

# **Christmas and Holiday Traditions Around the World**



**November 18, 2009 – January 10, 2010**

**Teacher Packet**

## Overview

Students will experience more than forty trees and/or displays during the *Christmas and Holiday Traditions Around the World* exhibition. They will have an opportunity to learn not only about seasonal holiday celebrations, but also ethnically diverse festivals and customs. Joining the time-honored displays of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, recent additions to this popular winter exhibition have included the African baobab tree known as the Tree of Life, a display celebrating the Chinese New Year as well as a presentation highlighting Eid ul-Fitr, a three-day Islamic festival concluding the month-long fast of Ramadan, and new this year the Vietnamese observance of the lunar new year, Tet Nguyen Dan.

Besides the trees and displays, the exhibition includes the Railway Garden. A 20-foot-long, model train journeys through a miniature landscape of historic Grand Rapids. All landmark buildings, bridges and waterways are comprised completely of natural materials such as hickory bark, grapevines, walnut shells, acorns, cinnamon sticks, lotus pods and more.

Other complements to the exhibition include a demonstration building focusing on the making of the landmark buildings as well as many hands-on activities in the Lena Meijer Children's Garden. In addition, students can learn to distinguish between the many varieties of Christmas trees while discovering interesting facts about this important Michigan industry.

Visitors will travel through the exhibition using one of two looking guides. The Family Looking Guide provides an overall map of the exhibition, and encourages the viewers to share their family traditions, stories and ideas with one another. The Discovery Tour is intended for middle school and older students and stresses critical thinking skills instead of observation as a means to experience the exhibition. *[The Discovery Tour is included elsewhere in this Teacher Packet, and may be duplicated for your use.]* Copies of both guides as well as clipboards are available from your greeter.

## Main Concepts

- Countries around the world pause during late fall and early winter to celebrate. This is the time of Kwanzaa (a celebration honoring traditions of African-Americans), Hanukkah (the Jewish Festival of Lights), Christmas (the Christian commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ), Diwali (the Indian holiday that symbolizes the victory of good over evil) and the Chinese New Year, among others. A complete list of the countries/cultures represented in the exhibition is included below.
- Families from all cultures enjoy unique traditions, stories, songs, dances and spending time together.
- Many cultures celebrate with the sharing of gifts, and feature a figure such as Santa Claus as the much anticipated gift-giver.
- Celebrations often include special foods.
- Evergreen trees and special plants often play an important role in decorations for the holiday.

## Curriculum Standards and Benchmarks

### State of Michigan Strand – Social Studies

- Describe places, cultures and communities in the United States and compare them with other regions and countries.
- Explain how culture and experience shape the position a person takes on an issue.

## EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

A new international display debuts this year – the Vietnamese celebration of the lunar New Year titled Tet Nguyen Dan (pronounced “day wen don”). Tet Nguyen Dan, which translates as “the first morning of the first day,” is the most important cultural occasion to the Vietnamese. The new display represents an ancestral altar which the Vietnamese create as a way to remember and honor their ancestors during the holiday.

To discuss this important holiday, Anh Nguyet Tran will be speaking at Meijer Gardens about Tet Nguyen Dan. Anh settled in Grand Rapids in 1975 as an Indochinese refugee from Vietnam. For eight years she worked in Tokyo for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Japan and Korea. In 2009 Anh established Liaison Services to serve the Vietnamese community in Western Michigan. She will discuss Vietnamese holiday traditions and customs from 7 to 7:30 pm on December 1, 8, and 15.

This year's holiday display offers several opportunities for making classroom connections. Beyond those interested in cultural and religious comparisons, foreign language students, local history buffs and train enthusiasts have extra reason to be glad this season. Our *Christmas and Holiday Traditions Around the World* exhibition will hold a special appeal for them.

French students will be charmed by a special nativity display featuring *santons*. *Santons* are a classic 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition begun in the Provence region of southern France. There creche scenes , depict figures of local villagers, known as "little saints" as they make their way to the manger, bearing not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but bread, wine, cheese and other products from their trade. These exquisite, hand-crafted scenes represent a frozen moment in time. Let us help your students bring the scene to life with an explanation in French of the *santons*, followed by a discussion of the culture of the French-speaking areas of Africa, Canada, Switzerland and Vietnam. After the tour, the class may enjoy the rest of exhibition. Tours are by reservation only.

