

# **The Arizona State University Museum of Anthropology**

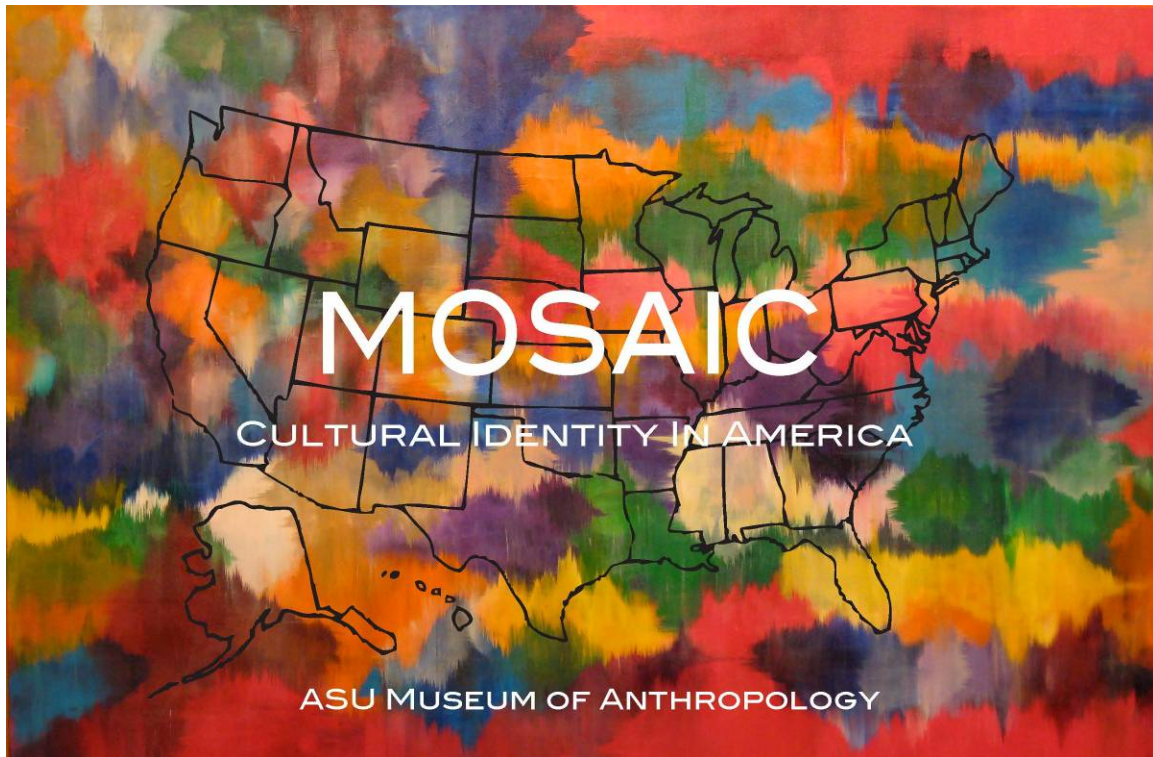


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## **MOSAIC: Cultural Identity in America**

**April 3 through October 3, 2008**

**Adult Information Packet**

# **MOSAIC: Cultural Identity in America**

## **Overview of the exhibition**

The current exhibition is the final step of an undergraduate honors thesis project. It is a juried exhibition of art by students at Arizona State University, meaning the pieces on display were picked by a panel of judges from many among many entries. The Guests Curator, Sarah Elsasser, was interested in how the artists feel about contemporary American identity and how they feel about their own identities in the United States and asked them to focus on those topics. Locating an art exhibition within a Museum of Anthropology allows for more than merely discussion of how the art was made but also why it was made.

Within this exhibition we encounter artistic methods such as:

- Photography
- Digital Imaging
- Mixed Media
- Handcrafts

Topics covered by the artworks include:

- Cultural Identity
- Ethnicity
- Pop Culture
- Consumption

MOSAIC: Cultural Identity in America is showing concurrently with FUSE: Portraits of Refugee Households in Metropolitan Phoenix.

This exhibition allows the visitor the chance to consider how you display identity. If given the chance, what would you choose to say about your identity? How would you say it?

