

## **Tree of Life—Personal Narrative Sculpture**

Jennifer Jervis, Castro Valley High School

Art

Ceramics

Grades 9–12

20 one-hour class periods

Summary of the Unit (including unit goals):

In this unit, students will learn about Pre- and Post-Columbian Mexican ceramic sculpture, focusing on the Tree of Life model as a mode of disseminating cultural and personal narratives. Students will view a wide variety of examples of Tree of Life sculptures, learn to analyze them, and identify specific storytelling elements within the work. After investigating traditional Pre- and Post-Columbian Mexican cultural stories and myths, students will write their own personal narratives in their preferred style (fiction, non-fiction, mythology, ancestral, historical, etc). The story that each student writes will become the inspiration for the Tree of Life sculpture that he or she will create, thus utilizing the visual medium to express a personal narrative. Studio time will be punctuated with music, video clips and readings that delve into Mexican folklore and culture, artists' practices and current stories from Mexico, including issues surrounding migration and immigration. The finished work, along with the written narrative, planning sketches, journal entries, written reflections and individual check-ins throughout the process will serve as assessments of progress and understanding.

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### Stage 1—Desired Results

- Established Goals (National Standards for Visual Art:  
[http://www.educationworld.com/standards/national/arts/visual\\_arts/9\\_12.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/standards/national/arts/visual_arts/9_12.shtml))
  - The student can analyze and identify narrative elements in sculptural work (Standard #2).
  - The student can utilize the visual medium to express personal narratives (Standard #1).
  - The student can demonstrate knowledge of Mexican pottery styles and motifs through various assessments (completed projects, sketches, journal entries, etc.) (Standard #4).
  - The student can write a personal narrative as inspiration for their sculpture design (Standard #6).
  - The student can complete a self-assessment rubric and write a post-project reflection (Standard #5).
- Understanding—Students will understand that:
  - Pre- and Post-Columbian societies in Mexico used the Tree of Life sculpture as a means of communicating narratives integral to their belief system, culture and society.
  - The stories told through Tree of Life sculptures have, in some cases, changed over time and modifications have been made to the basic structure.
  - The use of clay and ceramics has a long history in Mexico.
  - Stories can be told through art.
- Essential Questions:
  - How were stories communicated in the various eras of Mexican history?
  - What role did arts, crafts and artisans play in society?
  - What role did ceramics play in the cultural development of Mexico?
  - Why is it important to record personal stories?
  - What are the current personal stories in Mexico (e.g., immigration, culture, etc)?
- Students will know:
  - The history of ceramics in Mexico.
  - The importance of the Tree of Life sculpture in telling the story of a culture/ society/ belief system.

- How to tell their own story using three-dimensional ceramic sculpture as their medium.
- Students will be able to:
  - Create a three-dimensional sculpture from clay (Standard #1)
  - Utilize narrative techniques to express a story through art (Standard #2)
  - Write a short personal narrative (Standard #6)

### Stage 2—Assessment Evidence

- Performance Tasks
  - View and discuss examples of Tree of Life sculptures that span the history of Mexico
  - Create design sketches for a Tree of Life-inspired sculpture
  - Write a personal narrative
- Other Evidence
  - Journal entries regarding the process of creating a narrative sculpture
  - Self-assessment rubric and questionnaire
  - Exhibition of completed work

### Stage 3—Learning Plan

#### Project Materials

- Clay, glaze and/or acrylic paint
- Various clay tools (needle tools, carving tools, etc.; wooden skewers, plastic flatware and toothpicks can be used if ceramics tools are not available)
- Water
- Plastic containers with lids (cleaned margarine tubs or yogurt containers)
- Plastic grocery bags
- Notebook, paper and pencils

#### Technology

- Computer with PowerPoint and disc player (portable CD player can be used for music and TV/DVD combo to play DVDs)
- LCD Projector (if not available, slides can be printed to show the class)
- Kiln

