

# Marvelous Mandalas

**Joan Sterling**

Over the years, I have seen a variety of lessons on mandalas which have piqued my interest. My research led me to discover that this popular art form is much more complex than I had originally thought. With our international theme, “Art Around the World,” I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to incorporate a lesson about mandalas, so I set out to scale this powerful project down to an elementary level.

## History of the Mandala

The word mandala means “circle” in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, where a mandala represents the universe. Tibetan Buddhist monks use mandalas to focus on during meditation. Traditionally made with

colored sand, the mandala may be destroyed after the process has been completed. Many other cultures use mandalas in a variety of ways including the Navajo, who create sand paintings in a similar manner.

## Discussion

We began by locating India, the source of many mandalas, on a world map. We have some students who are from India, or have family from India, and they were eager to share stories about their families, visits to their homeland, and their knowledge of mandalas.

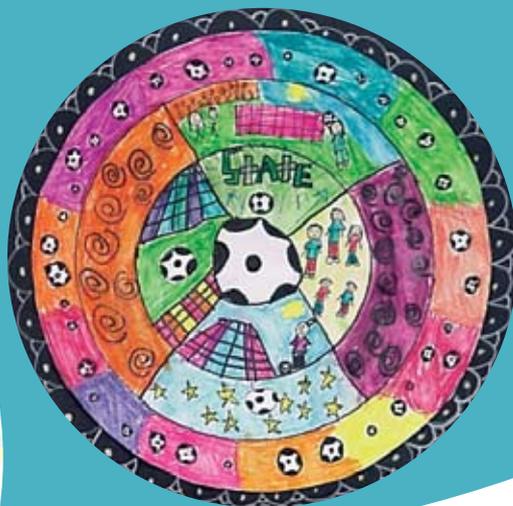
I introduced the term “mandala” and discussed how they are used to reach personal enlightenment. I shared a variety of images of mandalas I found online. We discussed how

the circular shape represents the universe, the use of symbols, and the way in which the viewer’s eye is led to the center by the design. We noticed that both radial and symmetrical balance may be found in mandalas.

## Creating Mandalas

The process of creating a Tibetan mandala consists of eight steps:

1. Purification of the body, fasting.
2. Centering through meditation.
3. Orientation to the rising sun.
4. Construction, material creation.
5. Absorption, concentration, and meditating on the work.
6. Ritual destruction to achieve detachment from the work.
7. Reintegration, reflecting on the process.
8. Actualization to renew and give energy to the life force.



("Mandala, Constructing Peace through Art," *Art Education*, May 2002.)

Students learned about the eight steps in the Mandala process. (They were concerned that their artworks would be destroyed after they worked so diligently on them, and were relieved to learn that we would skip that part.) As they learned about the process, they were intrigued by the way in which their entire mind and body could be involved in a work of art.

We practiced the steps that we were able to complete in a classroom. Although we couldn't fast, we were able to close our eyes and meditate for a few minutes with a yoga-type breathing exercise. We practiced slowly breathing in and out, clearing our minds of all thought. Next, we pointed in the direction of the rising sun to orient ourselves and continued to breathe deeply.

Now we were ready for design. Students discussed possible themes for mandalas and I explained that they should reflect important things in their lives. I gave each student a

12 x 18" brainstorming paper with eight sections and asked them to sketch some of their ideas. These topics included: about me, my family, hobbies, friends, goals, pets, or other. I asked them not to use any words but did tell them they could bring in images from home if needed.

The next class session, we reviewed the process and repeated the steps to achieve a proper mood. Students began by tracing a 12" circle pattern on 12 x 18" heavy drawing paper. Several other circle sizes were available for use, as well as rulers.

Students added their personal elements, placing the most important in the center. They outlined their drawings in

fine and extra-fine permanent black marker and erased pencil lines.

I chose to use watercolor pencils for coloring since they give a painted look but are easier to control in detailed areas. When water is added to the areas colored with these pencils, a lovely watercolor effect is achieved. We discussed ways to blend and mix colors for interesting effects.

### Reflection

Finally, I gave students a sheet of paper to write about their project. Although we were not able to complete some of the final steps such as ritual destruction, this writing portion would be their "reflecting" piece. Students were asked to write

### Objectives

- Students will view and discuss mandalas from many cultures and times.
- Students will use drawing and design techniques to create personal mandalas.

### Materials

- examples of mandalas
- 12 x 18" (30 x 45 cm) heavy drawing paper
- assorted circle tracers
- pencils and erasers
- fine and extra-fine black permanent markers
- watercolor pencils, markers, or crayons
- scissors
- brushes and water if using watercolor pencils
- large railroad or poster board for mounting artwork

several sentences explaining the significance of their mandalas and the pictures or symbols included in them. Afterwards, they cut out their mandalas and glued them to a large poster board, adding the writing component on the bottom. They added borders in metallic markers to frame and highlight their artworks.

These projects were the talk of the school. Everyone enjoyed viewing and reading about these amazing circular designs and reading about them. Students were proud and truly enlightened with their accomplishments. 🌀

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### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students demonstrate how history, culture, and the visual arts can influence each other in making and studying works of art.*

### WEB LINKS

[www.mandalaproject.org](http://www.mandalaproject.org)

[www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/mandala/mandala.htm](http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/mandala/mandala.htm)