Education Website: <http://www.geocities.com/mosaicexhibition/homepage.html>

Post-Visit Exhibition Evaluation Website: <http://mosaicexhibit.blogspot.com/>

## **Gallery activity**

At the back of the gallery is a space to think about your own identity and to bring together the two different exhibitions, MOSAIC and FUSE. Within this 'bridge' visitors can engage with various hands-on activities and questions about how they display their own identity.

## **Background Information**

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Ethnicity, Pop Culture

One of the hardest questions to answer is, “what is culture?” In different contexts, the answer comes from what you are looking for. The simplest definition, the one included in the Glossary, is that culture consists of the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. In the past, anthropologists have tried defining culture by studying a group of people different from their own, documenting every part of their religion, their government, and other institutions, and labeling this list of features as the group’s culture. Today, multiple simple and complex theories concerning culture exist simultaneously and can be applied to the same group of people with the outcome describing or defining culture entirely differently. We have asked ourselves what is more important, the features it produces or the daily lives of the people within it? This answer is left up to each individual to decide but what most social scientists have agreed on is that there is no one overarching definition of culture.

In MOSAIC: Cultural Identity in America, we have defined the parameters of our culture group as people living within the United States of America. This group shares common behaviors and beliefs, but that does not mean that the group is homogenous, or agrees on everything all of the time. The above discussion of culture focuses on an outsider’s perspective of culture but how do we identify our own culture? Many aspects of an individual’s life contribute to the creation of a person’s identity and so no two people are exactly the same. Each person also chooses to think about and present their identity in different ways. Many people use their membership in a group as the most important factor of their identity. When you meet someone new, do you often ask what they do for a living, where they are from or what sports team they root for? These are all questions asking your new acquaintance to identify themselves to you based on their occupational group, their locality, or their allegiance to a particular team.

Perhaps one of the most common and straightforward ways that people identify themselves is through their ethnicity, a topic that continues to be discussed and debated at great length in the United States. Ethnicity, like so many aspects of American culture, seems to have a dual nature. An individual’s idea of ethnicity, especially one that is different from the majority, can produce strong feelings of belonging, dissonance (or being disconnected from mainstream society) or inequality. On the other hand, identifying oneself through your ethnicity allows an individual to be a member of a potentially larger and more cohesive group than someone who identifies primarily with an occupation or a sports team. Many of the student’s contributing to this exhibit explore the politics underlying the concept of ethnicity within mainstream US American culture. Culture and ethnicity are not terms that are neither mutually exclusive nor do they always consist of identical groups of people. A person can identify with being an American and having an American culture while simultaneously identifying with their ethnicity of being Italian, or Italian-American, for example.

Along with ethnicity, popular culture continues to have a powerful influence both on how people perceive Americans and how Americans view themselves. Consumerism and media scandals are just two examples of US pop culture and society, and both are largely discussed with a negative connotation. For example, pop culture provides a dichotomy in American cultural identity: we want to look down upon our obsession with the media and our massive gas and product consumption, yet these continue to be mainstays of a particular and persistent facet of US American cultural identity perpetuated by millions and millions of Americans themselves. This exhibition allows the students an outlet to utilize art in displaying what they think and feel about identifying themselves within American pop culture.

## **Activity: Identifying Identity**

**Activity Level:** Adult

**Goal:** - To connect ideas/concepts of anthropology to the artwork presented in the gallery.

- To encourage self-exploration into long-held beliefs about personal and cultural identity.

### **Directions:**

#### **Before entering the gallery:**

- 1) Read and reflect on the terminology and ideas presented below.
- 2) Use the crossword to help reinforce the terminology and its meaning.

#### **At the museum:**

- 1) Take mental notes or use a notepad to take notes on the artwork.
- 2) Record which ideas and concepts are illustrated best through each piece of art.  
Example: *April Bojorquez's Buy-Cultural piece illustrates the concept of ethnicity.*

#### **After the museum:**

- 1) Use your notes to reflect on the artwork.
- 2) Explore the following questions: Which pieces did you feel strongly about? Why did you choose these pieces? Was the artist focusing on ethnicity, immigration, US culture, etc? How did you relate to the pieces and in what ways (using the terminology as a guide)?
- 3) Did you discover anything new about your own identity or that of others? Did you find that you are ethnocentric toward some of the artists' presentations or that you have learned to adapt to changing ideals? Etc.

