The Return to Aztlán by Alfredo Arreguín

About the Artist:

Alfredo Arreguín weaves the traditions, stories, art forms, and landscapes of his native Mexico with the experiences he has had while living on the West Coast of the United States. Inspired by the ornate textiles, tapestries, and totemic motifs of his birthplace, Arreguín overlaps shape, line, and color, often forming a picture within a picture. His compositions frequently include images of Mexican or Mexican American leaders, activists, or cultural icons in what he describes as an effort to “paint the memory of our heroic people in the context of their heroism.”

About the Painting:

The Return to Aztlán memorializes modern-era civil rights leaders Dolores Huerta and César Chávez alongside the historic revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata, Miguel Hidalgo, and José María Morelos. “Aztlán” can be interpreted in more than one way, most notably as the physical origin of the Aztec people (the area that once belonged to Mexico in the southwestern part of the United States) and as a rallying cultural and metaphorical entity. In the words of Arreguín, the painting “celebrates the traditions of independence and social justice that have been essential in the development of Mexican and Chicano identities.”

About the Subjects:

In the struggle for justice against Mexico’s Spanish colonial authorities, Miguel Hidalgo began the movement toward independence by calling for revolt on September 16, 1810. José María Morelos was appointed a lieutenant in the ensuing war and became the movement’s leader after the capture and execution of Hidalgo. The unpopular laws and practices of the Spanish were overthrown in 1821, and as a result, Mexico gained its independence. Mexicans celebrate their Independence Day on September 16 to commemorate the day when the struggle began.

Less than a century after their war for independence, Mexico experienced a violent revolution. Emiliano Zapata led the fight against governmental corruption and the hacienda system in which privileged plantation owners denied workers their basic rights. After nearly a decade of fighting, reforms were made, and the hacienda system ended.

Dolores Huerta and César Chávez endured racism and overcame obstacles as Mexican Americans. In 1962, they helped form the United Farm Workers Union to combat injustice toward migrant workers in California and the American Southwest. At that time, workers were exposed to dangerous agricultural chemicals while working up to sixteen hours a day in temperatures over 100 degrees. Their annual salaries averaged $1,600. Huerta and Chávez were inspired by civil rights leaders Emiliano Zapata, Jowaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in that they used non-violent approaches, such as marches and protests, to gain attention for their cause.

Huerta and Chávez's most widespread protest, the Delano Grape Boycott, was organized with the United Farm Workers in 1965. The boycott put pressure on the owners of the California grape industry to change their unfair practices. Millions of U.S. citizens, including children, participated by refusing to buy or eat grapes. After five years, the boycott proved successful when twenty-six grape growers signed an agreement that secured benefits and fair conditions for workers.

Think of an individual or group of people whom you consider to have left a legacy on your town, the nation, or the world. What did they do? Create a class collage of these heroes in the style of Alfredo Arreguín.

César Chávez said, “A symbol is an important thing. This is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride . . . when people see it they know it means dignity.” Research the symbolism of the eagle (found at the top center of the painting) and the American eagle. Create a Venn diagram or craft a comparative essay detailing their similarities and differences.

The slogan “Sí, se puede,” meaning “yes one can” or “yes it can be done,” was used by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta during the Delano Grape Boycott. In 2008, the slogan was used in Barack Obama’s campaign for presidency. Discuss the contemporary and historic use of the influential slogan. Individually or in small groups, create a “Sí, se puede” poster based on issues that are important to you, or inspired by individuals within your curriculum.

In Dolores Huerta’s 2012 acceptance speech for the highest honor a civilian can receive, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, she stated, “The great social justice changes in our country have happened when people came together, organized, and took direct action.” Ask students to write a speech from the perspective of Huerta or César Chávez. The speech can be set during the protest/boycott or after. Use persuasive language.

Respond to this quote by César Chávez: “The love of justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being, but it is also the most true to our nature.” Do you agree or disagree, why or why not?

Extensions: