

Art & Design: Identity



Badge of the Anti-Apartheid Movement
Great Britain
1984

Guide for teachers 7

Art & Design guides for teachers

The collections of the British Museum have inspired artists for hundreds of years and are 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 collections 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, from 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 collections further, either at the Museum or online. 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

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 topics

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 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.

Identity: portraits and beyond

Defining and representing identity, whether one's individuality or as part of a group, community, or nation, is integral to human experience. Few people would claim that their identities were defined by allegiance to one single community. For most of us, what makes us unique is the complex of different identities that we embody - political, religious, linguistic, national, local, social and so on. From analysing ways of presenting ourselves to exploring how others see us, the theme of identity is a rich topic for study. Portraits are one aspect of this, although to deepen our understanding of identity we can examine a wide variety of objects that represent or project identities and serve several purposes.

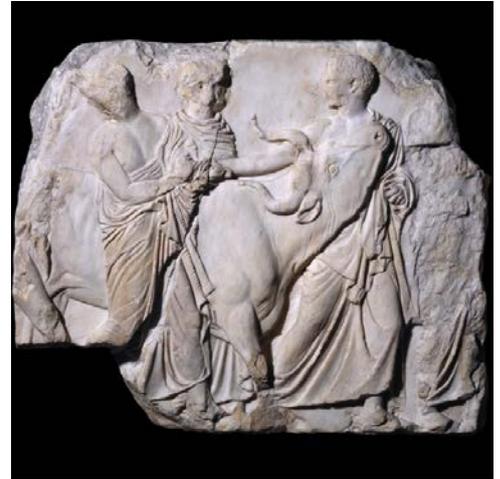
Symbols and self-portraits

Western portrait painters from the time of the Renaissance onwards often included objects or symbols in their prints, drawings and paintings. These were designed to add to our knowledge of the identity and character of the sitter. Sir Joshua Reynolds was one of the leading portrait painters of his day and the first President of the Royal Academy. This print of a self-portrait associates Reynolds with great artists of the past. The use of light and emphasis on texture is reminiscent of Rembrandt, while the pose is borrowed from Van Dyck. He leans on a table on which sits a bust of Michelangelo. He wears the gown of the doctorate of Civil Law from Oxford University which he gained in 1773. The whole image therefore reflects both his artistic and intellectual credentials. As a self-portrait designed to hang in the Royal Academy, we can be in no doubt about Reynolds' intention of self-promotion by projecting these different aspects of his identity.



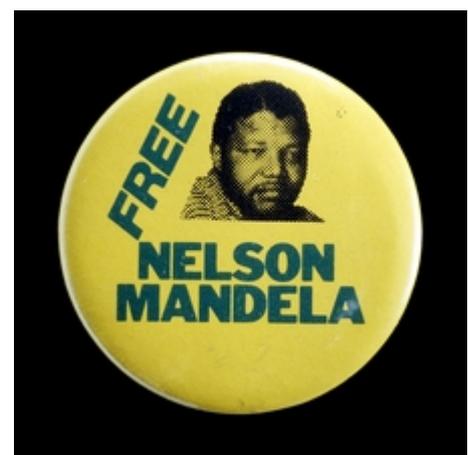
Architecture and civic identity

Belonging to a community, group, city or nation is an important component of one's identity. Buildings are significant expressions of group identity. Created by the leaders of a group, they are designed to be powerful markers of identity, to inspire community members, remind them of their group affiliation and provide a venue for group ceremonies, festivals and rituals - other components of identity formation. The frieze on the Parthenon in Athens (fifth century BC) depicts in marble the procession of the Panathenaic festival, which occurred every year to thank Athena for her safeguarding of the city. The citizens are carved in marble celebrating her birthday, thus the frieze created a permanent record of civic unity which could serve to remind citizens as well as potential enemies of Athens' celebrated history and favour amongst the gods. The classical uniformity of facial and physical features alludes to the equality of citizens in the Athenian democratic system.



Displaying allegiance

Adornments to clothing such as jewellery and badges can be used to express identity, indicate membership and declare beliefs whether religious or political. Badges were first mass-produced in Rome during the twelfth century AD to be given to pilgrims as proof of their pilgrimage. Since then their use has grown widely across the world. Some badges denote status and an element of exclusiveness, while others, such as this example, are mass produced and issued freely



to reach as wide an audience as possible. The image of Nelson Mandela, imprisoned in 1964 for political offences, became a symbol of resistance to the racist South African apartheid regime. The anti-apartheid movement was founded in 1959 and campaigned for Mandela's release through widespread international activities. This badge, from 1984,

is one example of how an individual could demonstrate allegiance to the cause and spread the message to others. It also enhanced Mandela's iconic image as his face became instantly recognisable and synonymous with the anti-apartheid movement.

Exclusion

By their very nature, symbols of identity, especially when allied with relationships of power, exclude others. During the British colonial period of the late nineteenth century, day to day life was highly segregated, with the British social scene centred around clubs and events, which were highly exclusive and out of bounds for most indigenous people apart from servants or occasional dignitaries. The particular clothing of the British administrators came to represent their claim to authority over the indigenous



masses. The pith helmet, a weighty and cumbersome piece of headgear designed to protect Europeans from the sun, and the umbrella became potent symbols of colonialism. Here the Yoruba artist uses the Nigerian sculptural style, which enlarges the most important or powerful features in the body or clothing, to capture the essence of colonial domination. In this way, the artist has empowered himself by depicting these symbols of exclusivity and authority in his own artistic tradition.

General discussion

- What badges are most commonly seen nowadays? (include school badges, charity ribbons etc). Put all the ideas on the board and ask pupils to find general group headings for them. What are the various purposes in producing the badges?
- What buildings do they know which inspire a sense of identity and belonging? How is this achieved through the building style or decoration?
- How do the students know the identities of people in power? Start perhaps with media and television, then extend to moveable objects – coins, souvenirs etc. Why is this important? How much control do those in power have over their own image?

Projects and activities

Primary

Group identity

Brainstorm with pupils all the ways in which the school projects its identity, e.g. uniform, motto etc. Ask pupils to design on the computer a new crest for their school using different symbols and motifs.

Self-portraits in a box

Take the theme of how the objects surrounding a person help to define their identity. Ask pupils to consider what objects they would choose to project aspects of their identity. Ask them to bring in examples of these or draw representations of them. Create 'portait boxes' - shoe boxes with key objects stuck into them.

Secondary

21st century identities

Discuss with pupils the impact of the internet in the projection of identities: in what way are these self-portraits? Use this concept of virtual identities as a starting point for a project and discuss similarities and differences with older forms of self-representation, e.g. idealisation, privacy, public image etc..

Exclusion and inclusion

Examine other instances in history and contemporary culture where objects, images or practices represent deliberate exclusion (handshakes, language, gender etc). Explore the impact this has on other people and ways they have found for tackling them such as appropriating the images and symbols for their own use.

Illustrations

Sir Joshua Reynolds

Self-portrait

Mezzotint

Published in London, England, AD 1780

length 48 x width 38 cm

Young cow and herdsmen from the south frieze of the Parthenon

Scene from a procession of sacrificial victims

The Acropolis, Athens, Greece, about 438-432 BC

height: 100 cm

Badge of the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Great Britain, around AD 1984

diameter: 3.8 cm

Carving of a European official with two policemen

Yoruba people, Nigeria, 20th century

20th century AD

height 68cm x width 42cm x diameter 40 cm