

# Using Art to Promote Dignity and Human Rights for Indigenous Women and Men

Rita E. Moran, City College of San Francisco

## English Composition Lessons Using the Maya Woman Collection

These paintings by contemporary Tz'utuhil and Kaqchikel Maya painters of Guatemala can serve as powerful prompts for discussion and composition. For more information on specific paintings, go to [MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html](http://MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html) and double-click on the image in question. See the commentary provided below the picture.

You are also invited to schedule an exhibition of 12 to 60 paintings from the Maya Woman collection at your college or university. Fees are waived for educational institutions.

### Lesson 1: How Do We Read a Portrait?



Go to [www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html](http://www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html). Find the artist Felipe Ujpan Mendoza, and display his painting *El Viajero / The Traveler*.

a. Present the vocabulary:

portrait	a representation of a person or group of people
facial expression	the way the different parts of the face work together to show emotion
gesture	what the person does with his or her hands
posture	the position of the body
setting	the place or environment in which the sitter is shown
attire	the clothing the person in the portrait is wearing
props	the things the person is holding or is surrounded by

---

NOTE: Some of these lessons have been adapted from *Language through Art: An ESL Enrichment Curriculum*, Education Department of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

- b. Explain to students that they can “read” the story of this portrait by examining each of these six aspects.
- c. Ask students to work in pairs and discuss each aspect of the portrait. Write a few sentences to describe how each word relates to something they see in the picture.
- d. Finally, ask them to talk about the story that is being presented in the portrait, and then briefly write the story.
- e. Ask volunteers to share their story with the class.

## Lesson 2: Writing an Interview



Go to [www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html](http://www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html). Find the artist Mario González Chavajay, and display his painting *Los Sin Tierra / The Landless Ones*.

- a. Have students, working in pairs, imagine that they are newspaper reporters and that their assignment is to interview this woman. Students can imagine possible answers based on careful observation of the people, the setting, and the props.
- b. Ask students to research displacement of indigenous peoples in Central America, and then rewrite the interview, including details from actual incidents. Have them provide references to the news stories or other sources from which they drew their information.

Alternatively, have the students read the article, “Violent Evictions in Polochic,” at [www.ghrc-usa.org/Resources/2011/Violent\\_evictions\\_in\\_Polochic.htm](http://www.ghrc-usa.org/Resources/2011/Violent_evictions_in_Polochic.htm), and then write the interview.

- c. Ask students to perform their interviews for the class.

### Lesson 3: Writing a Love Letter



Go to [www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html](http://www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html). Find the artist Domingo García Criado, and display his painting *Pedrana Trabajadora / Hardworking Woman of San Pedro la Laguna*.

Imagine that you are this woman. What is her life like? Where is her husband? Write a love letter that she might send to him.

- Tell him where you are, and what time it is.
- Describe your surroundings. What do you see and smell and hear?
- What are the children doing?
- How do you feel?
- What do you hope for the future?

## Lesson 4: How Does a Painting Tell a Story?



Go to [www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html](http://www.MayaWomenInArt.org/gallery.html). Find the artist Juanita López and display her painting *El Rapto / The Kidnapping*.

### A. What's the End of the Story?

- a. In small groups, have the students select one person to be the recorder, and one the reporter. The others are the detectives.
- b. Explain that the group needs to figure out what's going on in this story, and make up an ending for it. The detectives should come up with a list of three questions they would ask the artist to learn more about the story. The recorder should take notes on the discussion. The reporter will present the group's findings to the class.
- c. Discussion questions:
  - What do you think is happening in this work of art?
  - What do you see that makes you think that?
  - Describe the relationship between the different characters.
  - Where does the scene take place?
  - What do you think happened ten minutes before this scene?
  - What do you think will happen ten minutes later?
  - What are three questions you could ask the artist who made this picture to find out more about the story?
- d. Ask reporters to present their findings to the class.

### B. Follow-up Research

Have the students research and write about violence against women in Central America and Mexico. For example, they can visit web sites of any of these organizations:

- Amnesty International
- Guatemala Human Rights Commission
- Network in Support of the People of Guatemala
- Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador