Lowriders

8th Annual Día de los Muertos Festival Exhibit

The Arizona State University Museum of Anthropology

November 1, 2007 through January 11, 2008

Education Packet

Developed by ASU Museum of Anthropology volunteers
GUIDED GROUP VISIT INFORMATION

1. If you would like to schedule a visit to ASUMA, please contact Catherine Nichols at anthro.museum@asu.edu

2. Please arrive at least 10 minutes prior to your scheduled time.

3. The museum can accommodate up to 30 students, but 10-15 students are ideal. Please include the number of students that plan on attending so arrangements can be made to have sufficient staff for your visitation.

4. One chaperone must be present at all times for each group of 20 children. Two chaperones are preferred.

5. Please schedule your visit one week prior to the date you want to visit the museum.

6. Discuss museum behavior before your scheduled visit. Students should have an understanding of museum etiquette. They will not be able to touch the photographs in the gallery.

7. The museum is ALWAYS free; there are no fees for students, teachers, or volunteers. Museum hours are Monday through Friday, 11 AM to 3 PM. Other times can be arranged by appointment.

Please share this material with other educators. This packet is available for download at www.asu.edu/clas/shesc/asuma.
**Lowriders: 8th Annual Día de los Muertos Festival Exhibit**

**Overview**

The current exhibit presents a range of traditional and modern altars and artwork by contemporary artists and other community members from widely diverse walks of life. The following two essays introduce Mexican-American (Chicano) Lowrider art and culture and the Día de los Muertos tradition. Combining these two themes, we have also compiled activities for different age groups and suggested some in-class discussion questions. During your visit, we would like you to think about the “expressive culture” on display. What does it tell us about Chicano attitudes toward death and life, especially life between two cultures?
What is a lowrider? The word is used to describe a car that is customized primarily to be low to the ground, usually containing a hydraulic setup for adjusting ride height, with a fantastic candy paint job, chrome features, and customized upholstery. Included among the categories of lowrider cars are “bombs” (American-made cars from the late 1930s to the early 1950s) and “Euros” (import cars such as Honda and Acura) among others. Many lowriding purists believe that classic Chevrolets are the only cars that, once properly customized, can carry the lowrider label, yet today virtually any kind of vehicle can be transformed into a lowrider. There are now lowrider mini-trucks, SUVs (sport utility vehicles), motorcycles, bicycles, and even scale models. Most importantly, the lowrider label is also used to describe people who participate in this car culture phenomenon. Lowriding is a way of life for many of its participants, and its practice varies across the United States and abroad.

When did lowriding begin? Almost everyone has a different story to tell and all of them add to the vitality of lowriding as a cultural experience. For example, in Espanola, New Mexico, the lowriders claim it began there and the town has proclaimed itself Lowrider Capital of the World. On the other hand, Chicano lowriders in Los Angeles claim it started here with the pachuco/zoot suit culture of the 1940s and that it accelerated in popularity after WWII with the rise of the automotive industries in Los Angeles. African Americans in Los Angeles also participated in the lowriding scene, and have been important innovators. There is a long history of interconnection between Black and Chicano communities in Los Angeles reaching back to swing and jazz scenes of the 1940s to the R&B scene of the 1960s and 1970s, which has influenced lowrider culture and continues to do so.

The rise of automobile culture in the United States has been discussed at length by authors such as Tom Wolfe, James Flink, Cynthia Dettleback, and Nora Donnelly, to name a few. A highly visible pursuit, lowriding is a ritual with roots in American automobile history and culture that blossomed during the postwar manufacturing boom and the popularization of leisure activities focused around the automobile. As the demand for new cars increased when automobile manufacturing resumed after WWII, a large number of used cars became readily
available to anyone with limited means—WWII veterans, youth, the working class, and minorities. These second-hand cars provided motorists with an avenue to transcend the limits of territory, like the barrio or ghetto, through the mobility of their cars—and the postwar car culture exploded. As Ernie Ruelas of Los Angeles remembers in the documentary Low and Slow (1997), “You would buy a car in the ’50s for fifteen dollars, it was easy to put dual pipes on it, you know, lower it and, if you messed that up, you go get another one.” At the same time, many veterans learned mechanical skills through their work in shipyards, airplane hangars, and military motor pools. Many of these men were also part of the “52-20 club,” where they received benefits from the U.S. government for their military service. As Michael Stone suggests in “Bajito y Suavecito: Lowriding and the ‘Class’ of Class,” this extra income, which consisted of twenty dollars a month for a year, made it possible for veterans to purchase new or used cars. All of these changes allowed many working class youth the opportunity to purchase an automobile that typically represented “middle class status.”