## Resources

- Handouts (attached)
- Books:
  - Hoag-Mulryan, Lenore. (2004). *Ceramic Trees of Life: Popular Art from Mexico*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum.
  - Artes de Mexico. (June 1, 2001). *Metepc y Su Arte en Barro* (Bi-lingual Edition). Mexico City, DF: Artes de Mexico.
  - Nevins, Joseph and Mizue Aizeki. (2008). *Dying to Live: A Story of U.S. Immigration in an Age of Global Apartheid*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Open Media.
  - Hernandez Madrigal, Antonio. (2010). *The Eagle and the Rainbow: Timeless Tales From México*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.
  - Phillip, Neil. (2003). *Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet: Mexican Folktales*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
  - Cisneros, Sandra. (1991). *The House on Mango Street*. New York, NY: Vintage Publishing.
- Videos:
  - *Craft in America*, Season 1 (2007). Studio: PBS (Direct).
  - *Tree of Life* (documentary on Los Voladores), Directed by Bruce "Pacho" Lane, Ethnoscope Film and Video, ISBN #: 978-1-891813-00-9.
  - Vanguard, episode # 7- *Life and Death on the Border*, November 8, 2010 from Current TV.
- Music:
  - *Marvelous Mexican Marimba*, Marimba Nandayapa, World Music Library, 1997.
  - *Mi Tierra* by Susana Harp, Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 2002.
  - *Poetics*, Panda, EMI Latin, 2009.

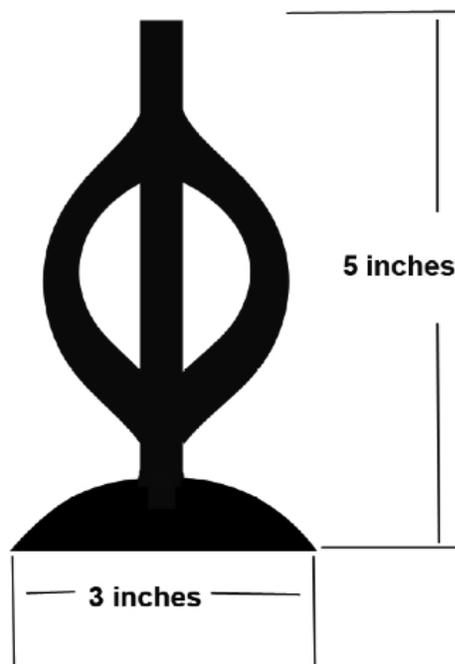
## Vocabulary

- Pre-Columbian/Pre-Hispanic/Pre-Cortesian
- Score and slip
- Sculpture
- Coil
- Slab
- Narrative
- *Voladores*
- Immigration
- Ceiba tree
- *Axis Mundi*

	<b>Lesson Plan Outline</b>
Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Frontloading question: How have people passed on cultural stories, now and in the past? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Brainstorm, pair/ share, share out to class. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Potential answers: through writing, stories, art (drawings, paintings, sculptures, pottery, architecture, etc), movies, conversations, storytelling, tattoos, etc</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● Show slide #1 (presentation available for download from this website: <a href="http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/outreach/mexico11/">http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/outreach/mexico11/</a>), discussing development of ceramics in Mexico: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discuss uses of pottery.</li> <li>○ Discuss decoration of pottery as a link to cultural stories/ beliefs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Continue slides introducing the Tree of Life sculptures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discuss aesthetic qualities of sculptures, how the details come together to tell a story.</li> <li>○ Working in groups or pair/share, have students dissect images of Tree of Life sculptures for narrative elements/ clues (printable images available in Appendix A).</li> <li>○ Have students share out what they came up with for the narrative of each example (each group should have a different example).</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Make books available for independent viewing (e.g., books listed in the Resource section as well as other books on Mexican/ Chicano art and artists, Días de los Muertos and Pre-Columbian/ Latin American art).</li> </ul>
Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ceramics skills group practice—making sculptural motifs from clay <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Practice creating the basic structure of Tree of Life (teacher leads students through each step): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Create a base for the structure with a slab of clay and trim into a desired shape (traditionally, the base is round or oval, but any shape will work as long as it is large enough to support the finished piece; base can also be</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

made from a pinch pot form).

- Using slightly dry clay, roll coils of clay about an inch thick (coils are made by rolling clay on the table with one's palms to create a snake-like form).
- For this simple practice structure, cut coil(s) into three equal pieces, each about five inches long. Working on a hard, flat surface, lay one of the coils straight for the center and curve the other two coils as seen in the diagram below.
- Practice scoring and slipping technique to attach the side coils to the center (to score and slip, scratch the areas of the clay that will be attached together, add slip, or a watered-down clay mixture, and press the pieces firmly together, cleaning the area with fingers to eliminate any cracks or seams).
- For best results, allow structure to dry a bit before scoring and slipping it to the base.



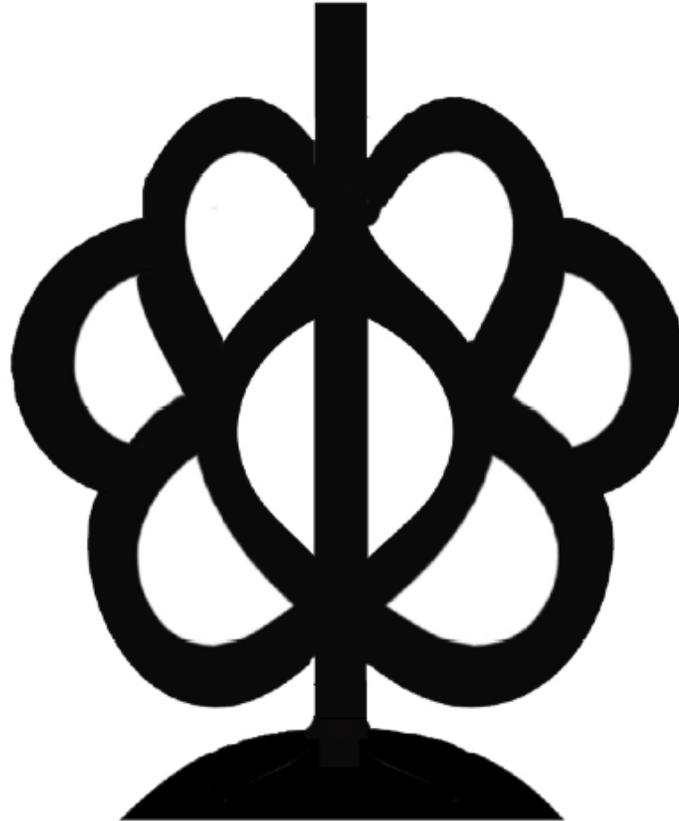
**Size is approximate for practice piece. It can be made bigger or smaller as needed.**

- Practice typical motifs, such as leaves, simple figures and animals:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ For leaves, clay can be flattened by patting it against the table and then leaf shapes can be cut out with needle tool, toothpick, or other sharp tool.</li> <li>▪ Figures and animals can be made by rolling clay into balls to mimic heads and bodies, and limbs can be made with small coils.</li> <li>▪ Small sculpted pieces can be attached to the structure by scoring and slipping.</li> </ul>
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mexican folklore, myth and stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Read short samples from a variety of sources (my recommendations are <i>The Eagle and the Rainbow</i> and <i>Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet</i>, listed in the Resource section. Many other options are available). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Read excerpts using “Popcorn” technique, where a student reads and then chooses the next student who will read and so on.</li> <li>▪ Students respond to stories as a group.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>● View video, <i>Craft in America</i>, Landscape episode, artist David Gurney <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Complete worksheet about the video (Appendix B).</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Have books available for independent viewing/ reading.</li> </ul>
Day 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Writing a personal narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A personal narrative is a story of the author, by the author, generally from the author’s point of view (first person). For this project, the personal narrative need not be strictly non-fiction and fictionalized incidents may be presented as fact. Students will be given the freedom to stretch the boundaries of the personal narrative as it relates to folklore, mythology, legends and other forms of storytelling that present fantastical details as fact.</li> <li>○ Read excerpts from <i>House on Mango Street</i>.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Day 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Writing a personal narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Read excerpts from <i>House on Mango Street</i>.</li> <li>○ Begin writing personal narrative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ For this project, 1–2 pages should be sufficient.</li> <li>▪ Story should be written in the first person.</li> <li>▪ Story should have allusions to visual vignettes.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Story should have a beginning, middle and a conclusion.</li> </ul>
Day 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● View video on Los Voladores (<i>Tree of Life</i>): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Discuss the symbolic “Tree of Life,” the pole that is central to the ritual. Made from a single, super-straight, tall tree trunk that is chosen and ritually harvested through prayer to the “tree spirit,” it is seen as the axis between the worlds (<i>axis mundi</i>), just like the ceiba tree to some of the indigenous cultures and the tree of life sculptures.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● On paper or in journal/sketchbook/notebook, design sculpture inspired by the structure of the Tree of Life and the personal narrative. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Identify specific features from story on the sketch.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● During studio time, listen to a variety of music, traditional and modern, from Mexico (suggestions are available in the Resource section, but many other examples exist. Youtube and iTunes can be good resources for additional options).</li> </ul>
Day 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work on sculpture—project requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ For the final sculpture, students may choose to start with a similar form as their practice piece and use additional coils to create more structure upon which to place sculpted pieces (see diagram on next page).</li> <li>○ Alternatively, students may take inspiration from a historical example or use their own creativity to design the basic structure of their sculpture.</li> <li>○ Size of final piece should be between eight and twelve inches tall.</li> <li>○ Width should not exceed height and the base should be made with consideration for the overall width of the project. The project should not tip over once complete.</li> <li>○ The final sculpture should show a distinct connection to the personal narrative, illustrating specific elements and aspects of the story.</li> <li>○ The sculpted pieces added to the structure of the sculpture should be neatly crafted and thoughtfully placed based on design sketches. Visual balance, rhythm and pattern are integral.</li> <li>○ Surface decoration with acrylic paint and/or glaze should be neat and intentional.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- Making indentations for candles is optional (it is typical for traditional examples to hold candles).



