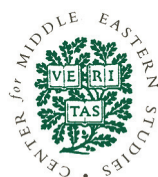


# USING OBJECTS TO TEACH ABOUT RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

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# SUMMARY

*The opportunities and challenges for teaching with objects in the context of studies on the Middle East region are myriad. Art and non-art objects related to religion are complex creations reflecting specific times, places, and cultural contexts. This paper advocates two approaches to overcoming common pitfalls to effectively teaching on topics related to the Middle East region. The first is the Cultural Studies approach to teaching about religion, and the second is an inquiry-based model for object-centered learning.*

## WHY TEACH WITH OBJECTS?

Objects, organically formed or purposely created, can become inspiring classroom tools for students at any grade level. As educators, many of us have experienced this first hand. We've watched 5<sup>th</sup> graders scrutinizing the details of a vivid painting, unlocking clues about a moment in history, a mythic story, or the natural world. We've seen students in high school passionately respond to the experiences of peoples living in different times, places, and cultures, as expressed through images and artwork, or simply an artifact of daily life. We may have also seen our teaching colleagues coming alive in creating their own art! These encounters have in common the ability to spark wide-ranging interest and excitement, which reveal new connections and insights.

Viewing and creating art can draw students into new worlds, an experience that can lead them to both empathize with others and to imagine new possibilities and perspectives for their own experiences. The classroom potential for “non-art” objects is no less rich. Objects used to eat, dress, play music, worship, and work; simple or complex, mundane or significant; are concrete products of particular times, places, and cultures. They can help students consider the complex context and processes that lead to their creation and to relate those understandings to their own lives.

Artifacts have long been used as teaching tools in art and history museums. However, as educators today, the possibilities for using these resources in our own classrooms continue to expand. The online-collections of Harvard's Fogg, Sackler, and Busch-Reisinger Museums, as well as the resources available through the Outreach Center at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, offer new opportunities for using objects in the classroom, particularly in the service of teaching about religions and cultures of the Middle East region.

## PITFALLS

Art and non-art objects can inspire the imagination and spark the curiosity of students as they learn about cultures other than their own. However, as educators, we must take

care to use the investigation of objects to enhance, rather than diminish, students' understanding of the complexity and diversity of the people from which they came.

As educators teaching about topics related to the Middle East region, Islam and Muslim communities, there are a persistent set of pitfalls we face. These can be reduced to three:

**ESSENTIALIZATION** concerns how an *approach* to studying a topic is constructed. Generally, an essentialized study is one that is organized in such a way that only the “essentials” (or what are thought to be the essentials) are considered. One example of this is a unit in which Islam is taught according to a stove-piped set of historical dates, theological interpretations and individual personalities. Frameworks for History and Social Studies for 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students mandate learning about Islam by studying Islamic beliefs, its historical rise to power, and interactions with the West.<sup>1</sup> In this study, Islam and Muslims are assumed to be a near monolithic group united by a commonly understood theology. A reading of the 900 years after the death of Mohammed with even some amount of critical consideration yields a less essentialized understanding that incorporates cultural, historical and political realities. Essentialization does not mean fabrication. However, essentializing in Middle East region studies usually has the unwelcome result of removing context, nuance and individuality from learning about complex social phenomena like religion.

**ORIENTALISM** concerns the *categorization* of knowledge about the Middle East region into an “us” and “them” paradigm. It is historically connected to colonial understandings of power and domination, whereby the colonized are inferior exoticized objects of study whereas the colonizer is proper and normal. Orientalism is a product of observing complex phenomena, like images, out of context. This approach skews a person's ability to accurately make sense of a broad amount of information in a way that is not prejudiced towards one's own assumptions, informed by years of cultural influence. Orientalism is highly influenced by a person's own context (culture, world-view, economic situation, political reality, etc.).

**REDUCTIONISM** pertains to an *evaluation* of the causes of complex social phenomena. Evaluation based on it yields results that are simplistic and de-contextualized. Solely linking the cause of terrorism with a specific global religion, such as Islam, is an example of reductionism. In this formulation, the multi-faceted causes of terrorism (how it develops, who uses it, when it is used, etc.) are reduced to a generic and monolithic understanding of its relationship to Islam and Muslim communities. Rather than addressing the complexity of the topic of terrorism, this reductionist approach focuses on isolating one reason for its existence at the expense of all others. The result of this lazy causation is a conclusion that does not take into account factors such as politics, economics and history—all of which emanate from a situated time and place. In addition, reducing in this case the cause of a complex phenomenon like terrorism to an equally complex phenomenon like religion does a disservice to the understanding of both subjects.

