

AZTLAN ACADEMY'S ARTE ACA Presents:

NUUESTRA NAVIDAD – A Family Christmas

Teacher Guide

Primary and Middle School Grades

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

The Aztlán Academy, founded in 1966 in Tulare County, is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to the advancement of Mexican/Chicano Folk Arts. The Academy serves as a catalyst for the expression of the vitality and excellence of these arts, and its artistic vision is to nurture opportunities and the environment where they can be learned, performed, and appreciated by people of all ages. The performance program professionally showcases the artists of Aztlán Dance Troupe and guest performers. The Academy also runs classes and 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 by Javier H. Salazar, a folklorist, dancer, choreographer, designer, singer, writer, and community activist born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México. He studied for the priesthood as a youth, later traveled extensively and learned to dance in the rural communities of 14 regions of México while working as a secretary, fisherman, cane cutter, sanitary inspector, rural teacher, vocalist, and percussionist. Without formal dance training, Maestro Salazar has composed over 400 dance pieces since 1960. He has produced hundreds of dance workshops and concerts in the United States.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

“NUUESTRA NAVIDAD - A Family Christmas”, suites of songs and dances from diverse regions of México, depicts the celebration of Christmas through distinct regional traditions. Christmas celebrations (*fandangos*) are the manifestations of the diversity of the Mexican communities and culture. “NUUESTRA NAVIDAD” celebrates the importance of family.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will--

- Develop an understanding of the diverse cultural traditions of México through ritual, celebration, music, and dance;
- Learn how the Christmas tradition evolved in México as a mixture of Christianity 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

The Christmas Tradition in México

- The Spaniards converted millions of indigenous people to Christianity in the 16th Century. Christmas, a religious ritual of central importance in Christian Europe, became a holiday celebrated in México.
- The Christmas celebration in México was rooted in the Spanish tradition and absorbed elements of the rituals of the indigenous 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 México according to their local environments and natural resources.
- The secular *Romería Navideña* is a popular *fiesta*, which is celebrated with food and drink, song and dance, flowers, and piñatas stuffed with fruit and candies. This festival traditionally takes place the evening before its religious counterpart.
- Christmas is celebrated as *Las Posadas*, nine consecutive days of candlelight processions and lively parties beginning on December 16 and culminating on the 24th (*La Nochebuena*).
- In villages and urban neighborhoods throughout México, youngsters gather each afternoon to reenact the Holy Family's quest for lodging in Bethlehem. The *Virgen María*, often perched on a live *burro*, led by a *San José*, heads the procession. They are followed by children and adults portraying angels, the *Reyes Magos* 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 singing and dancing asking for shelter, and is 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.
- *Pastorelas* (Shepherds Plays) are staged throughout the holiday season. These traditional, often improvised, theatrical presentations date back to Mexico's colonial period when Roman Catholic missionaries wooed converts and taught doctrine through dramatizations of biblical stories. These plays tell of the shepherds' visit to the newly born Child. First, they are visited in the fields by an angel who announces the holy birth. As the shepherds attempt to follow the great star leading them to Bethlehem they are plagued by a series of evils and misadventures provoked by *el diablo* (the devil). Nevertheless, in the end, good triumphs over evil and the shepherds reach their intended destination.
- Holiday festivities culminate on *Nochebuena* (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 *lucis de Belén* (sparklers). December 25th is set aside as a day to celebrate family and guests.
- Santa Claus and his reindeer are not a part of the traditional *Navidad Mexicana*. Mexican children ask *El Niño Dios* (the Holy Child) and *Los Reyes Magos* (The Wise Kings) for Christmas gifts.

THE POINSETTIA FLOWERS TRADITION

- The Poinsettia flower, which is now a common symbol of Christmas in the United States, originated in México.
- Poinsettias (which are called *Nochebuenas*, (Christmas Eve flower) in Spanish, and *Cuetlaxochitl* (star flower) in *Nahuatl*, the native *Mexica* language, is a native shrub and has been cultivated for centuries in México's Central Valley. Among pre-Hispanic kingdoms of ancient México, the *Cuetlaxochitl*'s leaves were often placed on the chests of those suffering afflictions of the heart to help stimulate circulation. They were also crushed to a pulp to be used for the treatment of skin infections. Several-colored *Cuetlaxochitl* were planted in the corners of the four cardinal points in the gardens of *Tenochtitlán*, the city of the Aztecs.
- When the Spaniards introduced Christianity and the celebration of Christmas during the Colony, Mexican people introduced the tradition of filling churches with *Cuetlaxochitl* flowers. The flower became a symbol of the development of Mexican cultural and religious traditions as an amalgamation of Christian faith and indigenous ritual.
- Joel Poinsett, the first foreign minister representing the United States of America before the new independent *Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, disseminated *Nochebuena* bushes in our country and later in Europe.

PPREPARATION FOR THE PROGRAM

1. Review "The Christmas Tradition in México" with your students. Ask them the following questions:
 - Do you celebrate a winter holiday? If so, which one?
 - Which tradition or ritual is 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 "Tradition 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 México 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 if they would like. What part of México they or their families came from? What are their traditions?
4. Have the students create a star *piñata*. Blow up a large balloon and cover with strips of newspaper soaked in a flour and water paste (papier-mâché), leaving a small opening. Create four construction paper cones and attach to the outside of the balloon shape. Cover the cones with papier-mâché. Let dry, and then pop the balloon inside. Fill the *piñata* with candy, fruit, or toys, and cover the opening with more papier-mâché. Paint the outside, and hang up so that students can take turns trying to break it.

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 Identify the uses of specific music in daily or special events.
- 3.2 Name the musical accompaniment and explain how it relates to the dances they have studied.
- 3.3 Select traditional dances that men, women, or children perform and explain the purpose(s) of the dances.
- 3.4 Describe dances seen in celebrations and community events.
- 3.4 Describe how costumes and shoes influence dance movement.

Aesthetic Valuing

- 4.2 Explain and demonstrate what it means to be a good audience member.

Connections, Relationships, Applications

- 5.1 Explain the role of music in community events.
- 5.1 Describe how historical events relate to dance forms.