Many car customizers utilized vehicles to express resistance to the culture of conformity that existed in the 1950s, and an environment was created that fostered a strong bond between American males and their cars. During this period, different groups developed their own styles of customizing. Whereas hot-rodgers customized their cars by raising them off the ground and enhancing their speed, lowriders reversed the aesthetic by lowering their vehicles and cruising as slowly as possible (Low and Slow/Bajito y Suavecito). The speed, the look, and the sound of one’s car became a symbol of cultural resistance and the work done to one’s car became a means of artistic expression. Lowriders transformed the style of an already manufactured item, an American automobile, by infusing it with certain meanings of urban life. Before hydraulics, customizers lowered car by cutting the suspension coils and installing lowering blocks for the lowest profile possible, a style that became known as “OG” or old guard. Many car owners were also known to put heavy objects such as sandbags, bricks or bags of cement in their trunks to achieve the desired look. The goal was to bring a car as close to the ground as possible. Some would even install street scrapers on the bottom of their car, so sparks would fly out from underneath the chassis.

Hydraulics marked the beginning of a new era of lowriding. In 1958, Ron Aguirre, a Chicano from Los Angeles, installed the first hydraulic system in a 1957 Chevrolet Corvette. The setup allowed his car to be lowered or raised with a flip of a switch, an important innovation in the lowriding scene. The hydraulic parts, surplus from WWII fighter planes, consisted of hydro air pumps and dumps, which assisted in lowering and raising the wing flaps of the fighter aircraft. These surplus parts were a valuable asset to the lowriders, since they could ride as low as they wanted to on the boulevard then return their cars to a legal ground clearance with the flip of a switch if the police were noticed. Because the California vehicle code stipulated that no part of a car could be lower than the bottom portion of the wheel rim, the police often wrote tickets to lowriders, some of their favorite targets. The lowrider label began its use in the 1960s and according to
Lowrider Magazine the term was first coined by the police after the 1965 Watts Riots. Jack Kennedy relates in Lowrider: History, Pride, Culture that “They [the police] were using the term ‘lowrider’ as a derogatory term for the young black kids that were causing all the trouble…They said that they were kids who drove cars with no springs and no seats so they could ride low.” The term “lowrider,” which began as an insult, took on new meaning as youth and young adults redefined it as an expression of cultural pride.

\textbf{CUENTOS: STORIES}

As an everyday practice, lowriding is fundamentally a family tradition. Many lowriders believe that the construction of custom cars fosters close relationships among relatives, especially between fathers, sons, and brothers. Parents give their children opportunities to discover the feelings of pride, satisfaction, and self-fulfillment by sharing their own lowriding experiences, passing on mechanical knowledge and technical skills, and encouraging creativity. The tradition instills a sense of responsibility in young people by demonstrating the rewards of dedication and a strong work ethic. It also encourages ingenious innovations as lowriders design cars that ultimately qualify as works of art. Describing how he felt when his father introduced him to lowriding, Albert DeAlba of Montclair, California said, “It was a whole new world. It was something to do, and you wanted to get better at it because you wanted to have the best stuff on the street.” A prime example of a strong family lowriding tradition, the DeAlbas have an automotive business where the four sons and grandsons work together with their fathers fixing cars.

The importance of carnalismo (family and fraternal relationships) among lowriders is reflected in the formation of their car clubs. Generally referred to by members as second families, most clubs were established by small, close-knit groups of custom car enthusiasts consisting of either blood relatives or individuals from their neighborhoods. In addition to establishing a sense of solidarity among lowriders, these associations also support friendly competition among members who try to outdo one another in creating the “perfect” car. While club politics do exist within the lowriding scene, each member shares a familial bond that fosters respect and pride for their cars. And because of the emphasis on these themes, their longevity as car clubs is often the result.
Some car clubs, like the Dukes of Southern California (the oldest lowrider club in continuous existence), demonstrate their strong commitment to community activism by sponsoring fundraisers and charity events that have benefited local churches, benevolent societies, and social movements like the United Farm Workers Labor Union. The Dukes celebrated their 40th anniversary in 2002. At the heart of this car club is the Ruelas family, who are regarded as the “godfathers of lowriding.” Petersen Automotive Museum director Dick Messer remarked in the June 2007 issue of Lowrider Magazine that “Every discipline, no matter what it is, needs some icon to be the one everyone turns to. In hot rodding, it’s Wally Parks. In NASCAR, it’s Tony Stewart, and in lowriding, it’s the Ruelas brothers.”

