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Day of the Dead Folk Art Lesson Plan:

Learn How to Make Mexican Papel Picado

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Jerome's Class Learned about Mexican Culture & about the El Dia de los Muertos Holiday

"**Day of the Dead**" is the Mexican holiday for remembering and honoring deceased loved ones and ancestors. An important part of the tradition is laying out altars (called "altares") to relatives. The holiday is celebrated annually on November 2nd.

Jerome led a team of fifth-graders charged with turning their social studies class's three ArtHouses into El Dia de los Muertos folk art shrines. To make authentic decorations, they chose to learn one of Mexico's most popular and distinctive folk arts: "papel picado".

A second group selected and arranged Day of the Dead offerings ("ofrendas") within the three altars. Ofrendas usually contain religious items, candles and incense, photographs, sugar-candy skulls, toy skeletons, and favorite toys, foods and beverages and clothing of the loved ones. They often also include marigold flowers. A third group made a small banquet to learn about authentic Mexican foods.

Papel picado is a particular style of paper-cutting with its own traditions. The art originated in pre-Columbian Mexico. Aztecs used mulberry and fig tree barks to make a rough paper called "amatl". The art blossomed when tissue paper became available. Papel picado artisans usually layer forty or fifty leaves of tissue and then punch designs with special chisels called "fierritos". Sheets of papel picado are hung along strings as banners called "banderitas".

Papel picado is made for many other celebrations besides Day of the Dead. Different celebrations call for different colors and motifs. Day of the Dead paper-cuts are usually purple (for pain), white (for hope) or pink (for celebration). Since the 1930's, most Day of the Dead papel picado artwork has shown skeletons in funny scenes. These were inspired by the art of José Guadalupe Posada, a very well-known engraver of cartoons. Religious symbols are also popular. The scenes sometimes say something special or personal about the ancestors' lives, but more often they're just colorful and imaginative decorations.

How to Make Mexican Papel Picado:

We recommend making papel picado scenes symmetrical down the middle like Jerome did. Lay a sheet of regular paper flat. Put two or three layers of tissue on top of it. (Hint: they can be different colors.) Then fold the stack in half down the middle. With stiffer paper on the outside it's much easier to cut and also you can sketch and plan your design on the cover. Jerome's other trick is to make a parallel crease near the opposite edge. The second crease helps hold the paper sandwich together.

What differences can you see in the designs above? In the design on blue tissue every hole is symmetrical. The design was cut entirely with scissors, so extra folds were necessary. Every cut-out starts at a folded edge or at the edge of the paper.

Although it's possible to make all cuts with scissors, elaborate designs are much easier with a sharp razor knife (as evidently done on the other two designs). Put an old magazine under the paper so you won't cut into the table.

Be careful and remember: (1) You can't make "islands" of paper. (2) You have to be careful because you can't "erase" a cut. (3) It's best to plan carefully so you won't have to alter your design as you go. When you're all done cutting, flatten creases carefully before removing the cover because the individual sheets of tissue will be very fragile. As with most art, it takes practice, so don't get discouraged. Have fun!

Enlarged Images:

[Mexican Day of the Dead Folk Art](#)
[La Ofrenda: a Folk Art Decorated Altar](#)
[Scissor-Cut Papel Picado](#)
[El Dia de los Muertos](#)

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