

Art & Design: Celebration



Silk dancing dress
from Tibet
late 19th - early 20th century AD
Length: 147cm

Art & Design guides for teachers

The collection of the British Museum has inspired artists for hundreds of years and is a rich source of ideas and stimulation for teachers and students alike. This series of ten guides is intended to help primary and secondary teachers to use the objects in the British Museum collection for teaching art and design. This will support students' research skills, knowledge and understanding in order to make their practical work more meaningful and contextualised.

Each guide focuses on a topic. Each topic is analysed through four or five themes, each of which is illustrated with a museum object, which in turn represent different historical periods and world cultures. These topics, themes and objects have been specially chosen so that you and your students can use them as starting points to explore the collection further, either at the Museum or in the classroom. Each guide ends with points for classroom discussion and brief ideas for starting off activities and projects. The guides in the series are:

- 1 Containers
- 2 Sculpture
- 3 Textiles
- 4 Symbols
- 5 Celebration
- 6 The Natural World
- 7 Identity
- 8 Gods and spirits
- 9 Objects in motion
- 10 Death and the afterlife

Most of the objects have been taken from the Museum's online database, available through: www.britishmuseum.org/explore/introduction.aspx. There you can find high quality images which can be copied into your own presentations for the classroom or for students to download. Fuller details of each object are given at the end of each guide.

Contextual understanding

In order to develop their critical thinking, students should examine the following when considering any museum object:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Origin: | Who made it? Where and when was it made? |
| Materials: | What is it made from? |
| Process: | How was it made? |
| Function: | What was it used for? |
| Meaning: | What does it mean? |

Once students have understood the context, they can analyse the form and decoration of the object which are usually determined or influenced by all these aspects.

World cultures

The guides are not based around a particular cultural or geographical region. If you wish to focus your study on, for example, objects from Africa then use the list below, where the guides which contain objects from particular regions have been grouped.

Africa

Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Identity, Sculpture, Symbols, Textiles,

The Americas

Celebration, Containers, Gods and spirits, Symbols, Textiles, Natural World

Asia

Celebration, Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Objects in motion, Sculpture,

Europe

Celebration, Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Identity, Objects in motion, Sculpture, Textiles, Natural World

Middle East

Gods and spirits, Sculpture, Natural World

Oceania

Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Sculpture, Symbols, Natural World

Cross-curricular links

Citizenship

Many of these topics tap into citizenship themes such as local and national identity, globalisation and global issues, and the impact of the media.

History

The objects are from a variety of historical contexts and periods. Research and discussions about the use of clothing for status and the importance of symbols, for example, are central to exploring images as evidence in history.

Geography

Examining objects from specific cultures is an excellent way of understanding how humans interact and cope with living and surviving in different environments.

Religious Education

Many of these objects have some spiritual significance. Those relating to the afterlife and deities are ideal starting points for considering similarities and differences in belief systems.

Celebration

Exploring the theme of celebration allows us to consider how decoration of objects and materials, adornment and costume are integral components of celebrating, as well as investigate further questions of the role of festivals in communities and how they can be used in creating and developing group identities. When considering celebrations, it is important to think about them in context. Often accompanied by music, fire, food and drink, processions and dancing, celebrations are lively active occasions and often involve all the senses. Each of the objects below depicts or is used for a celebration and suggests the exciting variety of celebrations but also key commonalities for humans across the world.

A celebration in action

This drawing by artist John White depicts the harvest ritual of the Secotan people of North America. White was one of a group of settlers sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh to found new colonies in 1585 and made detailed records of the people they found there.



Here we can see a watercolour painting which vividly conveys the action of this celebration. Visible are activities which feature in celebrations worldwide: dancing in a special arrangement, particular clothing – in this case breeches and aprons, and feathers in their hair. Some of the dancers have adorned their bodies with painted decorations and we can see some with gourd rattles, which would have made rhythms, and others holding leafy twigs. The ritual area was marked by human-height posts, each carved to depict human heads. It is believed that this festival was the Green Corn Festival, which celebrated the first harvest of Indian corn or maize at the end of the summer. Like harvest festivals the world over, it would have been dedicated to giving thanks for the success of the harvest.

Dressing for the occasion

Prized materials were often used in making costumes for important celebrations. This richly embroidered silk robe was part of the ritual costume worn by monks in Tibet in the late 19th century. Masked dances were a regular feature in Tibetan monasteries. The opulent robe would have been worn with a mask and jewellery and may have formed part of the end of year festival. The silk and pointed sleeves swirled with the dancer, creating a great visual effect for the audience.



The silk depicts a four-clawed dragon and other patterns which were Chinese in origin and often associated with imperial officials from China. The silk was probably a gift to the monastery from the Chinese emperors of the Qing dynasty. The motifs and materials therefore suggest power and wealth.

