

Altered “Alebrijes”

A lively way to rejuvenate an old toy and discover a much-loved art form from Mexico

(art + social studies)

In 1936, Pedro Linares, a craftsman in Mexico City, fell ill with a high fever and dreamed he was in a strange land filled with fantastical, brightly colored creatures shouting the word “Alebrije!” Upon recovery, Linares began recreating the creatures in cartonería (the term used for papier-mâché in Mexico). Eventually, his work made its way into galleries and caught the attention of artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who commissioned him to create more. Today, the Linares family continues to create cartonería Alebrijes that are prized by collectors all over the world.

In the 1980s, artisans in the central valleys of Oaxaca adapted the Alebrijes by carving them from copal wood and creating more exotic animals such as elephants, giraffes, and lions. As wood carving and painting had been a tradition in this region since pre-hispanic times, the addition of Alebrijes was an expansion to the traditional repertoire.

Inspired by these vibrant sculptures, students can fashion a fantastical creature of their own — with a bit of a personal touch. Start with an old toy that’s no longer in use, add a covering of plaster wrap and bright decoration, and turn a Teddy into a Yeti or a plastic dinosaur into a mythical dragon. Please note that the toy cannot be reclaimed after it has undergone its transformation to an Alebrije.

GRADES 2-12 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Each student will need a toy to cover: plastic formed animals, dolls, action figures, stuffed animals, or “bean bag” animals can be used.

Process

1. Place the toy on a plastic bag to protect the work surface and avoid having the dry piece stick to the surface. If the toy will need to be moved while drying, place the bag on a piece of scrap cardboard to make it easy to move about while drying.
2. Cut plaster cloth into small strips, about 1” wide. Dip each strip in water and use fingers to remove excess water. Place strips one at a time over the toy, wrapping it around the body, legs, and other features. All surfaces should be wrapped. Rigid toys (such as plastic) can be wrapped tightly. Soft toys should not be wrapped too tightly or their shape may distort.



Materials (required)

Toy, one per student

[Crayola Portfolio Series Acrylics](#), 16 oz, assorted colors (00629-); share across class

[Activa Rigid Wrap Plaster Cloth](#), 4” x 5 yd roll (33507-1004); plan on 2 ft per student

Optional materials:

[3M Production Sandpaper](#), fine grit, pkg of 10 sheets (34916-1303)

[Blickrylic Gesso](#), quart (00711-1017)

[DAS Modeling Clay](#), White, 2.2 lb (30538-1042)

[Creativity Street Rhinestones](#), 375 piece pkg (61762-1001)

[Creativity Street Sequin Mix](#), 4 oz (60718-1004)

[Crayola Washable Glitter Glue](#), assorted color sets (23838-)



Process, continued

3. Smooth the plaster with fingers to create the most smooth surface possible. Allow to dry for a few hours or overnight.
4. The plaster surface can be lightly sanded prior to painting. If a smoother surface is desired, apply 2-3 coats of acrylic gesso over the dried plaster, allowing time to dry between coats.
5. Extensions such as horns, wings, tails, etc. can be added to the creature using air-dry modeling clay.
6. Paint with vibrant acrylic colors, inspired by designs created by Mexican Alebrije artists.

Options

1. Add sequins, rhinestones, glitter, and other objects to enhance the Alebrije.
2. A Calaca is a skeleton figure, commonly shown wearing festive clothing, dancing, or playing musical instruments to indicate a joyous afterlife. A doll or action figure could become a calaca.

National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding



Step 1: Cover a toy with damp strips of plaster cloth and allow to dry.



Step 2: Extensions, such as wings, horns, tails, etc. can be added to the creature using air-dry modeling clay.



Step 3: Paint with vibrant acrylic colors.