

THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM

Art & Design: Sculpture



Bronze figurine of Hermes
From Saponara, southern Italy
Hellenistic Greek, 200-100 BC

Guide for teachers 2

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.

Sculpture

Humans have created three dimensional, sculptural objects throughout their history. A wide range of materials and techniques have been and continue to be used which reflect local practices and the resources available. Sculpture is produced for a numerous reasons and functions in a range of different ways. Many peoples produce sculptures that depict divinities or cultural heroes in human or animal form which would have been used in a religious or ritual context. Other types of sculpture celebrate kingship and power, commemorate ancestors or relate to beliefs about death and afterlife. Sculpture is found in a wide variety of contexts, both sacred and secular. A work might be placed on an altar, located in the landscape or it could be applied to architecture. The works of contemporary sculptors can be found in both public and private contexts and explore a range of issues, both formal and thematic.

Idealisation of the human figure

The ancient Greeks developed a naturalistic but idealised sculptural language that celebrated the nude male body. The nude embodied Classical culture's idealised conception of human figure and its celebration of the athletic male body. Both gods and humans were depicted in this way, and it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other. This free standing bronze figurine, produced to be seen in the round, probably represents Hermes, the messenger of the gods, wearing a wide-brimmed *petasos* (sun hat). He would originally have held another of his attributes - the *kerykeion* (snake-entwined staff) - in his right hand. The stance of the figure is known as *contrapposto*, with weight on one leg, the other bent and a slight twist in the body and is typical of Classical sculpture. It helps give the figure a relaxed, natural feel. The god's powerfully observed musculature and detailed anatomy are typical of the Hellenistic period (323-30 BC).



Classical sculptors worked in both bronze and marble, but bronze was popular because of

its naturalism: its shiny gold colour imitated oiled, suntanned skin. Like the Benin bronzes and Indian Chola bronzes, also in the museum collection, the figure was cast using the lost wax method. It is not known how such figures were used, but they may have decorated household shrines or gardens or been given as offerings to temples.

Celebrating kingship

Sculptural objects are often freestanding, but other types include the relief or frieze. A relief is halfway between two-dimensional wall decoration and the three-dimensional



sculptural object and is often found in an architectural context. Many cultures have employed this format. This ancient Assyrian example comes from the throne room in King Ashurnasirpal's palace in Nimrud. It is part of a much larger frieze that continued round the room at floor level and was brightly coloured. Such Assyrian friezes glorified royal power and authority, showing the king's military and hunting achievements. In many Assyrian reliefs the narrative is continuous, but here the artist has focused on a single episode: the royal lion hunt. Ashurnasirpal is seen in a horse-drawn chariot wearing the pointed Assyrian crown and shooting a lion with a bow and arrow. Another lion lies dead beneath the horse's feet. The relief is shallow and carved from a single piece of alabaster, a stone that was readily available in the area. The style is characteristic of Assyrian relief. The figures are stylised and seen in profile. The artist focuses on outlines, taking great care with the contours of bodies. Certain details are incised with great precision, such as human and animal hair or musculature.

Sculpture in a temple

One of the most common ancient Chinese sculptural materials was stoneware brightly decorated with green and yellow glaze (*sancai* ware). Figures from temples and tombs made of the material have been found, the strong colours surviving particularly well because the glaze does not rub off once fired. This life size figure is from a Buddhist temple and



depicts a Luohan, a follower of Buddha with supernatural powers. He is seated cross-legged in quiet contemplation, his hands folded in his lap. His face is calm and serious and could almost be a portrait. However, despite the naturalism, it is not a specific person but a wise man 'type'. The figure is modelled naturalistically and details carefully observed. He wears a green under-robe and an orange-brown patchwork robe decorated with prunus-blossoms. The patchwork robe was traditionally worn by monks as a sign of humility. His elongated ears indicate wisdom. Such Luohan figures were placed along the walls of a temple entrance, or grouped in pairs on either side of the main Buddha sculpture.

An object produced over time

Not all sculpture is produced by a single artist or craftsman to reflect a preconceived aesthetic idea. Some, such as this carved wood and nail *nkisi* figure (from the Democratic Republic of Congo) were produced over a long period of time as a result of their ritual function.