Above: sample diagram of a more elaborate structure for the Tree of Life.

Days  
8–20

- Work on sculpture.
- During studio time, listen to a variety of music from Mexico, traditional and modern.
- Day 1—Discuss contemporary culture in Mexico, issues around migration and immigration.
  - Show excerpts from Vanguard, *Life and Death on the Border*.
- Day 13—Read excerpts from *Dying to Live*.
  - Reflection in notebook, share out in class discussion.
  - Ready sculptures for firing.
- Day 15—View contemporary artwork about immigration issues from Mexican and

	<p>Chicano artists (“Border Stories” presentation available for download from this website: <a href="http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/outreach/mexico11/">http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/outreach/mexico11/</a>).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Begin painting sculptures.</li> <li>● Reflection in notebook, share out in class discussion.</li> </ul>
Day 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Options for exhibition—Display finished artwork with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ An artist’s statement that explains the piece and artistic process</li> <li>○ The original personal narrative</li> <li>○ An edited/revised/summary version of the personal narrative</li> <li>○ A combination of the personal narrative and an artist’s statement</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Display finished work at school or community location off campus.</li> <li>● Self-assessment rubric and reflection questions (Appendix C).</li> </ul>

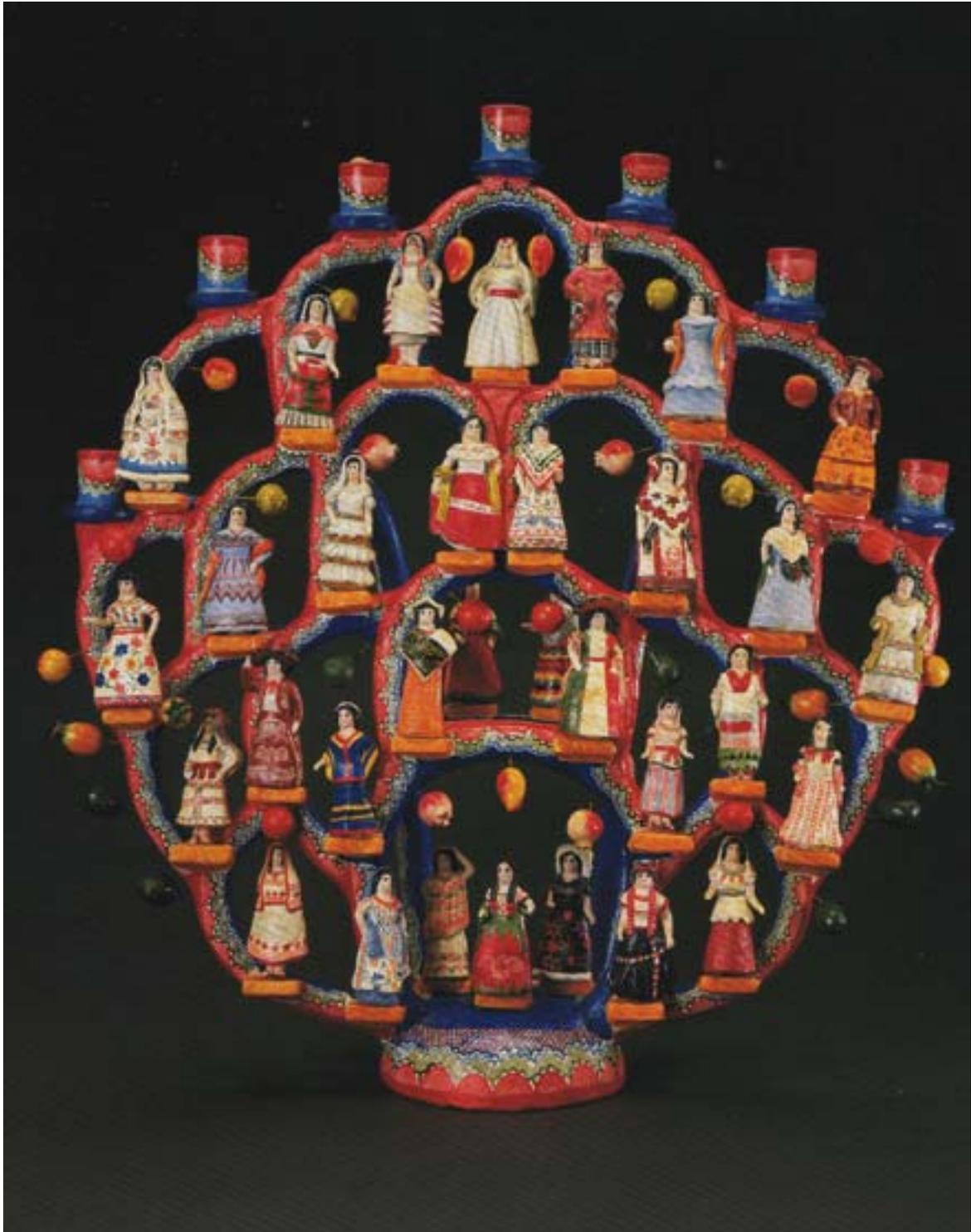
Appendix A—Images to use in narrative activity (Day 1)