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Ruelas brothers grew up in a South Los Angeles neighborhood where Hispanics were less visible and Blacks dominated the cultural landscape. Ernie Ruelas explained in the July 2006 WEST Magazine that they “…were known as the ‘Black Mexicans.’ Our Black brothers respected us for having courage.” In the same article, Terry Anderson and Ted Wells (both African American) remember meeting the Dukes in the early 1970s, an event about which Anderson remarked, “These guys had me at their home for quinceañeras (teenage girl coming of age celebrations), funerals of car club members, and holidays. They took me into their family.” Demographically, South Los Angeles is today predominantly Latino (54 percent), while the African American population is now 38 percent. This demographic shift was not lost on Ted Wells, who told WEST Magazine, referring to the racial conflicts during the 1960s and ‘70s that “…it was seldom Black on Brown. Instead it was Black on Black, Brown on Brown. It’s not like that anymore. Back then a black eye, a bloody nose…but (we) hugged up together in the end.” Documenting and understanding Black and Brown cultural histories of Los Angeles through the study of lowriding can help illuminate the present dynamics and offer possible solutions to the problems created by cultural tensions that often plague our urban landscape.
Lowrider Magazine (LRM), which celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2007, has played an integral role in the documentation and transformation of lowrider culture. From its debut in 1977, the magazine has provided Chicanos and other aficionados a means to capture and document their pursuits. Many Chicanos responded enthusiastically to a periodical created by Chicanos for Chicanos, and the magazine featured lowriders, pachucos, cholos, and cultural symbols of Chicano barrio life. Over time, LRM made it possible for lowrider culture to expand across ethnic, class, gender, and geographic boundaries. Such outreach has brought lowriding to African Americans, Asian Americans, and members of other cultural groups, adding to its vitality. Though other magazines endeavor to capture the lowrider lifestyle, LRM has achieved international popularity, creating a means by which all lowriding enthusiasts can unite and celebrate the culture.

On an international level, there are lowriders in Japan and Europe. Japan has a particular affinity for lowrider culture, and there is even a Japanese Lowrider magazine. Many of the Japanese youth adopt certain fashions associated with barrio culture such as baggy pants, bandanas, and zoot suits. They even wear T-shirts that say “Chicano Pride” or those bearing images of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Many Japanese are also buying lowrider cars from the United States and bringing them to Japan. In the process, many aspects of lowrider culture have changed as lowriding has moved out of the barrios, into the suburbs and across the globe. Photographer Estevan Oriol and artist Mister Cartoon have played important roles documenting and creating art that examines the intersections of lowrider culture, Japanese culture, and hip hop culture. Music and art have become important facets of la vida lowrider and they will be featured in the upcoming Petersen exhibit. What began as a rolling celebration of urban life on the boulevards of Los Angeles has evolved into a cultural expression and way of life that has come to unite people of all cultures. It is a tradition that brings together the socio-cultural experience in the boulevards of the past, present and future. Bajito y Suavecito (Low and Slow) is a way of life that requires passion,
corazón and respect. It is a cultural pursuit that is both fluid and active. It is also about being seen; beckoning the viewer to look and discover a cultural expression that remains an integral part of Los Angeles. La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels is an exhibition ripe with many exciting surprises, and the cruising has only begun. ¡Que Viva Lowriding!

Denise M. Sandoval, Ph.D.
Guest Curator and Community Researcher

La Vida Lowrider: Cruising The City of Angels will be on view October 27, 2007 through June 8, 2008 in the Grand Salon.
Día de Los Muertos

The Mexican celebration of Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, has its origins in the Pre-Colombian era. The Mesoamerican people, including Aztec and Maya, conceived of life and death as cyclical. The Cult of the Dead involved acts of reciprocation between descendant and ancestor. Offerings were made to ancestors to ensure future prosperity, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the dead and the living. The Spanish colonization of Mexico and the introduction of Catholicism resulted in a layering and fusion of religious beliefs. The Day of the Dead celebration as it is known today is a product of this process.