Entertaining the crowd

Celebrations are often accompanied by community entertainment such as sports or performances. Shadow puppet shows have been a part of celebrations in Java since the 11th century and are still very popular today at marriages or other ceremonies. They are not only entertaining but are considered beneficial for the well-being of the community. The puppeteer is therefore not just a storyteller and performer but also a ritual specialist.



This puppet is Kumbakarna, a character from the Indian epic, the Ramayana, and can be identified by the colours and characteristics. He is the enemy of Rama, the hero of the story, and the pink colour suggests his ruthlessness and his tusks suggest he is a giant or monster. The puppeteer was a highly skilled performer who expertly manoeuvred his puppets while telling compelling stories.

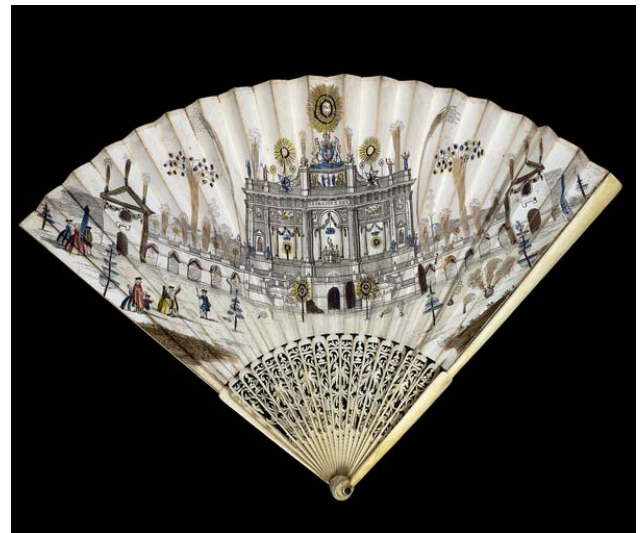
Decorating the festival

The papier-mâché sculptures made for the Day of the Dead festival in Mexico are spectacular objects which represent death in different forms. They decorate the streets and houses on this joyful celebration of remembrance, reunion and feasting, where families reconvene to remember the dead. As the sculptures are remade annually, they are made of a degradable material. This also means that they may refer to international events which were important at the time. Made in 1983, this figure is War, one of Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and refers to contemporary conflicts. The symbol of the skull represents Death and is depicted in many forms of decoration such as printed images, stencils, cakes, sweets and candles.



Remembering the celebration

A particular celebration may be commemorated with souvenirs - the memory of a celebration reminds one of an exciting time and creates anticipation of the next one. Throughout history commemorative objects have served to embed occasions for celebration, such as victories in battle, in the public consciousness.



Depicted on this souvenir fan is a magnificent temporary structure and firework display created in St James Park in London to celebrate the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1749. The peace did not last long in Europe, but this fan, which would be used at other events, reminded the owner of a spectacular occasion. Creating commemorative material is a huge industry in contemporary society and objects are designed to remind us of communal events and forge group identities and memories.

General discussion

- Discuss with students what kinds of events are celebrated in these examples and other ones they know about – how can they be categorised?
- What other objects can they think of that are used for celebrations?
- Students should examine each of the objects and consider what they might have heard, seen, smelled or tasted at the associated celebration. If they do not know, they could do some research into these particular traditions and festivals.
- Try to find different examples across the world of New Year festivals. Why do they take place at different times during our calendar? What are the similarities and differences? Why is New Year celebrated in particular? What feelings does it evoke?

Projects and activities

Primary

Shadow puppets

Choose an appropriate upcoming celebration and create a shadow puppet show to accompany it.

Commemorative objects

Ask students to design their own commemorative objects for a celebration – remember that to be effective it should be an object that can be used regularly.

Cross-curricular project

Create a celebration with all the associated components – music, dance, visuals, language etc.

Secondary

Identity

Consider the important link of identity and celebration. Examine these objects and consider how events are integral parts of forming group identities. Choose a particular culture and explore how objects, such as costumes, jewellery or souvenirs, and how these create and define identities.

Ephemeral events

Celebrations are by their very nature short-lived or transient. Objects created for them are often disposable or deliberately designed to be destroyed. The Durga celebration in India culminates in a richly adorned clay sculpture which took a month to make being lowered into the Ganges. How does this affect the objects? Are they designed to be permanent - if so, why? Are they to be reused? Do they gain added significance and power from being reused several times throughout history?

Illustrations

A Festive Dance

John White
from North America
Around AD 1585-93
27 x 35 cm

Silk dancing dress

from Tibet
late 19th - early 20th century AD
Length: 147cm

Shadow puppet of Kumbakarna

from Java, Indonesia
19th century AD
height: 66 cm

War

from the Atomic Apocalypse, by the Linares family
Mexico City
AD 1983
height: 2m

Souvenir fan of the Royal Fireworks

hand-coloured etching on paper, with ivory sticks
from London
1749
42 x 16 cm

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