<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, 2003, pgs 53-54.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

Object based learning can be used to effectively address the problems caused by these three pitfalls. However, they also have the potential to amplify them. De-contextualized objects can act as problematically static or monolithic representations of culture. Such an approach may send the message to students that one way of dress, holiday tradition, or kind of food can epitomize an entire culture and community, or, even more problematically, many cultures within a diverse region. This kind of essentialization can be particularly troublesome when teaching about the religions of the Middle East region. Students may already have assumptions about the archaic or unchanging nature of these traditions (think of the veil or beard), and particular care is needed in order to use art and objects to challenge, rather than reinforce, these beliefs.

In contrast, the most effective classroom uses of objects utilize them as tools to talk about complexity and nuance, and to raise questions that cannot be answered with sweeping answers or blanket evaluations. Objects can be tools of contextualization by highlighting specific geographical locations, historical contexts and conditions. These parameters provide a “situated” context for objects within the wider topics they address.

The Cultural Studies approach to teaching about religion developed by Diane L. Moore of the Harvard Divinity School, and inquiry-based approaches to object-based learning advocated by Shari Tishman, Director of Project Zero among others can be used in service of these goals.

## CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural Studies is a multidisciplinary approach that emphasizes the connections between religion, culture, history, and politics. It considers the power dynamics that these social contexts produce, as well as the “situated” nature of all knowledge claims made about, and from within, these contexts. Central to this approach is the assumption that religions, like the cultures in which they develop, contain internal diversity and respond to historical, political, and geographic realities.<sup>2</sup> Because of religion’s multi-faceted importance a multi-disciplinary approach to its study is necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Objects can concretely demonstrate the understanding of religious traditions as *diverse*, *dynamic*, and *imbedded in culture*:

- Religious traditions are connected with objects which, while used throughout the world, look quite different depending on the geographic and historical context in which they were produced. Examining both the similarities and differences between a prayer mat produced in Egypt and one produced in Syria can be a concrete way for students to consider the presence of both unity and diversity within religious traditions;

<sup>2</sup> Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 78–88.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Pp. 79.

- Objects are not understood or used in the same way throughout their existence, or by all persons who encounter them. The uses, values, and meanings of an object are determined by individual perspectives and contexts, and may be altered dramatically throughout the course of an object's "life"; and,
- The production and use of objects are embedded in, and affected by, historical, political, and cultural contexts, including economic conditions, the state of technology, trade and other factors.

### INQUIRY-BASED TEACHING WITH OBJECTS

Object-based learning in classrooms and museums include diverse styles and tactics. Some emphasize the transmission of information about objects from "experts" to students, while others focus on the prior knowledge and questions that learners bring to their encounters with objects. The work of Shari Fishman and others at the arts-education research center Project Zero have contributed extensively to the development and understanding of the latter approach.

### BEGINNING WITH OBSERVATION



*Student observation of an intriguing object can prompt questions and reflections about its use and significance.*

The foundation for inquiry-based lessons is student observation. This process involves encouraging students to look closely and carefully at an object, and *then* to think more expansively about the related questions and ideas that it generates.

Students record their own encounter with the object with *detail* and *precision*. Rather than vaguely stating that, say, a fork has several spikes (tines) on one end, students should be urged to state the obvious: How many tines? How long are they? Are they all the same length? What color are they? How sharp are they? Are the edges smooth or rough? Etc.

At this stage students learn to distinguish between direct observation and inference. While learners might be eager to guess what the fork is made of, or that the tines were made

*Unknown Artist*

*Qalamdan (Pencase), second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century*

*Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum,*

*Bequest of Frances L. Hofer, 1979.352;*

*Photo: Imaging Department*

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either by hand or machine, a key aspect of critical thinking is re-enforced as students learn to separate their fact gathering from the claims that they may later support with these facts.

We highlight three techniques to aid students in the object observation process.

**SET SPECIFIC QUANTITATIVE GOALS.** The “10 X 2” routine asks students to note ten observations about an object, read over their list or swap with a partner, and then go back and note ten more is useful. Students might be asked to see how many observations they can independently make about an object in three minutes, and then compare with their classmates. Or, students can go around in a circle, each making one observation about an object without repeating anything noted by a previous classmate.

**ENGAGE MULTIPLE STYLES OF OBSERVATION.** Have students “act out” the position of people or other elements in a sculpture or object by creating a frozen tableau with fellow classmates. Physically enacting the object in space can result in a whole new range of observations about the original item’s form, shape, and content.

**MAKE THE FAMILIAR UNFAMILIAR** Giving students prompts such as “Pretend you are an alien who has never visited earth before. How would you describe this object in an email to your friends at home?”