In contemporary Mexico and the Southwest region of the United States, Día de los Muertos is the annual celebration of the return of the ancestors, who are invited to come back and visit during the first and second of November. People prepare altars with the purpose of sharing the joys of life with family members, friends and loved ones that have passed on. The ways in which altars are prepared vary in each region of Mexico and the United States. The principle elements that are found on altars include the favorite food and drinks of the people who have died, candles, personal objects, pan de muertos (bread of the dead), images of saints, copal (resin) incense, flowers, crosses, water and photographs. If altars are dedicated to children, sweets and toys are included. In some regions, altars are set upon graves in cemeteries and churches.

Yet, if we view this ritual and celebration merely as reflections on the duality of life and death, we lose some of the existentialist threads that are woven into the current practices of the Día de los Muertos. It involves the transformation of death into something common and familiar, as well as the view of life as tragic and ruled by chance. Hence, “it is not fear of death, but anguish towards life; being conscious of exposure, with insufficient means of defense; a life full of uncertainties and dangers” (Aguilar-Moreno 1998:10). With this honest perspective on the pitfalls of life, also comes the ability to reconcile with the realities of grief, suffering and loss. It is best to embrace wholly the pain of losing a loved one, while at the same time to celebrate the wondrous and chaotic nature of life. This is also the central theme represented in the art of Jose Luis Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913), who produced Calaveras, or epitaphs, that portrayed the energy of life in the face of death. Unlike the traditional European view of the skeleton as a reminder of the fleeting nature of life, according to the artist Diego Rivera, Posada personified death ‘as a skeleton that gets drunk, picks fights, sheds tears and dances for joy’ (Diego Rivera cited by Rothenstein 1989:187).

(A complete Day of the Dead education packet can also be downloaded at www.asu.edu/clas/shesc/asuma.)
Gallery Activity

**Scavenger Hunt**

You may ask your tour guide for help if you need it. Have fun!

Find the following people, words, or objects in the LOWRIDER exhibit and write down the name of the artist (or the title of the artwork):

- chessboard
- chain steering wheel
- wrench on a cross
- Marilyn Monroe
- two musicians in a living room
- “Old School”
- bikerider wearing cowboy hat
- upside-down lowrider car
- bird hood ornament
- skeleton with red braids
Discussion Questions

Do you own anything that says something about your personality, family, or community? What do you think lowrider vehicles tell us about Mexican-American culture? (colorful celebration of Chicano culture and heritage; difficulties of barrio life; mixture of Hispanic, Pre-Columbian, and US motifs)

If you have ever lost someone or something you loved, you know that it makes you feel sad. Does looking at your favorite work of art at the Arizona Museum of Anthropology help you feel a little happier when you think about your loss? If so, why do you think that is? (view of life after death that is hopeful, beautiful; brings the dead close again, reminds us of their life)

In what ways are Halloween and the Day of the Dead similar? In what ways are they different? Do you prefer one to the other? Why? (Both focus on death, nighttime; both use carnivalesque fun, laughter, parties, personal expression and creativity (altars, costumes, community haunted houses) to deal with fear and grief; DotD both personal and communal, Halloween emphasizes community; DotD gives a sense of love and respect for one’s ancestors, loved ones)

The Day of the Dead originally celebrated living children and the dead. Why do you think that is? (circle of life)

What do cars mean to you in your life? What are some ways people see cars? How have people’s views on cars changed over time? (expression of identity, status; freedom; traffic congestion and global warming)
Classroom Activities

The Car Relay

Directions:

