

# Character Nichos

(art + social studies, art + literature)

In Mexican and South American cultures, small, decorated boxes called “Nichos” are commonly found in homes and public places, displayed on walls or pedestals. Made from wood or tin and often painted with bright colors, they provide a stage-like setting for an object or collection of objects that have great significance. Most commonly functioning as an altar for a religious icon, a Nicho can also serve as a memorial to a loved one or as a reminder of an important event.

This lesson plan can be used to support a study of Mexican literature or culture, or as a character profile that can link to other literature studies. A student selects a character and builds an environment - a mixed media 3-dimensional collage - that describes that character. The Nicho can also be a personal statement, incorporating things that are important to them.

## Grade Levels 5-8

*Note: instructions and materials based on a class of 25 students. Adjust as needed.*

## Objectives

- Students will select the known qualities of a literary character and create an environment that describes the personality, surroundings, feelings and lifestyle of that character in non-verbal, visual statements.
- Students will create a 3-dimensional mixed media collage that will function as a wall sculpture.



*“El Pajaro Amarillo”  
mixed media collage,  
front view above, and  
side view at left*

## Materials

Paper Maché Mini Box (60001-), assorted shapes, need one per student

Chipboard (13115-2222), single thickness, need approximately one 4" x 5" piece per student

Blick Matte Acrylic (00727-), assorted colors, share at least six 2-oz bottles across classroom

Acme™ Titanium Scissors (57058-1025), one per student

Delta® Sobo® Craft Glue (23820-1004), share five 8-oz bottles across classroom

Blick Scholastic Wonder White Brushes, (05377-) assorted sizes and styles, need at least one per student

Optional Materials for Decorating:

2-Toned Tooling Foil, (60504-8125), coppertone

Embossing Tools (60500-1010), 3-tool set

Copper Wire, 18-gauge (33411-0200)

Beads, assorted color (60716-1005)

Assorted Metallized Beads (60776-1001)

Woodsie™ Wood Shapes (60408-1009)

Crayola® Air-Dry Clay (33272-1125), white

## Preparation

1. Look at examples of Mexican Nichos on the web. Many examples are religious, some are humorous, and materials used vary from elaborate tooled metal and gems to recycled materials and found objects.
2. Discuss the ways that a very ordinary object can become something of great value and importance when placed in a particular setting.

## Process

1. Cut a window in the lid to the box. Measure 1/4" from the edge with ruler. Cut with scissors or craft knife.
2. Measure the chipboard for a front piece. It will need a window slightly larger than the one in the box lid. Place the box lid in the center of the back side of the matboard, trace the window with a pencil. Use the ruler to measure lines 1/8" to 1/4" on the outside of the lines marking the window. Cut out the opening using scissors or craft knife. Leave the front piece as a rectangle or create cut-outs, rounded corners, scalloped or zig-zag edges. Glue onto the lid of the box
3. Paint the front piece as desired with acrylic colors. Paint the outside and inside of the box, the lid, and all surfaces of the chipboard.
6. While paint is drying on the Nicho, assemble the character or object to place in the box. Model the character with air-dry clay, allow it to dry, then paint the surface. Or, to simplify and save time, use paper cut outs or found objects. The bird in the example on page one was formed with clay on a wire base.
7. Decorate the outside of the box to further describe the character. Add painted wood shapes, cut-outs from foil or more objects created with modeling material. Use a push pin to create holes in the box, then attach copper wire pieces to string beads (see example) or to add a hanger on the back of the box (see side view). Glue the character into the Nicho as a final step.

## Options

- Wrap the box with foil and tool patterns and designs into it
- Use newspaper and magazine clippings, tissue papers and other collage elements instead of, or along with paint.
- Use a larger or unusual shaped box.
- There are many ways to make this project more challenging for older students. Require them to create a full scene from a literary piece, or create a Nicho with multiple windows. Incorporate more sculptural elements, hinged doors or even add a light fixture.

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### National Standards:

**Content Standard #3** — Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas

- **5-8** Students use subjects, themes and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks.

- **9-12** Students apply subjects, symbols and ideas in their artworks and use the skills gained to solve problems in daily life.

**Content Standard #4** — Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

- **5-8** Students analyze, describe and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

- **9-12** Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times and places.

**Content Standard #6** — Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

- **5-8** Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods or cultural context.

- **9-12** Students compare the materials, technologies, media and processes of the visual arts with those of other arts disciplines as they are used in creation and types of analysis.