

# Alebrijes

**Art Technique/Media:** Clay/paint

**Objectives:** The student will create a three-dimensional animal figure from clay and add a decorative painted finish.

**Materials:** Clay (air-dry or kiln fired), brightly-colored acrylic paints, paintbrushes in a variety of sizes

**Procedure:**

1. Create a three-dimensional animal figure from clay. The figure can be realistic or fanciful. Allow the figure to dry.

*Note: Alternatively, plastic animal figures can be spray-painted by the instructor ahead of time and students can take on this project starting with the next step.*

2. Paint the figure using acrylic paints. Encourage students to add details with fine brushes to make dots, dashes, and lines of varying widths. The other end of the paintbrush can also be used to add these details.

**Lesson by:** Hillary Shearer

Alebrijes originated in Mexico City in the 20th century, in 1936. The creation of the first alebrijes, as well as the name itself, is attributed to Pedro Linares, who was an artisan from México City, who specialized in making piñatas, carnival masks and “Judas” figures from cartonería (a kind of papier-mâché), which he sold in markets.

In 1936, when he was 30 years old, Linares fell ill with a high fever, which caused him to hallucinate. In these feverish dreams, he was in a forest with rocks and clouds, many of which turned into wild, unnaturally colored creatures, which frequently features wings, horns, tails, fierce teeth and bulgy eyes. While seeing the creatures, he heard a crowd of voices which repeated the nonsensical word “alebrije.” After he recovered, he began to create the creatures he saw using papier-mâché and cardboard. Eventually, a Cuernavaca gallery owner discovered his work. This brought his work to the attention of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who began commissioning Linares to build more alebrijes. The tradition grew considerably after British filmmaker created a 1975 documentary on Linares. This inspired other alebrije artists, and Linares’ work became prized in both Mexico and abroad. Rivera stated that no one else could have fashioned the strange figures he requested; work done by Linares for Rivera is now displayed at the Anahuacalli Museum in Mexico City.

The descendants of Pedro Linares, many of whom live in Mexico City near the Sonora Market, carry on the tradition of making alebrijes and other figures from cardboard and papier-mâché. Various branches of the family occupy a row of houses on the same street. Each family works in their own workshops in their own houses but will lend each other a hand when big orders come in. Demand rises and falls; sometimes there is no work and sometimes families work 18 hours a day.









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