## **Key Terms:**

### **What is Identity?**

Identity is an interesting and complex topic that needs to be understood through self-exploration and reflection. There is no clear or straightforward definition for identity but identity comes in two basic forms: group and individual. However, there are too many kinds of identities (i.e., personal, cultural, national) to create one strong definition that encompasses them all. Instead, identity is best understood through exemplifying its importance in life. The following information on identity is intended to illustrate this point.

**Values:** Personal values are the core of individual and group identity. How you see yourself makes a statement about the values you think are important. Each group of people that an individual has affinity with embodies a set of these values.

**Boundaries:** Identity is rooted in personal relations, as humans typically see themselves in relation to other people. Personal identity comes from identifying with people who share similar values and making distinctions with those who do not.

**Development of Identity:** Identity is highly fluid in children but becomes more stable in adulthood. Identity develops from the earliest years, beginning with children's awareness that they are separate and unique individuals (as taught in the US). First indications of this come when infants start to recognize themselves. As self-awareness grows and develops, children become increasingly aware of how they are similar to and different from others. Physical, cognitive and social changes mean that these similarities and differences continue to evolve. Adolescents explore different identities before firming up their own individual identity. Identity tends to become more fixed, but never static, once they enter adult life.

**Consumerism:** Identity is something that is shared and is susceptible to the influence of the global market. Market researchers, politicians, and those interested in people's values now benefit from understanding the changing nature of individuals' identities. Identity influences lifestyles and determines everything from the clothes people wear to the leisurely activities they enjoy. Because consumer preferences allow people to identify with others making similar choices, changes in identity are accompanied by new patterns of consumer behavior.

**Power Relations:** Identity has always had an impact on public life, as ethnicity, disability, gender and nationality have become the focus of politics, regionalization, and perceived cultural difference. Groups have projected their identities to challenge existing power relations, as they have sought not just tolerance for difference, but public respect, resources, and representation.

## **Other Key Terms:**

**Acculturation** - the exchange of cultural features that results when groups come into continuous firsthand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct.

**Adaptation** – the process by which immigrants retain or re-shape elements of their ethnic culture depending on how the dominant culture meets their needs in the host country.

**Anthropology** - The study of humans in the past, present, and projected future.

**Assimilation** - the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are forced to acculturate into the dominant culture (i.e., the most powerful) of a society.

**Culture** - the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. It is also the shared language, shared religion, shared customs, and shared history of a group of people.

**Ethnicity** - a set of characteristics which result in a distinctive culture. In the United States, ethnicity is flexible in meaning, but generally refers to a subset of the national culture in which people share nationality, religion, ancestry, and/or language.

**Ethnocentrism** – the belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group. Everyone has ethnocentric ideas even if they are latent. *An ethnocentric statement:* People in Europe drive on the WRONG side of the road. *A culturally neutral statement:* People in Europe drive on the OTHER side of the road.

**Environment** - combination of external physical conditions that affect and influence the growth, development, and survival AND the social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of an individual or community.

**Gender** - the socially and culturally projected component of human sexuality, but is not limited to inherent biological traits. In many cultures, gender is not limited to male and female but includes as many genders as is necessary for the culture to function efficiently.

**Immigrant** - a person who leaves one country to settle permanently in another.

**Pluralism** - a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization.

**Refugee** - a politically charged term that generally refers to any person who is outside their country of nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any

country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (Adapted from the legal US definition of a refugee.)

**Socialization** - refers to the process in which people learn the skills, knowledge, values, motives, and roles that is, culture of the groups to which they belong or the communities in which they live

**Symbol** - something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention. We all have personal associations with things in our lives; art is the manifestation of these associations. Symbols also have different meanings in different cultures. For example, in Chinese culture, dogs represent devotion and faithfulness, while in many others they represent impurity or infidelity.