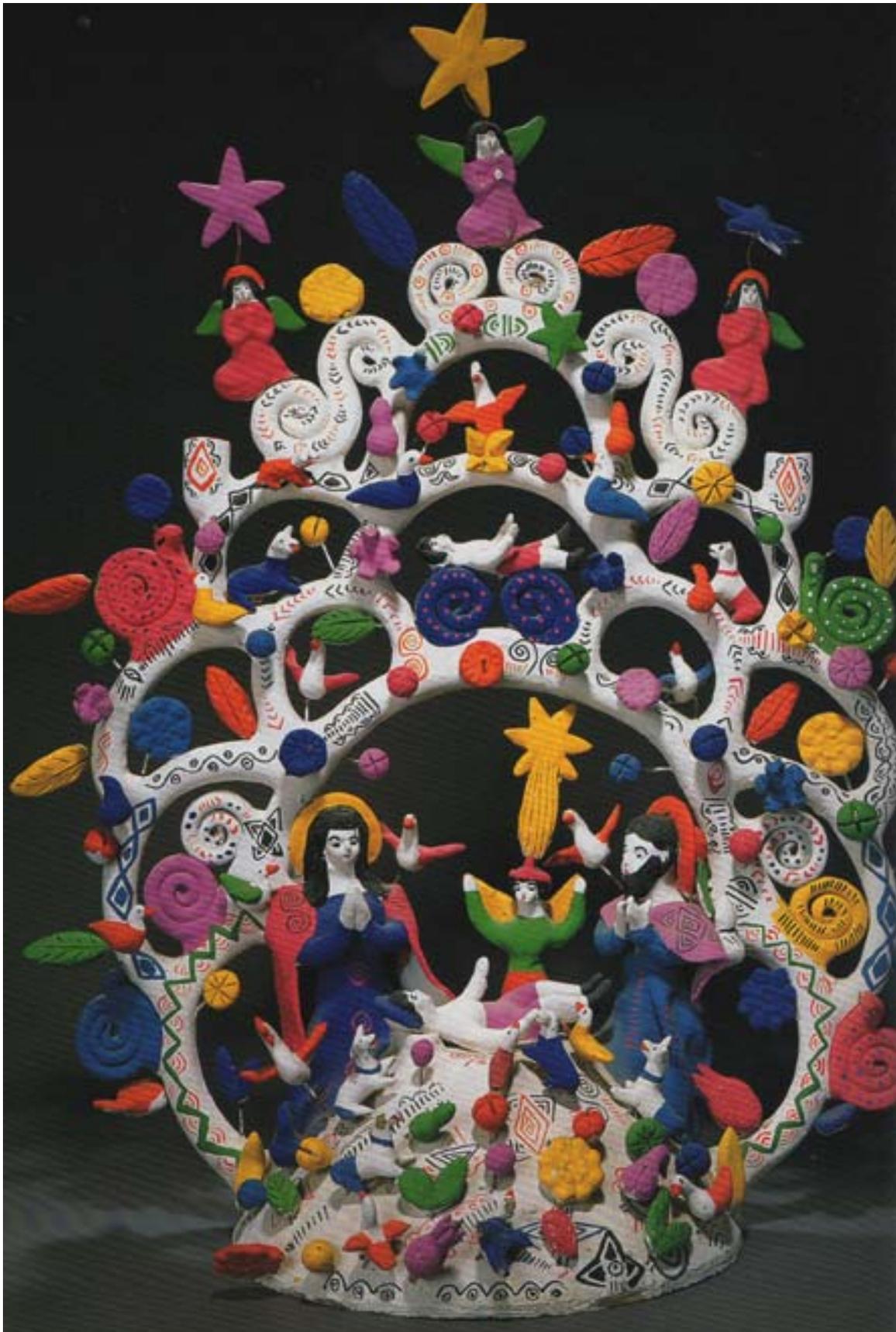




Jervis – Tree of Life  
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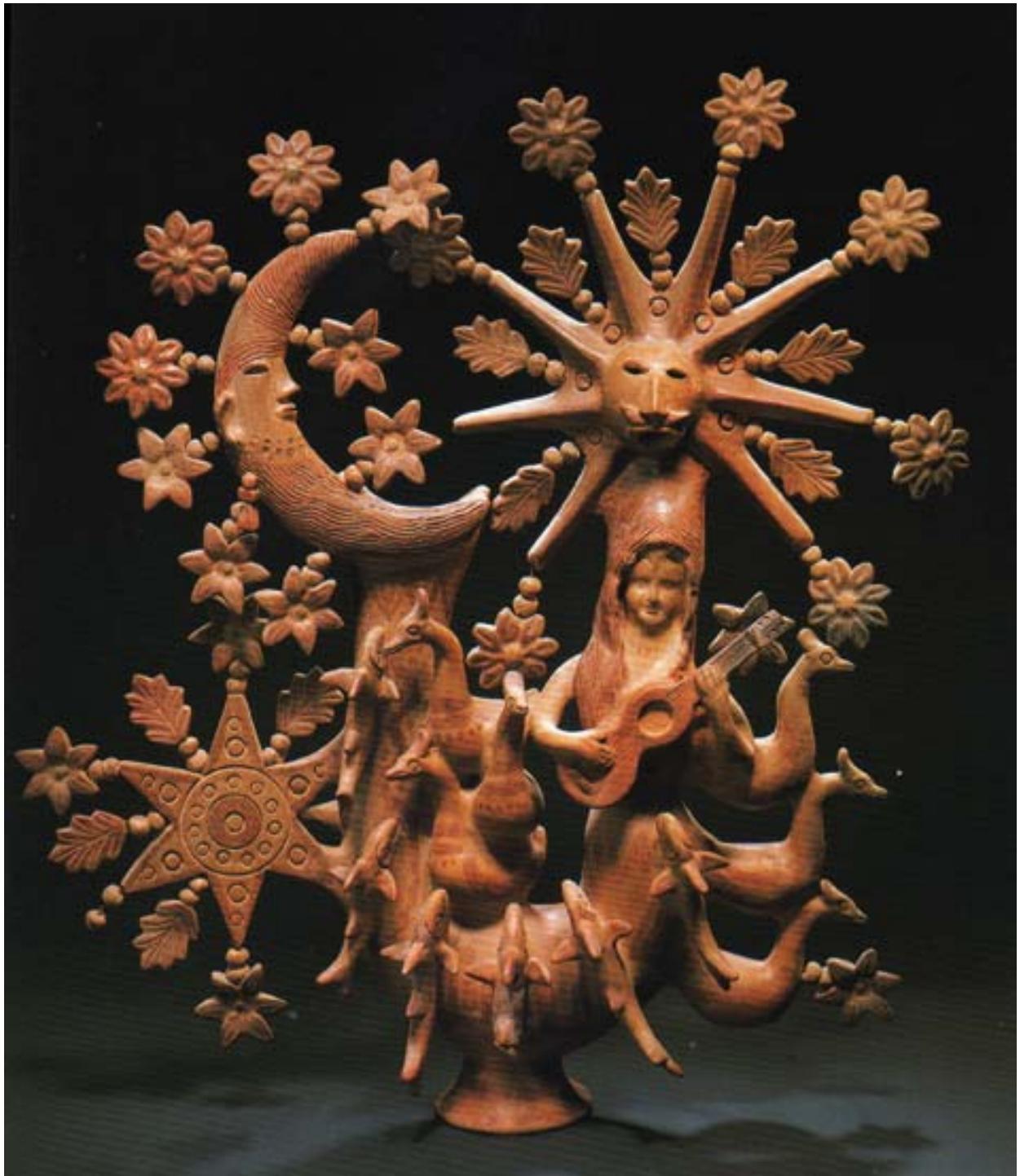