Nkisi figures were believed to contain powerful spiritual forces and were used by a *nganga*, a healer or diviner. If a member of the community had a problem they would visit the *nganga* who would recite invocations and drive a nail or blade into the *nkisi*'s body. This 'shock' activated the *nkisi* figure's powers. The nails gradually built up over time and each reflects an invocation. *Nkisi* figures can be either human or animal and were believed to have the power to hunt down wrong-doers. This *nkisi* figure is the double-headed dog Kozo. In Kongo society, dogs were seen as particularly good at hunting down wrong-doers as they were mediators between the seen and unseen, the living and the dead. They could therefore move easily between the known and unknown to hunt down their pray. Kozo's two heads and four eyes made him particularly good at seeking out invisible causes.

Transient sculpture

Like many Oceanic sculptures, this figure from New Zealand is characterised by its intricacy, spatial complexity and open structure. The carved elements interpenetrate to



create a multiplicity of volumes and planes and the surface is covered with intricate painted decorations. It depicts a figure of ancestral identity in semi-human form and would have been used during the *Malagan*, a cycle of rituals held in memory of the dead. The gender of the figure is ambiguous, having both male and female attributes such as male genitalia and a female white cap. The ambiguity is further stressed by the inclusion of a particular fish, a rock cock, at the bottom of the sculpture, which changes gender during its life cycle.

Numerous other fish, birds and eyes peer out from over the surface and the large, stylised semi-human face at the top has tusks and rows of sharp teeth. Such sculptures had numerous symbolic meanings including identity, kinship, gender, death and the spirit world. When someone died, Malagan figures representing the person's life-force were made and displayed in special enclosures, sometimes in considerable numbers, during the feasts

and rituals honouring both the dead and the donors of the carvings. Once they fulfilled their function they were abandoned or destroyed and so, unlike some sculptural traditions, they were not permanent memorials to the departed. However, despite their impermanence, they were made by specialist craftsmen and required huge outlays of wealth. Making malagan is a continuing tradition, but it is now less usual to destroy the carvings after the ceremony.

General discussion

- Discuss the difference between realism and abstraction in sculpture. For example explore the way different cultures depict the human body using an abstract or realistic visual language. What different things can the two approaches achieve when dealing with the human body?
- Why are some types of sculpture permanent and others ephemeral? Consider how the function of the sculpture and different ideas of value and aesthetics might affect whether an object is permanent or ephemeral.
- What different techniques or ways of producing sculpture can you think of? How do they differ from one another? Find examples of each. Do the methods and materials used by contemporary artists differ from those employed traditionally?
- How do the traditional functions of sculpture from across the world differ from the contemporary function of sculpture? What different contexts would you expect to find sculpture in? We see much traditional sculpture in a museum context. Does the fact that it is no longer in its original context affect the meaning of the work?
- Consider portrait sculpture and compare it to contemporary traditions of portraiture.
- How does the classical tradition of the idealised nude human body differ from the reality of the human body? Find examples of sculpture that treat the body in a non-idealised way.
- Much sculpture is linked to religion or power. Consider why this might be the case. Are there other types of sculpture you can think of?

Projects and activities

Primary

Portraits

Look at different traditions of the portrait bust. Explore why they are made (e/g. memory, power, likeness or ancestors) and how they are displayed. Make a portrait or self portrait bust out of clay and think about where and how it might be displayed. Perhaps the class could create a 'memory altar' and display the busts together.

Friezes

Look at the Assyrian friezes in the British Museum collection and get the class to create their own reflecting typical aspects of everyday life.

Secondary

Sculptural Techniques

Research the lost wax process and explore how it has been used in different cultures. Produce a mould and make a cast to explore the technique. Discuss the difference between a cast sculpture and a carved sculpture. Explore contemporary forms of reproduction and their different types.

Installation

Research and explore the difference between sculpture and installation.

Communicating power

Research the ways different cultures express the power of a leader or king through sculpture (propaganda). Compare this with the way contemporary leaders manipulate their image through the media and the messages they wish to communicate. Produce a contemporary power figure, thinking carefully about the type of message the figure communicates.

Influences from Africa

Research how early 20th century painters and sculptures were influenced by African sculpture.

Illustrations

Hermes, the messenger of the gods

Bronze figurine

from Saponara, southern Italy

Hellenistic Greek, 200-100 BC

height: 49 cm

A lion leaping at the King's chariot

Stone panel

from the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) northern Iraq

Neo-Assyrian, 883-859 BC

length: 2.24 m, width: 88 cm

A disciple of the Buddha

Stoneware luohan

from Yi county, Hebei province, northern China

Liao dynasty (AD 907-1125)

height: 1.3m

Nkisi nkondi

Kozo, the double-headed dog

from the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Kongo, late 19th - early 20th century AD,

length: 64cm height: 28 cm

Malagan mortuary figure

from the north coast of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea,

AD 1882-83

height: 1.2 m

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