Ideas for Family Programs from the Idaho Read to Me Program

Exploring Mexican Art Through Children’s Literature

There have been several children’s picture books published in the last decade that introduce children (and their parents) to different Mexican artists and different styles of art. A program highlighting these wonderful books and a guest speaker who can expand on the concepts presented in the book by demonstrating artistic techniques or bringing in examples of the real artwork would be interesting to a multi-generational audience in a school or public library setting.

Here are some books that feature artists or art mediums from Mexico:

**The Pot That Juan Built**
by Nancy Andrews-Goebel, David Diaz (Illustrator)

*Review from School Library Journal*
Kindergarten-Grade 5 - Juan Quezada is one of the best-known potters in Mexico. Using only natural materials to form and paint his pots, he is responsible for creating a vibrant folk-art economy in his small town of Mata Ortiz. This unusual book is set up to allow for differing levels of reading expertise, presenting information about Quezada in such a way that it can be read as a story or as an informational book, part biography, part fine-arts discussion. One page contains a catchy cumulative rhyme modeled on “This Is the House That Jack Built,” which outlines the process of making a pot. The facing page offers a clearly written prose presentation, laying out the story of the potter’s life and his method of constructing pots in the classic style of the Casas Grandes Indians. . . An afterword gives a more in-depth treatment of Quezada’s life and work, and is illustrated with small inset color photographs. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

**Dream Carver**
by Diana Cohn, Amy Cordova (Illustrator)

*Review from School Library Journal*
Grade 1-3 - Inspired by the story of Oaxacan wood-carver Manuel Jimenez, this tale shows how imagination can become a compelling force for change. Like his father and grandfather, Mateo carves juguetes, tiny wooden toy animals, to sell at fiestas. The boy, however, wants to make large and bright animals that are brilliantly decorated with speckles and patterns. Since his father disapproves, the child makes his creations on the sly. At fiesta, they sell like hotcakes, and a new art form is born. The text is a trifle wordy and static, but the story does impart its message of belief in oneself without undue didacticism or heavy-handedness. Cordova’s brilliant primitive paintings, rendered in acrylic and colored pencil on a gessoed background, bring Mateo’s animals to vivid life, reinforcing the textual message. A two-page afterword gives information on Jimenez and his art. A good introduction to a uniquely Mexican art form. Ann Welton, Grant Elementary School, Tacoma, WA Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.
Frida (English Language Edition)  
by Jonah Winter, Frida Kahlo, Ana Juan (Illustrator)  

Editorial Review by Amazon.com  
Beset by one shattering ordeal after another, world-renowned painter Frida Kahlo always managed to channel her anguish into creativity. *Frida*, by Jonah Winter and illustrator Ana Juan, is an exquisite and playful glimpse into the artist's life and work. Filled with the folk art icons of Frida's Mexican culture--monkeys, devils, smiling skeletons, and sympathetic jaguars depicted with acrylics and wax on paper--the book describes, in short streams of text, the feisty, irreverent, fierce nature of the artist. One especially memorable illustration, based on one of Frida Kahlo's own paintings, shows Frida herself caught in a tangle of thorns against a mournful blue night sky. The text reads, "After the accident ... her body will hurt, always." Author and illustrator's notes add background information, but this stunning book from the author of *Diego*, about famed Mexican muralist (and husband of Frida) Diego Rivera, is a spectacular, lush introduction to an inspiring woman and her art. (Ages 5 to 8) --Emilie Coulter

Diego by Jeanette Winter (Illustrator), Jonah Winter  

Editorial Review from School Library Journal  
Grade 1-4-- An accessible picture book about the life and work of Diego Rivera sounds like an oxymoron, but Winter and Winter succeed beyond belief. His early life is the focus: the text in Spanish and English captions the paintings. It does a journeyman's job of conveying facts in well-condensed sentences; the Spanish translation is clear and easy to follow even for those readers without fluency in the language. Each picture is bordered with Mexican folk-art designs done in vivid, resonant, tropical tones. The paintings themselves are done in Rivera's own colossal style, even though they actually measure only a few inches square. Winter displays her clear knowledge of and love for her subject. Frida Kahlo appears in one scene without any identification other than her distinctive eyebrows; this subtle allusion is the only mention of Rivera's tempestuous personal life. The last pictures show him as a young man, perched on his scaffolding, brushes in hand, beckoning viewers on with his ardent glance. Readers will wish they could follow. --Ruth Semrau, Lovejoy School, Allen, TX

Another title that has received excellent reviews is *The Tree is Older Than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems and Stories from Mexico with Paintings by Mexican Artists* by Naomi Shihab. This may be geared toward older readers.

Resources for this type of program:  
Contact your local arts or cultural council or organizations to see if they can recommend someone who is a knowledgeable guest speaker. College or university art departments located near your community may also be a resource.

Explore ways to allow families to do a hands-on art or craft activity during your program.

Local Hispanic organizations may be interested in co-sponsoring a program like this.

There may be funding available from local arts and cultural organizations, community service clubs or organizations, The Idaho Commission on the Arts, The Ezra Jack Keats Foundation, and others. Partnering with others in your community may increase the chance that you'll get outside funding.

Having multiple copies of the books mentioned above will be helpful for a program like this.
Family Fun with Trails & Geography

Books offer a glimpse into far away places. Where else can you travel across the globe or galaxy with a flip of a page? Use books and activities to help teach children about travel and geography. Emphasize where a story takes place to help kids become aware of settings. Use the following ideas to help.

- Find a large copy of a world map. Put pins, stickers or highlight places visited, where relatives live, current events, or book settings.

- Talk about where ideas, products, and people come from.

- Visit a travel agency and collect travel brochures. Read them and talk about unique places to travel.

- Collect stamps. Research or map their origins.

- Help your child get a pen pal or write letters to relatives or friends in different cities or countries.

- Keep maps, atlases and globes around the house. Use them with your child.

- Talk about what you like best about being home. What is it like to be away from home? What do you or would you miss the most? If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go? Why?

- Make binoculars by stapling two toilet tissue tubes and some yarn together. Explore and talk about what you see together.

- Celebrate cultural customs and rituals from your own heritage.

- Experiment with other cultures. Attend a pow-wow, eat foods from other cultures, and learn as much as you can by reading and talking with others from different cultures.

- Create a pretend "suitcase" from a file folder or cereal box (cover with paper or fabric). Have kids cut out or draw pictures of items they might need on a trip (toothbrush, clothing, camera, etc.) and "pack" them in the file folder.

- Learn a few common phrases in other languages.

- Examine images that television, movies, and books project of people of various cultures. Discuss what's authentic and what's stereotypical and how you can determine the difference.