Five Online Museum Collections Activities to Include in Your Course Syllabus
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1. Think like a Curator: Design or analyze an exhibit

Your students are already curators, whether or not they know what a curator does. They curate images and information on their social media daily. Asking them to think like a curator to design an exhibit will enable them to understand some of the practical limitations museums and curators face. You can ask students to curate an exhibit using one museum collection or “loan” objects from different museums to create a meaningful exhibit about your course’s subject:

- Search for one object from an online museum collection that connects to X (your class’s theme).
- Form a group or pair up with a peer (who has chosen a different object).
- Come up with a meaningful idea/information that your selected objects communicate. You can try to connect, compare, or contrast your objects.
- Write a short exhibit label and individual labels for your objects.

It is challenging to condense complicated, sometimes even controversial, ideas in a way that is concise, impactful, informative, and free from jargon, even for experienced curators. But clear communication is a skill necessary for any student at any level. You can encourage your students to fit their labels in one Tweet or even Tweet them.

If you want to take this activity a step further and allow students to “visit” their peers’ exhibits, they can use Artsteps, Kunstmatrix, or a free online exhibition tool such as Omeka to design and present their exhibits virtually. The curation itself can happen on social media as well. Students can curate their work individually or in groups on your course’s Instagram page or create a Pinterest page with images and information taken from online museum collections. One of the frustrations students face looking for images online is that images posted on Pinterest often have no contextual information. You can underline the importance of such contextual metadata in your activity. As an educator, you can also curate your own online exhibits or online teaching collections using Smithsonian Museums’ collections and share with others via the Learning Lab.

Drs. Elizabeth Knott, Agnete W. Lassen, and Klaus Wagensonner ask students to consider the physicality of the exhibit, such as the size and shape of the exhibition cases and objects in their “Build your own exhibition” activity based on the “Women at the Dawn of History” (2020) exhibit at the Yale Peabody Museum. In addition, you can ask students to look up the dimension of their chosen objects in the museum’s online database. Then they may think about how they can organize exhibits in more accessible ways.

To move things into the physical world while teaching virtually, you can ask students to choose several objects from their house or dorm room connected to the theme of your course and form an exhibit. Include a writing component by asking students to look up object labels in online museum object pages and provide the types of information presented by the museum.
(date, dimensions, context, materials, provenance). Students can label already existing artworks in their house or even make physical display cases. If you do not want this activity to be writing-focused, you can ask students to record audioguides for their exhibits or record short podcast episodes. Read about a similar activity by educator and art historian Virginia B. Spivey here.

Another possibility is to continue the discussion after students curate their exhibit and write their labels/audioguides: Ask students to critique virtual exhibits, online museum searches, museum labels, or museum social media accounts, now that they have done it themselves. This will allow them to reflect on their own and others’ work more critically. You can read the lesson plan “Writing Exhibition Reviews” by Alexis Clark, an art historian at Duke University, here.

2. Think like a Curator II: Re-evaluate, deconstruct, and question online museum collections

Speaking of critical thinking: As much as museums try to present accurate information about objects, many ancient objects, especially those in art museums, may not have complete information about their findspot, context, or provenance (the history of an object’s production, use, excavation, and acquisition). Many cultural objects and ancient artifacts ended up in museums through the art market, sometimes through illegal looting (mostly pre-1970 UNESCO Convention), sometimes as a result of “partage,”¹ or as a result of legal yet unethical acquisitions.

Dr. Megan Cifarelli, a professor of Art History at Manhattanville College Purchase, uses online museum collections in her university teaching to illuminate precisely this idea that museum collections and the practice of archaeology are themselves artifacts of imperialism, colonialism, and orientalism:

“In my teaching (both ancient art and museum studies), when I craft assignments using online collections, I ask my students to respond to a few questions based on the information that is provided and to reflect on why certain categories of information/interpretation are privileged over others.

• Where did this object come from?
• How did this object get to the museum?
• What is the art/historical significance of this object? Why was it collected?
• Why was this object created?
• What significance does this object have to indigenous/heritage populations in its country of origin?
• How is the presence of this object in this collection related to the mission of the institution to which it currently belongs?

¹ “Partage is the system whereby archaeologically rich nations, foreign excavators, and sometimes landowners split the excavated artifacts at the end of a field season.” Morag Kersel (2015). “Storage Wars: Solving the Archaeological Curation Crisis?” Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies 3/1: 42-54.
Of course, some of this is quite difficult to access on museum websites, so the lack of information itself becomes the basis for discussions about truth in labeling, point of view, decontextualization, and aestheticization.”

In our last blog post, we talked about how much the general public trusts museums when looking for reliable information. However, museum labels and object information are not written in stone; they change over time. New research questions, new technologies, or a new curator's interpretation can change the way the information about an object is presented. It is important for students to understand where information comes from and what information is missing. A helpful exercise can be to annotate a museum object's page with more information students learned or re-evaluate/correct the problematic language that is a remnant of a different time. Rewriting museum labels or creating alternative labels can activate socially-conscious thinking (Fig. 1). You can read a “correcting museum labels” activity by Dr. Izabel Galliera, an Assistant Professor of Art History in the Department of Art and Design at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania, here.

Fig. 1: “How would you label this object?” labels for visitors and students to fill during the “Make your own label” event as part of the “Blind Origin” exhibit. In this exhibit, in addition to the traditional label, archaeologists responded to the exhibited objects with personal interpretations and stories. The alternative labels created by visitors and students were put up next to these labels. This activity can be replicated using online exhibits and/or online museum collections object pages. Photo and labels by the author.
Museums are currently including indigenous voices in the interpretation of their collections. Scholar and writer Paula Peters, in the Listening to Wampanoag Voices: Beyond 1620 exhibit at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, says that:

“In 2020, the year that marks four centuries since the voyage of the Mayflower, the anniversary is being commemorated internationally for establishing the first colony that would be the foothold of New England. But a point too often lost or undersold is that colonization does not occur without people being colonized, subjugated, oppressed, even killed to accommodate the colonizer. Colonization happened to, not for, the Wampanoag. But we have endured. In this online exhibit, the Peabody Museum is giving us the opportunity to illustrate that point by lending contemporary Wampanoag voices to objects that were made, held, worn, consumed and otherwise made useful by our ancestors’ generations, if not centuries ago. These words attest to the significance of the objects and our continued relevance to them.”

You can read and listen to these interpretations and stories here. Including more voices and interpretations will demonstrate that different kinds of knowledge exist, are valuable, and provide more information on objects, people, and histories. Another example is the Narrating the Diverse Past project, which explores how museums can support the creation of inclusive and diverse narratives for archaeology collections through historical research and how these narratives can best be presented to younger audiences.

Our teaching, just like an exhibit, is curated. When teaching art history, one can’t possibly show all objects that come from one place, culture, or one period. So we end up teaching objects and artworks that we think are “important,” “unique,” or representative of a “canon.” Many universities are now re-evaluating their art history survey courses because of this reason (you can read more about this here). Allow students to question these canons and challenge your selections. Ask students to explore online museum collections on their own and to find objects connected to the course theme that are interesting to them personally. Don’t always dictate the selection. That way, students get to see a wider variety of objects that may not fit the traditional categories or categories as you, the instructor, has curated. Ask students what they think is interesting and what they want to learn. This activity can help decolonize our teaching by centering marginalized ideas, underrepresented groups, cultures, and artists. It can allow students to question what and who is represented in “canons,” who is missing, what ideas museums highlight and prioritize, and which ones they overlook.

3. Make and explore connections

One of the best ways students retain information is when they can transfer their classroom knowledge into new contexts. Dr. Jen Thum, Assistant Director of Academic Engagement and Assistant Research Curator at the Harvard Art Museums, informs me that teaching languages using museum objects enables students to see that they can use the information they learn in the classroom outside the classroom. She gives the example of a French class that visits the Harvard Art Museums to use their new language skills to describe Surrealist works of art to each other.
Dr. Thum, in her presentation at the AIA’s “Museums and Object-based Learning in the Era of COVID-19” session, also explained that empowering students to interpret objects based on their own experiences can help students and instructors to make new connections and see objects in a new perspective. Choosing to teach with an object that is personally interesting to students, whether because of its function, familiarity, color, or story, gives them more agency and enables them to consider different ways of thinking, seeing, and living than their own. In their presentation, Dr. Thum and her co-presenter Dr. Frances Gallart Marqués, discussed how showing students that their own knowledge is relevant to understanding an artwork or object allows for sharing authority and subverting power dynamics. If you would like to learn more about how to enable students and educators to create knowledge together by sharing authority, you can refer to Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed book or bell hooks’ work.

Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s music video in the Louvre and their selection of artworks has sparked interesting discussions on status, representation, and canons for many art history classes in the last couple of years. Using museum collections in our teaching enables us to make such connections between the past and present. A more direct example is the Penn Museum’s new Middle East Galleries called the “Journey to the City.” This exhibit ends with cases called “Living then and now,” which connect ancient objects with their modern equivalents (Fig. 2).

You can replicate this concept in your classroom by asking students to find an ancient object that resembles an object they use in their daily life. Another option is to ask students to search in a local museum’s online collection to find an object that connects to your class’ theme so that they can contextualize their new knowledge within the framework of the familiar. You may not know enough about these objects. But asking students to share the museum information with you will allow yourself to admit the limits of your knowledge. As a result, your students can
also start to see that their own limits to certain knowledge can be expanded by using the information found on online museum resources.

Online museum collections can connect your students directly with the object and with more people. A successful example of this is done by Harvard students, who lead gallery tours of the Harvard Art Museums on Zoom by using artworks from the collection. Rather than the traditional presentation format, your students can come up with alternative presentations such as this make-up tutorial by Cecilia Zhou based on Alexei von Jawlensky's painting “Head of a Woman.”

In literature (reading- or writing-heavy) courses, students could read books about art historical subjects and search for the relevant artworks in online museum databases, and design an exhibit with these objects in connection to the ideas in the book. Non-fiction books such as the "Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution" by Dan Hicks can be utilized to stimulate critical discussions. Students can search for the objects and photographs mentioned in the book in online museum collections and analyze them in connection to the book.

Virtual museum tours help get a sense of the museum gallery, but without a guide or guidance, wandering around virtually within a space that students are not familiar with may not be very fun or educational. This is why virtual museum visits need to be contextualized and connected to a “research question” or theme. It can help to focus on several objects within the virtual tour

Fig. 3: A screenshot of the object page of the “statuette of a Man at Prayer” from Ashur, Iraq in the online database with a screen shot of the Google street view.

Image caption: Below the image of the statue are two buttons: one to "explore connections," one to "view in street view." The "view in street view" button is highlighted and connected with an arrow to the screen shot of the street view of the gallery and exhibit case where the statue is located.
and connect those to the course theme. Allowing students to question where objects are exhibited, in proximity to what other objects will enable them to connect different kinds of information (spacial, abstract, and visual). The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin’s Google Arts and Culture extension, for example, enables one to see the objects in the galleries using Google street view and explore connections with architectural contexts and other objects (Fig. 3).

Last but not least, you can connect your students with museum professionals. Don’t be shy to reach out to museum educators and curators to ask what objects and collections would be best for teaching a specific subject. Dumbarton Oaks curator Dr. Elizabeth Dospěl Williams shared in the same AIA session that she connected with classrooms virtually to have live object “handling” sessions in the storage. Students were able to see the objects over Zoom and had the chance to talk to a curator and art technician about these objects in real-time. There is really no limit to who can visit your classroom virtually, so you can invite people and include voices you normally wouldn’t be able to. You can invite museum experts on [this list](#) to your classrooms to give a virtual tour or to have a Q&A session with your students. Look up museum professionals also on [Skype a Scientist](#), [Request a Woman Scientist](#), [Women also Know History](#), and [Women of Ancient History](#) to invite them to your virtual classrooms. (Remember that museum professionals may be overwhelmed at the moment due to staff and budget cuts. Make sure to plan ahead and allow time for planning and scheduling.)

### 4. Look closely, see differently

One of the best assets of online museum collections is their high-resolution images. The Rijksmuseum and the British Museum recently made thousand of their artwork images available under public domain license, and many other museums already have images of their artworks and objects online. These images enable students, and really any of us, to see objects close up, sometimes even closer than we would be able to in the physical gallery behind the glass.

According to the Toledo Museum of Art, the average person spends 17 seconds looking at a work of art in a museum. But to process the information both visually and conceptually, we need to slow down, carefully observe, and analyze. Online museum collections are the perfect way to achieve this. Toledo Museum of Art also states that such visual literacy skills are useful for people in every field.

Images from different angles and with close-ups on specific details allow us to see objects differently. Dr. Katherine Harrington from the Department of Classics at Florida State University tells me that for her Greek Archaeology course, she curates a selection of ancient Greek objects from major online museum collections and asks her students to do an object analysis:

“I usually pick about 8 objects that I know have high-resolution images and multiple views. Students then pick an object out of those eight (or one object of their own choice) and write a description. They think about how the object was used, its context, what its physical properties can tell us, and how it connects to the subjects they learned in the classroom.”
Good news for Dr. Harrington and others who teach with ancient Greek material culture: The Acropolis Museum is now digital! Find the virtual tour and online objects information here.

Similarly, Dr. Christian Casey, a CLIR postdoctoral fellow at the NYU ISAW Libraries, illustrates in his teaching activity how students can “decipher” ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs using a high-resolution image of the Rosetta Stone. Students may have seen some of these museum objects already. But taking the time to really look is a helpful exercise to notice important details such as the royal cartouches. Many museum educators use similar activities (see here for instructions and the additional resources at the end). You can look at a single object and still have a lively discussion for an hour.

Another activity you can assign to your undergraduate and graduate students is to design a research poster around a single museum object. In my “Tablets, Temples, and Cities: Near Eastern Art and Archaeology” course, I asked my students to find an archaeological/art historical object that was not covered in the course lectures and design a research poster around it. The poster assignment was created to help students learn how to use online museum collections, practice how to find reliable information, and design a visually appealing poster with high-resolution images. Make sure to show your students some good examples of posters and explain how to design a poster using various platforms (Adobe Suite or Powerpoint). Students can even be encouraged to submit their research posters to academic conferences.

5. Write, think, and make creatively

The digital museum world is your oyster! Allow students to explore it creatively. Many artists have used objects in museums as their inspiration. Watch Wangechi Mutu’s interview on her work “The NewOnes, will free Us” and how ancient Greek and African objects and artworks inspired her.

It would defeat the point to tell students to be creative and then provide instructions on how to be creative. Nevertheless, I want to highlight one example: The first cohort of Narratio fellows, 11 poets from around the world between the ages of 17 and 21, selected objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Near Eastern Art Galleries. They then wrote personal poems that re-imagined the stories behind the objects. Watch the interview with the founder of Narratio, Ahmed Badr, here. An artwork or object your students find in their online museum collections search can similarly inspire them to produce creative writing pieces, stories, and poems. You can find “ancient fanfiction” examples inspired by ancient artifacts and people written by Save Ancient Studies Alliance volunteers here.

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2 The course obviously needs to be renamed due to the colonial implications the name “Near East” carries. Read more on the term “Near East” and colonialism in this post by Erhan Tamur, Curatorial Research Associate at the Morgan Library and Museum.
Some final words of caution and consideration:
- Avoid using words like “treasure/scavenger hunt,” which, as an idea, encourages illegal excavation, looting, and “hunting” or “scavenging” for objects rather than aiming for contextualized information. If you want your students to find specific objects in the online museum collection, you can use words like “museum/collections re/search.”
- Make sure that students avoid cultural appropriation and the use of images in creating disrespectful and inappropriate memes. Don’t just take objects, symbols, or visual elements and reuse or recreate them. Students should learn about the objects themselves, their use, and meaning in their cultural and temporal context before using them for their own creative purposes.
- Not all objects are made for everyone to see or understand what they mean. Do research on objects that are culturally sensitive or considered sacred if you plan on using them. For example, burial objects (especially if they are in a museum and the museum is not providing context) may have been illegally or unethically acquired. Cultural objects that fall under NAGPRA should also be very carefully considered. Openly discuss and explain to your students why such objects are sensitive.
- Make sure to provide students with clear instructions on how to find objects in online museum collections. Stay tuned for our upcoming instructional video on how to search online museum collections!

