



## Mexico: Meso-American Indigenous People- Nahua and Otomi People

### Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading

Throughout history, mankind has developed many tools for communicating. Of the various tools, paper continues to be valued and widely used across cultures.

The origins of making paper can be traced back to the earliest civilizations in ancient Egypt and China. Paper got its name from papyrus- a plant that was once abundant in Egypt. The plant produced a thick paper-like material that was used by Egyptians, Greeks and Romans of the time. The style of paper that we are more familiar with today came from China. During the Han Dynasty, raw materials such as bark and cloth were used to create paper fibers. The use of these lighter resources became very popular over the previous method of creating books made of larger pieces of wood or bamboo.

Bark from various types of trees (pine, birch, maple, oak, spruce, eucalyptus, mulberry, and fig) is commonly used to make paper. Traditionally, the bark is stripped from the trees and boiled for long periods until soft. The strips of boiled bark are then separated and laid into grid patterns. Artisans use stones or wooden blocks to pound the strips until they flatten together and form a sheet. These sheets are laid in the sun to dry. After drying, the sheets would then be cut into smaller sheets of paper for writing and other activities.

Paper was created by local artisans in this manner until the invention of machines. During the Industrial Revolution new methods of manufacturing made the process faster and more efficient. However, in some cultures, such as with the Nahua and Otomi people of Mexico, the artisan traditions continue today. The paper made by these Mesoamerican cultures of Latin America is known as *amate bark paper*.



Paper was sacred to both the Maya and Aztec cultures. In addition to recording history and keeping trade records, there is archeological evidence that it was used in decoration of shrines, burial places, sculptures, and other art forms. Paper was also used for communication purposes, tribal records, and rituals.

When the conquistadors from Spain conquered the region, the practice of using amate among Mesoamerican cultures was banned. Its production was stopped and replaced by European paper. The only exception was the Otomi village located in the mountainous and somewhat geographically isolated Mexican state of Puebla. The Otomi people continued to make their own amate and create beautiful works of art on the paper. These bark paintings illustrated the flora and fauna native to their region. Traditionally, the paintings included colorful flowers, birds, and other animals such as deer or rabbits. Artists developed new styles that eventually included illustrations of their villages and also religious scenes.

Recently, painters and craftsmen from the Nahua tribe near Mexico City revived the craft and are producing new works of art. This revival has been promoted by the Mexican government. Through this promotion, amate bark paintings have become popular in Mexico and around the world as a traditional Mexican indigenous handicraft. Bark paintings are sold as a form of ecotourism to help the economy of local tribes.

**Source:**

<http://www.twinrockerhandmadepaper.com/showprod.php?dept=Pulp&grp=Twinrocker+Pulp&prod=Ready-to-use-pulp&PHPSESSID=5b80289697f70f61f426f2feb8c97660>

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**Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Paper originated in what two countries?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. List three types of trees that are used to make paper:

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Describe the steps used in making paper by traditional artisans:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. True or False? Today, the Nahua-Otomi people of Mexico still make paper in the traditional way. \_\_\_\_\_

5. What caused the process of making paper to change worldwide?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. In your opinion, why do you think the Nahua-Otomi people resisted modern paper-making methods? \_\_\_\_\_





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### Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading **KEY**

1. Paper originated in what two countries? **Egypt and China**
2. List three types of trees that are used to make paper:  
**pine, birch, maple, oak, spruce, eucalyptus, mulberry, and fig**
3. Describe the steps used in making paper by traditional artisans:
  1. **Bark stripped from the trees**
  2. **Bark boiled for long periods until soft**
  3. **Strips of boiled pulp separated and laid into grid patterns**
  4. **Pound the strips until flattened together- forming a sheet**
  5. **Sheets laid in the sun to dry**
  6. **After drying, cut sheets into smaller sheets of paper**
4. True or False? Today, the Nahua-Otomi Indians of Mexico still make paper in the traditional way. **True**
5. What caused the process of making paper to change worldwide?  
**began using machines due to the Industrial Revolution**
6. In your opinion, why do you think the Nahua-Otomi people resisted modern paper-making methods?  
**Answers will vary but might include: paper was sacred to them, so they were willing to resist the powerful Spanish rules; they lived in an isolated part of Mexico, so Spanish could not find them; the Industrial Revolution did not affect them due to their isolation**