

## Hofstra University Museum JPMorgan Chase Art Travelers through Time: Literacy and History through Art

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Wooden slit-drum (*teponaztli*)  
Mexica\*, AD 1325-1521  
From Mexico

**WHAT:** *Teponaztli*, Wooden Aztec slit-drum

**WHERE:** Mexico

**WHEN:** AD 1325-1521

**WHY:** The people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka). The artifact pictured is an example of a slit-drum called a *teponaztli* (pronounced "tay-po-nawtz-lee" in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Mexica).

This cylindrical wooden log drum, hollowed-out and carved from a piece of hardwood, was played with mallets. Two tongues were slotted at the top. By striking the mallets on the left and right tongues, two distinct tones were produced. *Teponaztli* were generally decorated with designs in relief or carved to represent human figures or animals.

Different sources from the Spanish colonial period (1492 – 1898) illustrate its use in various ceremonies which involved dancing. The origin of the instrument is not known but it is likely to go back many centuries, before the Spanish Conquest in 1521. The *Late Postclassic* period (AD 1250-1521) of Pre-Columbian history is traditionally framed between the emergence of the Aztec/Mexica Empire and its destruction by the Spanish conquest. During this period there was increased militarization and competing empires across Mesoamerica.

Aztec percussion instruments also included rattles, rasps, shakers, and a variety of other drums. The most important of these was the huehuetl (pronounced weh-weht), a large vertical hand drum covered with stretched animal hide. The huehuetl produced two tones— the lower by striking the center of the drum head, and the higher by playing near the outer rim. Its horizontal counterpart was the teponaztli. The huehuetl and teponaztli were traditionally played together, and served an important role in accompanying Aztec songs.



### Vocabulary

Mesoamerica

Percussion

Cylindrical

Pre-Columbian



## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**Music Activity:** Tone describes the quality of a sound. Tones from a whistle are sharp, while a cello or guitar might have warm tones, and a trumpet can have bright tones. Experiment with different instruments and invite students to describe the tone. On the internet, you can find audio samples from different instruments.

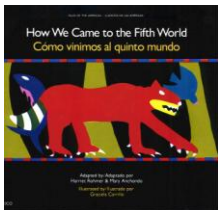
**Social Studies Activity:** Drums have been used throughout history for various purposes, such as religious, spiritual, or recreational. Have students identify the types of drums used by their own culture and share the story of these drums with classmates.

**Science Activity:** How are sounds made? Discuss how vibrations create sound. Sound travels (vibrates) differently through various materials. Ask your students, "Which materials would make good musical instruments?" Then experiment with some of their ideas (strings, rubber bands, sneakers, paper towel tubes, juice boxes, a student's arm). Create a chart of the items students have tested.



## Resources

### Related Children's Books



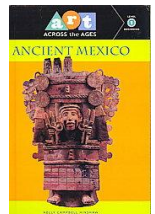
#### **How We Came to the Fifth World: A Creation Story from Ancient Mexico (Tales of the Americas)**

By Harriet Rohmer and Mary Anchondo.

This Aztec legend, written side-by-side in English and Spanish, recounts the histories of four worlds, or ages, before the present. Each was destroyed by the gods because of mankind's greed and selfishness.

#### **Art Across the Ages: Ancient Mexico** by Kelly Campbell Hinshaw.

This distinctive art-history book for budding art lovers includes stunning photographs and simple text. It is an ideal introduction to the art of ancient Mexico including that of the Olmecs, Maya, and the Aztecs.



### Web Links



The [Mesoamerican Timeline](http://archaeology.about.com/od/latinamerica/a/mesoamerican_timeline.htm) is a guide to the various civilizations in Mesoamerica's ancient history.

#### Experiments with sound

[http://homepage.eircom.net/~kogrango/sound\\_experiments.html](http://homepage.eircom.net/~kogrango/sound_experiments.html)



[Video of a teponatzli drum](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGzDQsDZ5b0) creating beautiful sounds with different tones.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGzDQsDZ5b0>