Not only do other cultures and countries come to life before your eyes, but so does an area closer to home - Grand Rapids. Visit our *Railway Garden* and view a unique collection of local, landmark buildings. All structures are carefully crafted from natural materials. Magically, an acorn cap becomes a street lamp; shelf fungus becomes a stair. Be amazed at the life-like detailing on five historic buildings shown side-by-side with their antique photos. Learn the secret of creating these miniature worlds with a demonstration model of the farmhouse located in our Michigan's Farm Garden. *[A complete list of the buildings is included elsewhere in this Teacher Packet.]*

The *Christmas and Holiday Traditions Around the World* exhibition opens November 18, 2009 and continues through January 10, 2010. Call Suzie Doten today to schedule your field trip: (616) 974-5239.

## Countries/Cultures Represented

Africa	Japan
Australia	Korea
Austria	Kwanzaa
Belize	Lithuania
Bird Tree	Mexico
Brazil	Middle East
Canada	Netherlands
China	Peru
Denmark	Philippines
Eid ul-Fitr	Poland
England	Poinsettias
Finland	Russia
France	Slovak Republic
Germany	Spain
Greece	Sweden
Hanukkah	Switzerland
Hungary	Ukraine
Iceland	United States
India	Victorian
American Indian	Vietnam
Ireland	
Italy	

## **Railway Garden**

All buildings included in the Railway Garden were created by Paul Busse and his staff at Applied Imagination. The structures are artistic renditions of Grand Rapids landmarks and are decorated entirely with natural materials.

### **Landmark Buildings**

- St. Mark's Episcopal Church
- Fountain Street Church
- Choo Choo Grill
- Herkner Jewelers
- Ledyard Building
- Ryerson Library
- Pennisular Club
- Fulton Street Power Station
- McKay Tower
- Trust Building
- Pantlind Hotel
- Flanagan's Pub
- St. James Church
- St. Cecilia Music Center
- Holland Harbor Lighthouse ("Big Red")

**Demonstration Model:** See how these amazing buildings are made.

- Farm House, partially constructed to show steps in the creation process
- Tools
- Natural materials used – find where they appear on the Farm House

### **Other Structures**

- Lit Arch Bridge
- Cedar Mountain Pass
- Water Feature
- Generic House
- Generic Buildings (3)

### **Train and Trolleys**

Train travel comes alive in our Railway Garden. The train's roadbed, bridges, trellis work and general layout were also designed by Paul Busse. A multi-car, garden-scale (1:22) train runs over 600 feet of track, and makes a round trip of the display every four minutes. The train features a Hudson steam locomotive, a coal tender and several passenger cars. In addition, there are two trolleys that travel through a miniature cityscape. The trolleys are replicas of the famous trolleys found in cities such as New York, San Francisco and New York—and now Grand Rapids.

## Christmas and Holiday Traditions Around the World Discovery Tour, 2009

1. Compare the components on the Chihuly chandelier to the glass ornaments on the **German** tree. How are they different?
2. The **Vietnamese** New Year holiday of Tet Nguyen Dan (pronounced day wen don) looks backward by honoring ancestors and forward by praying for good fortune in the New Year. What are your New Year's wishes?
3. Many countries incorporate a nativity (manger) scene in their holiday decorations. Look for the cardboard example beside the **United States** tree. Now find other nativity scenes made out of olive wood, gourds, and ceramics. What countries are they from?
4. The **Australians** have their own version of the song "The 12 Days of Christmas" that features 12 native Australian animals. Four of the 12 animals are: kookaburra, wombat, emu and koala. Circle one you're not familiar with and research it at school.
5. Which one of the Lynn Chadwick pieces in the **Sculpture Galleries** would you like to wrap up and give as a gift? Who would you give it to? Why?
6. In the **Philippines**, the parol (a star-shaped lantern) is the main symbol of Christmas. List the colors in the paroles.
7. The **French** santons represent the gathering of an entire village. Name five occupations shown here.
8. Piñatas have been used in **Mexico** at Christmastime for hundreds of years. Instead of candy, what would you put in a piñata?
9. **Native Americans** believe their drums are the heartbeat of the Earth Mother. How many different kinds of drums do you see?
10. Today we live in a global society and can buy things from anywhere in the world, but traditionally cultures have used only materials found close by. What materials can you identify on the **African** baobab tree?
11. In the **Arid Garden** a hot, spicy food is used as decoration. What is it? What food would make a pretty decoration in your home?
12. Look at the **Japanese** origami (folded paper) cranes carefully. Then go into the Chadwick exhibition in the Sculpture Galleries and find a bird-like sculpture. How does it look similar to the origami cranes?
13. Find the Choo-Choo Grill in the **Railway Garden** display area. Imagine having your holiday meal at the Choo-Choo Grill. What would you order?
14. In **India** banana plants are decorated for the Festival of Lights (Diwali) celebration. If you lived in the tropics, what other plants or trees might you use (hint: look around the Conservatory)?