- Divide the class into five groups.
- Set up 5x5 rows of chairs in the classroom. Each of the five chairs in a row is a lane.
- The first student in each group will approach the first chair and after the first question has been asked from the “question and answer” sheet below, the student who raised their hand first and answered the question correctly will move up a chair. If they do not answer correctly another student may try in another group.
- Once a team member has moved up a chair, the next student from that group steps up and the process is continued.
- Whoever gets their entire group through all five chairs first wins the relay!
1. Where did the holiday Día de los Muertos originate? Mexico
2. When is Día de los Muertos celebrated? November 1st and 2nd
3. True or False: Families celebrate this holiday as a reunion of the living and the non-living? True
4. What is the Spanish word for “party”? Fiesta
5. Lowriders are originally associated with what culture? Chicano, or Mexican-American
6. True or False: There were no Coca-Cola or Snickers placed on any of the altars in the ASU Museum of Anthropology. False, they were on at least four altars.
7. In the movie Night at the Museum, which character wanted to play fetch? T-Rex
8. What is Día de los Muertos translated into English? Day of the Dead
9. True or False: The song Lowrider is the theme song for The George Lopez show. True
10. Name two famous people to whom the altars were dedicated in the ASU Museum of Anthropology. Here are just a few of the answers; Selena, 2 Pac, Martin Luther King Jr., Pancho Villa….
11. What kind of food is placed on the altars for the deceased family members? Favorite foods of the deceased person, bread, and sugar skulls to name just a few.
12. True or False: Papel picado is traditionally used in the festivities for Day of the Dead? True
13. In the movie Cars, which car helped McQueen with his turns? Doc Hudson
14. What kind of lowrider vehicles are there? Cars, trucks, motorcycles, bikes…
15. True or False: The candles on the altars represent souls. True

16. What does “ofrenda” mean in English? Offering

17. Name a museum you know of other than the ASU Museum of Anthropology?
   E.g. the Louvre, Smithsonian, or any community museums they know of…..

18. True or False: Food may be placed on altars in order to nourish the deceased family members. True

19. For how many years has the ASU Museum of Anthropology held the Día de los Muertos exhibit? Eight years

20. True or False: The three main colors on ASUMA’s walls are red, grey, and black.
    False; they’re orange, purple, and green.

Finish customizing the lowrider car on the next page!
CRAZY CRUISIN' MAZE
Cruiser Crossword

Across

1. A ________ is a lowrider that bounces.
7. Slang for an old, fixed up car.
8. A 1950 car is considered a ________.
9. _______ are the wire part of the wheel.

Down

1. _______ help raise and lower the car.
2. _______ were Latino street rebels of the 1940s.
3. Traditionally lowriders are from _______ subculture.
4. A popular car to customize.
5. Slang word for riding.
6. Refers to the Chicano, Latino and Hispanic peoples.
Across
  1. hopper
  7. ranfla
  8. classic
  9. spokes

Down
  1. hydraulics
  2. Pachucos
  3. Latino
  4. Chevrolet
  5. Raza
This word search puzzle is a little easier than the one that follows…

N S K I R T S Y V E H C C T U
E I U A S N D S A S U S T E E
O A A B I M P A L A E R S E Y
O I C F W O L L E M H E T S H
C R L E K O A A A I C P G R S
U B A E G W O L T H N P N C A
H R S B E N F F H Y I O I U L
C U S T O M I Z E D I H P S F
A S I E S U Y S R R P C P D T
P H C C H C N S I A S O I N L
W S S Y D N A C R U I P D I S
V E L V E T B G E L R S E I E
A F W S O Y R E E I S C I H F
A H N R E M O R H C S A A N A
A N H S E P I R T S N I P O G

AIRBRUSH
BOUNCE
CANDY
CHEVY
CHROME
CLASSICS
CRUISING
CUSTOMIZED
DIPPING
FINS
FLAMES
FLASHY
GRAPHICS
HOPPERS
HYDRAULICS
IMPALA
LEATHER
PACHUCO
PINSTRIPE
RAISING
SKIRTS
SPOILER
SPOKES
SUBWOOFERS
VELVET
WHITEWALLS
AIRBRUSH
BOUNCE
CANDY
CHEVY
CHROME
CLASSICS
CRUISING
CUSTOMIZED
DIPPING
FINS
FLAMES
FLASHY
GRAPHICS
HOPPERS
HYDRAULICS
IMPALA
LEATHER
PACHUCO
PINSTripes
RAISING
SKIRTS
SPOILER
SPOKES
SUBWOOFERS
VELVET
WHITEWALLS
### Unscramble the Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>HCSPUCOA</th>
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<tr>
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<td>WELESH</td>
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SSACICL: CLASSIC  HCSPUCOA: PACHUCOS
OLEIRDWR: LOWRIDER  SNRIIUGC: CRUISING
ARISHPCG: GRAPHICS  EHMRCO: CHROME
SAUIRRHB: AIRBRUSH  LANTZA: AZTLAN
WELESH: WHEELS  CNBOEU: BOUNCE