hand. Now dressed for a dance, Nezahualpilli stands in the gardens of Tetzcotzingo. In 1454, his father ordered the construction of these terraced gardens that served as a summer residence for the kings of Texcoco, as well as for cultivating medicinal plants. The gardens were a masterpiece of Aztec architecture dedicated to the gods of rain, water, and earth. Stairways, pools, and colorful reliefs were carved in naturally shaped stone. All types of plants grew on terraces decorated with stone sculptures that portrayed the different animals of the country. An aqueduct supplied the gardens with fresh water, channeling it through waterspouts onto fields of flowers.
**Nezahualpilli: King of Texcoco, at Tetzcotzingo**

Nezahualpilli wears the turquoise mantle, the garment of kings and symbol of the Old Fire God, woven out of silklike rabbit hair. His hair is decorated with feather tassels, and he wears resplendent bracelets of gold, jade, and emeralds on his arms and legs. In his right hand he holds a fan, and near his feet lies a bouquet of flowers, a symbol of the Aztec nobles. In the background, a waterspout in the shape of a monkey head dispenses water onto fields of flowers behind a stone carved with images of a butterfly, water, and a smoke bundle.
ACTIVITIES

Codex
National Museum of anthropology in Mexico City

Art ● Language Arts ● Technology
Lilian A. Bell in her book *Papyrus, Tapa, Amate and Rice Paper: Papermaking in Africa, the Pacific, Latin America and Southeast Asia*, reports that sometime between A.D. 500 and 899 the Aztec and Mayas developed their earliest books. The books were stored in libraries housed in stone buildings and included the topics of religion, rituals, astronomy, geography, history, genealogy, and customs. The remaining codices are: the Dresden, Paris, Madrid, and Grolier. They are now housed in the cities by which they are named.

Codex Borgia Mixteca-Puebal Culture, 15th century codices, or hand-painted books, made by Aztecs, Mixtecs and other indigenous Mexicans were originally filled with pictures that conveyed a rich variety of local information, including histories, cosmogonies, tax records and family genealogies.

With the 16th century Spanish invasion came the introduction of alphabetic writing, which increasingly influenced indigenous manuscripts and eventually supplanted traditional pictographic systems of communication.

Imagery derived from the codices can now be found in everything from tourist art to tattoos; as such symbolism evokes a popular nationalist idea that Mexico’s modern identity lies in the country’s ancient past. Today, pictorial codices, as well as those demonstrating early European influence, are celebrated and reproduced in facsimile form because they serve as windows onto the complex artistic and cultural heritage that makes Mexico unique.

These books now referred to as painted books, pictorial manuscripts, or codices were made in a screen fold format. The paper was made from beaten bark and the finished strip was between six inches and eight inches wide and between twenty inches and thirty-five inches long. The prepared sheet was coated with a white substance of some kind of plaster. When the coating dried, it was a smooth surface for painting on.

Using the Internet to research the history of early books and codices (plural of codex), have students create their own codex, you can use construction paper and any writing tool. They used a brush. You will need two pieces of blank paper. Start at either end. Fold the paper into pleats. Using the photograph as an example, start from the left and number each page and then continue numbering the back pages.

Mark one page the front cover. The covers can be decorated and/or made with a heavy cardboard. In most cases, reading was from left to right. The book should be held folded in your hands and opened one section at a time. Read the two pages that are exposed and then turn the next pleat to read the next two pages.

Art
The codex that students created can be used when they go to the exhibition: Reconstructing the Pre-Columbian World. The handout entitled Codices can be used as a model for inspiration of using the codex as a journal or writing surface for a sketchbook. An Internet site with Aztec art and mythology:
http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/azt_stor.htm

Codex Page
National Museum of anthropology in Mexico City

Art ● Language Arts ● Technology
Use the codex or create a three-dimensional art and artifact timeline. Through the creation of a three-dimensional timeline, students are asked to bring together information from the art and artifacts that covers people, places, events, and cultural landmarks.
Another way of creating a three-dimension art and artifact timeline is the development of a pop-up book. An excellent model for the pop-up book is: *Splendor of Ancient America*, by Francisco Serrano and the Internet sites:

Ancient Mexico: The Art, Culture and History of Ancient Mesoamerica:
http://www.ancientmexico.com/

Mesoamerican Timeline:
http://www.ancientmexico.com/content/timeline/index.html

Historical Documents from Mexico:
http://www.ancientmexico.com/content/documents/index.html

Using the art and artifacts highlighted in the exhibition paintings for this activity; students are encouraged to combine written information with visual images. It may be easier to conduct this activity after students have read and studied about the history, culture, people, and art of Christiane Clados. Artifact timelines provide the students with the opportunity to develop their skills in sequencing, writing, creating models.

**RESOURCES**


Royal Academy Aztec Children’s Guide PDF File.


**INTERNET LINKS**

Great Tenochtitlan History for Kids

The Aztecs

Mesoamerican Manuscript Facsimiles
http://www.lib.utah.edu/digital/aztec/
Images of Everyday Life Drawn from Codices
http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/azt_lif.htm

Mundo Maya: Maya Codices
http://www.mayadiscovery.com/ing/history/default.htm

Ancient Scripts
http://www.ancientscripts.com/aztec.html

The Organization of the Aztec Empire

National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City
http://www.islc.net/~lesteyl/nationalmuseum.html

Glossary With Words Sounded Out
http://library.thinkquest.org/27981/glossary.html

Tempus Fugit: Time Flies
http://www.nelson-atkins.org/tempusfugit/
Codex
A manuscript referred to as codex is painted or drawn on a long strip composed of sheets of animal or bark paper in a screen fold, or accordion fold. Context: These images on codices remain as a record of life in Ancient Mesoamerica.

Screen fold
A manuscript that is folded accordion style. Context: Made of amate, the codex is a screen fold or accordion folded manuscript.

Obsidian
A usually black or banded, hard volcanic glass that displays shiny, curved surfaces when fractured and is formed by rapid cooling of lava. Context: Obsidian was an important trade item for all of Mesoamerica.

Feathered or Plumed Serpent
One of the widely venerated gods of Post-Classical Mesoamerica. Context: Quetzalcoatl was the Feathered or Plumed Serpent god. In the creation myth of central Mexico, Quetzalcoatl ruled the second sun or world.

Tenochtitlan
The capital of the Aztec or Mexican empire. Context: From the Nahuatl tenochtli=hard pickly pear + li=next to + tlan=place.