Cite this resource:
Additional resources for teaching with online museum collections:

Read Dr. Thum's essay on strategies of teaching with museum objects, Dr. Casey's Rosetta Stone activity, Yale curators’ teaching activity and many more activities that use online museum collections in An Educator's Handbook for Teaching about the Ancient World book (free open access): https://pinardurgunpd.wixsite.com/teachancient

National Parks Service Museum Resources on a variety of topics using museum objects and resources: https://www.nps.gov/museum/ https://www.nps.gov/museum/tmc/tmc_links.html


Many museums have created a version of a close-looking exercise using their collections. Even though these resources are great, the number of very similar activities may make it harder for educators to select one. If your museum is planning on creating a similar activity, we suggest using or linking the already existing ones, such as the ones linked in the document and the following:

- Close-looking exercises by University of Colorado Boulder Art Museum: https://www.colorado.edu/cuartmuseum/programs/close-looking-exercises
- “Learning to Look” by Hood Museum of Art: https://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/learn/k-12-educators/educator-resources/learning-to-look

Downloadable K12 virtual visits and lesson plans by the RISD Museum: https://risdmuseum.org/virtualvisits

“Think Like a Curator” lesson plan by University of Maryland Art Gallery: https://www.artgallery.umd.edu/lesson-plans/think-curator-creating-virtual-exhibition

Museum Pedagogy in the Classroom by CUNY: https://museumcuny.commons.gc.cuny.edu/category/materiality/

Lessons and activities for all levels by the National Gallery of Art: https://www.nga.gov/education/teachers/lessons-activities.html

Museum object portfolio assignment by Elise Smith: http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/2014/03/museum-object-portfolio-assignment/

The Metropolitan Museum of Art lesson plans: https://www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/lesson-plans

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Educator's guides (free open-access books): https://www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History essays contextualizes objects in the collections in short essays: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/

Curriculum collections/educator resources by the American Museum of Natural History: https://www.amnh.org/learn-teach/curriculum-collections

Teaching through Collections by the University of Alaska, Museum of the North https://www.uafrica.edu/museum/education/educators/teaching-through-collecti/


Art Museum Teaching, digital community and collaborative online forum for reflecting on critical issues in the field of museums, including issues of teaching, learning, community engagement, equity & inclusion, social justice, and reflective practice: https://artmuseumteaching.com/about/

Journal of Museum and Society (open-access), Special Issue: Isolation as a CollectiveExperience: Museums’ First Responses to COVID-19: https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/mas/issue/view/202
Podcasts:
Unboxing the Canon Podcast: https://unboxingthecanon.podbean.com/
Peopling the Past Podcast and Resources: https://peoplingthepast.com/
Exhibiting Kinship: https://www.exhibitingkinshippodcast.com/
MuseoPunks: https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museopunks/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI3MvkNuJ6wlVGuy1Ch3zpweOEAAAYASAAEjZ0vD_BwE
Thin Edge of the Wedge episode on museums: http://www.wedgepod.org/episode-list/
Harvard Museums Podcast: https://hmcs.harvard.edu/podcast
Museum Confidential: https://www.npr.org/podcasts/557204718/museum-confidential

Videos:
Why do we have museums? By J. V. Maranto (introductory animation video for younger audiences): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHo928fd2wE
The Case for Museums: The Art Assignment by PBS Digital Studios https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcTqaCwBBcQ
Museums have a dark past, but we can fix that by Chip Colwell https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJYS9CO6_qY&t=321s
Museum in progress: Decolonizing museums by Hannah Mason-Macklin https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRoRzMOBIdc
How art gives shape to cultural change by Thelma Golden https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thelma_golden_how_art_gives_shape_to_cultural_change/transcript?language=en
Can art amend history? By Titus Kaphar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4FTBXaAJSY
How you can activate the soft power of your museums by Ngaire Blankenberg https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHAKYODbkNE
Seeing the Past as Present: Why Museums Matter by Colleen Leth https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SehKVHo601c
Museum as activator, museum as activist, museum as agitator by Pedro Gadanho https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiHTGBT8hlc
Museums should activate multiple senses, not just the eyeball by Ellen Lupton https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1-r7CR6FSs
How will museums of the future look? By Sarah Kenderdine https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXhtwFCA_Kc
Death to Museums talks: https://deathtomuseums.com/ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiLyLYvXlWghzWezCjZEJXQ