Jervis – Tree of Life  
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## Appendix B

### David Gurney Video Worksheet

1. “One of the most wonderful things about clay is that you make a \_\_\_\_\_.”
2. “Occasionally, your hands almost feel like they’re \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. “[Trees of Life] have their \_\_\_\_\_ in the earth and they’re reaching up to \_\_\_\_\_.”
4. “I have an almost inexhaustible source of \_\_\_\_\_.”
5. “You can’t compete with \_\_\_\_\_. You can just try to \_\_\_\_\_ it and be a part of it.”
6. “It comes out of the kiln looking like \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_.”
7. “If you follow the things that truly inspire you, it will lead you to a \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_.”

## David Gurney Video Worksheet Answer Key

1. “One of the most wonderful things about clay is that you make a 3-dimensional object.”
2. “Occasionally, your hands almost feel like they’re singing.”
3. “[Trees of Life] have their roots in the earth and they’re reaching up to heaven.”
4. “I have an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration.”
5. “You can’t compete with nature. You can just try to reflect it and be a part of it.”
6. “It comes out of the kiln looking like water on stone.”
7. “If you follow the things that truly inspire you, it will lead you to a good place.”

## Appendix C

### Self-Assessment Grading Rubric

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Per. \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: Please read each of the following statements and circle the ones that best describe your project for each of the listed criteria.

	<b>25</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Quality/ clay skills</b>	Clean, smooth edges; clean carving & texture; interesting sculpted elements with added clay; no seams or evidence of scoring and slipping	Mostly smooth around edges; mostly clean carving & texture; added clay enhances design; no seams and little evidence of scoring and slipping	Cracks and rough edges take away from the quality of the piece; carving/ texture is messy; evidence of scoring and slipping and/or connections coming apart	Cracks, rough edges &/or loose pieces display poor clay skills; poor quality carving or texture; evidence of scoring and slipping and/or connections coming apart	Major cracks, rough edges, missing or loose pieces display poor clay skills; sloppy scoring and slipping resulting in breakage during firing
<b>Decoration</b>	Great attention to detail using a paint/glaze in an interesting way; all decoration looks clean and intentional	Good use of paint/glaze; most decoration looks clean and intentional	Some details are messy or look rushed; not a lot of attention to details	Messy/ sloppy decoration; poor use of paint/glaze; very rushed	Little or no decoration; very poor use of paint/glaze; very messy
<b>Project Requirements</b>	Met all project requirements; clear connection between personal narrative and finished piece; all storytelling elements in place	Met all project requirements; good connection between personal narrative and finished piece; most storytelling elements in place	Met some project requirements; some storytelling elements missing; some disconnection between story and finished piece	Met few project requirements; lacks connection between personal narrative and finished piece; lacks detail	Met no project requirements
<b>Attitude/ Participation</b>	Worked hard everyday with a positive attitude toward project	Worked hard most days with a good attitude toward project	Worked hard sometimes with an uneven attitude toward project	Took it easy most days and worked hard at the end; poor attitude toward project	Took it easy everyday; did not fully finish project; poor attitude

Total score: \_\_\_\_\_

## Reflection Questions

1. What is your overall impression of the piece you created? Did you meet all requirements? Explain.
2. What would you change or do differently?
3. What was your favorite part of this project?
4. What did you learn while completing this project?