

Ancient Icons

In this activity students will be exploring art as a means to learn more about history and science. Ancient Andean civilizations worshipped animal deities that informed their cultural practices and understanding of the natural world. This multidisciplinary entryway to science will give students the opportunity to use art and/or creative writing as a means to draw inspiration from nature and creatively express their own understanding of it.

Objectives:

- To illustrate the cultural connections ancient and modern-day Andean people have to animals
- To use observation skills as a means to make inferences about animal behavior
- To create a poem, story, or artwork based off a personal experience
- To integrate history/social studies with science

Materials:

- [Ancient Icons Student Worksheet](#)
- Notebooks
- Pencils
- Colored pencils
- Computer
- Speakers

Process:

Part 1:

- 1) The teacher will introduce students to the Chavín, a pre-Incan civilization originating around 1000 BC. According to archeologists, “Chavín [was] the ‘mother culture of the Andes’ and continues to be thought of as one of the six ‘pristine’ civilizations in world history with unrivalled influence on subsequent Andean cultures.”¹ Chavín de Huantar, an archeological site of the Chavín, was a centre for sacred pilgrimage for the Andean religious world.²
- 2) The teacher will discuss with students that the Chavín worshiped a deity called El Lanzón (show images on Ancient Icons Student Worksheet). It has been described as, “an unspecific anthropomorphic [having human form or attributes] being with feline characteristics.”³ The jaguar is often a prominent animal in many early Andean icons. However, archeologists are now starting to question if maybe El Lanzón more closely resembles an Andean bear, the only bear species found in South America.

- 3) Students will have the opportunity to compare images of El Lanzón to jaguars and Andean bears. They will identify traits of both animals that they observe in the monolith.
- 4) The teacher will explain that Chavín icons often integrated the strongest features of different animals to personify a supreme deity.
- 5) The teacher will discuss how in indigenous and ancient civilizations, animals symbolized people’s cultural beliefs and understandings about the natural world. For instance, Andean bears are associated with water, a natural mediator between the earth and the sky, and agricultural and human fertility.⁴ According to Pailsey and Saunders, “Their connection with agricultural fertility may well spring from sharing an omnivorous diet with people, in particular the fondness of maize, a crop of great economic and ceremonial importance from pre-Columbian times.”⁵

Part 2:

- 1) The teacher should take students somewhere they’d be able to observe a live animal. This can be any animal in any setting. For instance, it might be a class pet, an ant colony on the school playground, a fieldtrip to a zoo/aquarium/nature center, or any other outdoor location. For teachers in NYC, the Queens Zoo has Andean bears, which directly connects to part 1 of this activity.
 - a) For teachers who are unable to take fieldtrips or go outside, you can also observe animals by watching live webcams or video clips. Provided are several WCS video clips of Andean bears at the Queens Zoo and in the wild.
 - i) [Video 1](#)⁶
 - ii) [Video 2](#)⁷
 - iii) [Video 3](#)⁸
- 2) Ask students to write down any words that come in mind while observing the animal. The words can be related to the animal’s behavior, traits, or the way it makes students feel. In addition, students can also sketch the animal if it helps enhance their observation. In essence, students are creating a persona for the animal.

3) Instruct the students that they have two options:

- a) To write a creative story or poem about the animal's connection to nature and culture.
 - i) Students should think about how they can better understand the processes of the natural world by observing their selected species. How do they plan to showcase the traits, behaviors, feelings that they identified and have those translate into a fictional story?
- b) To create their own animal icon.
 - i) Students should think about how they will showcase the traits, behaviors, feelings that they identified. How will that present itself as a work of art?

Citations:

- 1) Susanna Paisley and Nicolas J. Saunders, "A god forsaken: the sacred bear in Andean iconography and cosmology," *World Archaeology* 42, no. 2 (2010): 251.
- 2) United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. "Chavin (Archaeological Site)." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/330>.
- 3) Paisley and Nicholas, A god forsaken, 252
- 4) Ibid., 249.
- 5) Ibid., 256.
- 6) Wildlife Conservation Society. "Andean Bear Cubs on Exhibit (2019)," YouTube video, 02:28. May 15, 2019. <https://youtu.be/yzlKiQchkwE>
- 7) Wildlife Conservation Society. "Queens Zoo Andean Bears," YouTube video, 01:04. November 6, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ea3DmskJF8w>
- 8) Wildlife Conservation Society. "WCS Remote Cameras Reveal: Andean Bears Hate Paparazzi," YouTube video, 01:09. October 22, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cISmmDrism8>

Supplemental Resources:

To gather more background information on Chavín de Huantar, check out these resources!

- 1) [New World Encyclopedia - Chavín de Huantar](#)
- 2) [UNESCO World Heritage Centre- Chavín \(Archaeological Site\)](#)

 WCS presents

FIELD SIGHT

To learn about WCS Education
and our park programs, visit
wcs.org/education

 @WCSEducation

 @WCSEducation