The most seemingly mundane objects can become great fodder for these activities. Objects can highlight the ways in which elements of daily life may be a catalyst for exploring important social and historical trends, by guiding students to questions about the production practices, activities, and relationships in which the object participates. As students learn that objects used and produced in the Middle East region can be a great source of information, they will also begin to recognize that objects used in their own everyday life say a great deal about the culture in which they live.<sup>4</sup>

## INQUIRY AND REFLECTION

Once students have engaged in close-looking, they can transition into more expansive thinking. This transition highlights the ways in which student observations act as learner-generated data that can be used to support inferences and prompt questions. Educators can help students to make these connections by providing structured categories such as:<sup>5</sup>

- “See-Think-Wonder”: What do you *See*? What do you *Think*? What do you *Wonder*?
- “Claim-Support-Question”: Make a *Claim* about the object; Give *Support* to your claim); Ask a *Question* related to your claim; and,
- “Know-Puzzle-Explore”: What do you think you *know* about this object? What questions or *puzzles* do you have? What does this object make you want to *explore*?

Central to the cultural studies model is the ability to recognize how our own cultural,

<sup>4</sup> John Hennigar Shuh, “Teaching yourself to teach with objects,” *The Educational Role of the Museum*, 2nd Ed., Ed., E. Hooper-Greenhill, Pg. 80-92.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.vtshome.org/>, as well as Danielle Rice and Philip Yenawine, “A Conversation on Object-Centered Learning,” *Curator*, Vol. 45, Num. 4.

historical, and political contexts affect the *assumptions* that we bring to the learning process, and to recognize and reflect on how our assumptions affect our knowledge claims.

The “Visible Thinking”<sup>6</sup> element of close-looking and use of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) can support students in this process. VTS strategies require learners to record direct observations, share them with others, and document the relationship between their knowledge claims and these observations. These methods can help students to recognize, literally, what they see from their own perspective, and how this perspective guides their process of inquiry and meaning-making.

## USES AND EXTENSIONS

Once students begin brainstorming questions about an object and its larger implications, as teachers, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the expectation that we will have “all the answers.” In fact, it is impossible to know everything about the subject that students will want to learn, and it is important for students to see that we do not. Teachers can support students by modeling their own inquiry process, noting that they can engage in observation without any prior knowledge on a subject, and then think critically about what information they have gained through observation, and what resources they can use to build on that knowledge. These approaches can be used at many different points in the learning process:

- As an opening activity for a larger unit. The observation and inference process can be used both to help students reflect on the assumptions they bring to studying religion and the Middle East region, and to help teachers assess the prior knowledge of students;
- As a pre-learning activity in preparation for a specific reading or activity, to generate student predictions and curiosity. In this case, the teacher might anticipate that the reading will answer student questions and confirm or deny student inferences, or might use the inquiry process more generally to generate student interest and assess prior knowledge; and,
- As a way to generating student questions, claims, and puzzles to be used as learner-generated topics for independent student research.

## USING OBJECT RESOURCES AT HARVARD

### THE OUTREACH CENTER AT THE CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN

**STUDIES** provides resources on a variety of topics related to Islam and the Middle East, which may be shipped throughout the country.

Additionally, the collection of Harvard’s *Arthur M. Sackler Museum* includes more than 2,200 objects identified as “Arts of the Islamic World,” spanning the 9<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Images of a large number of these objects can be accessed for free through the museum’s website.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [http://pzweb.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking\\_html\\_files/VisibleThinking1.html](http://pzweb.harvard.edu/vt/VisibleThinking_html_files/VisibleThinking1.html)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.harvardartmuseum.org/study-and-research/collectionsearch.dot>

**CULTURAL MOVEMENT AND INFLUENCE** The objects in this collection were produced in cultures ranging from Spain and North Africa to Southeast Asia, as well as the Middle East region. Comparing and contrasting pairs or small groups of these objects shows students how elements of Islamic art and culture have spread and developed over time. For example, using the “Claim-Support-Question,” or “Know-Puzzle-Explore” routines, students can compare a 15<sup>th</sup> century Spanish plate bearing a Christian monogram with a nearby tile adorned with decorative Arabic calligraphy. Rather than being told about relationships between Christians and Muslims in Medieval Spain, students can use their own observations about the similarities in artistic styles to develop understandings and hypothesis about cultural influence in this historical context.

**OBJECT FORM AND FUNCTION** Many objects in the Sackler’s collection blur the boundaries between “art” and “non-art” objects. Students can investigate these functional objects to better understand the close relationship between religion and other aspects of social life and identity. The See-Think-Wonder routine is a great way to heighten students’ curiosity by having them observe objects, such as a Syrian pen case, an Iranian tombstone, and an Iberian dagger sheath, and record guesses about their identity and uses before providing background information. Once they learn what the objects are, further observation of the calligraphic embellishments from the Qur’an and Hadith engraved on these functional items gives students a concrete introduction to the ways in which religion is imbedded into culture and daily life.

These examples offer a brief overview of the potential for objects to engage students in inquiry based exploration of cultural and religious themes. While the historical collections at Harvard are a wonderful resource, such tools and frameworks are also a great way to introduce elements of contemporary material culture and visual media into the classroom. By engaging student curiosity and insight, while making their thinking process transparent and visible, we can offer a strong foundation from which to explore this complex material.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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