15. The red heart is a traditional symbol of Christmas in **Denmark** and appears on the national coat of arms. What colors do you associate with Christmas?
16. Go to the windows by the **English** tree. Look out at the Volunteer Tribute Garden which honors the hundreds of people who volunteer at Meijer Gardens every year. What do you do in the spirit of giving?
17. **Belize** is a country with a long coastline. What decorations do you see that remind you of the ocean?
18. In **Iceland** at Christmastime it is believed that playful Yuletide Lads put small gifts (or potatoes) in children's shoes. What are some of their names (hint: read the scroll)? What would you name your own Yuletide Lads?
19. The burning of incense during the Muslim holiday of **Eid-ul-Fitr** symbolizes warm hospitality. What fragrance do you associate with the holidays?
20. Study the menorahs (candle holders) at the **Hanukkah** display. How are they different from one another?

### Answers

1. answers vary
2. answers vary
3. Middle East, Peru and Italy
4. answers vary
5. answers vary
6. red, yellow, green and white
7. answers vary (for example, baker, seamstress, flower vendor)
8. answers vary
9. five
10. answers vary (for example, wood, gourds, beads, cloth)
11. chili peppers
12. geometric shapes (especially triangles) sharp edges, flat planes, pointy ends
13. answers vary
14. answers vary ( for example, Golden Hawaiian bamboo, Fiji fan palm, Chicle)
15. answers vary
16. answers vary
17. fish and shells
18. answers vary (for example, ladle licker, door sniffer, sausage picker)
19. answers vary
20. answers vary (for example, menorahs are different heights, different shapes, made from different materials, have different number of candles, have different colored candles)

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Social Studies: Our Family's Traditions**

To examine the unique traditions of families within your classroom, ask each student to bring a favorite ornament or holiday object from home. The object may represent any tradition observed by the student's family. Photograph each student with his/her decoration, and then create a "Traditions Display" in the classroom utilizing the photographs. Discuss the similarities and differences in holiday celebrations.

### **Social Studies: Classroom Collection of Holiday Traditions**

Ask students to interview their oldest family member. Sample questions might include:

- What was [holiday name] like when you were young?
- Do you have a memory of a favorite holiday or a favorite gift?
- Did you ever create a hand-made gift for someone? What was it? How was it made?

### **Social Studies: Ancestral Altar**

The Vietnamese altar honors the souls of the ancestors and serves as a point of communication between the living and the dead. Only objects of reverence are permitted on the altar. Each mid-day, for the duration of the New Year week, offerings are placed on the household altar and incense is burned in memory of the departed. Each stick of incense represents a different ancestor to be remembered. What objects would you place on a family altar? Why? [Possibilities include photograph of the deceased, a keepsake that he/she gave to you; an object that represents an occupation or hobby; an item of clothing, a favorite food; a souvenir of trip taken together, etc.]

### **Math: Real vs. Artificial**

Create a brief survey for each classroom in your school to count how many families decorate a real tree, and how many prefer an artificial one. Using the information gathered from the survey, create a bar graph. Display classroom names along the horizontal axis, and numbers of tree users along the vertical. Display your findings. If there is a school newspaper, publish the results.

### **Language Arts: Holiday Journal**

Have each student keep a journal describing his or her family holiday preparations. They may wish to include current events as well as their feelings. Encourage them to store the journal in a safe place to read in the distant future.

### **Art: Creative Decorations**

See how many recyclable or natural materials can be used to create holiday ornaments for the classroom.

### **Holiday-Related Activities: More than Santa?**

Research the gift-giver image of various countries. Display images in the classroom and discuss similarities and differences.