

Art & Design: Textiles



Textile with Eros figures in a boat
from Akhmim, Egypt
4th century AD

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

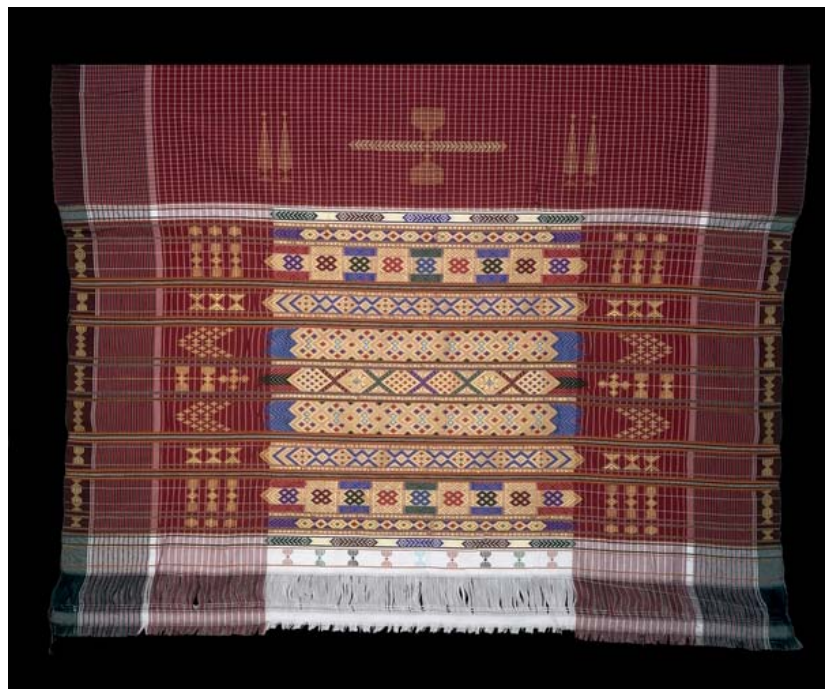
Many of these objects have some spiritual significance. Those relating to the afterlife and deities are ideal starting points for considering similarities and differences in belief systems.

Textiles

The word 'textile' is used to describe a wide variety of materials that are fabrics, both natural and synthetic, which have been woven or have fibres bound together mechanically, by hand or naturally. The technique of making a textile in many cases determines the decoration. For example a pattern can be woven using different fibres coloured with natural or man-made dyes. Plain fabrics with a fine weave, such as manufactured cotton, can be printed by hand or by machine. Fabrics can also be embellished using embroidery and adding texture or ornaments to the textile. Textiles are flexible – their fibrous nature means they can be remade into any shape by sewing - which has enabled them to be used across the world for a multitude of other purposes. Since they are organic materials, fewer textiles remain from early periods in history and conservators at the British Museum use highly specialised techniques to preserve textiles from further decay.

For ceremony and status

Across the world, high quality or rare fabrics are worn by important people within societies to denote and display their status. For ceremonies and rituals, special clothing is often worn by the participants – marriage being a good example. This garment is worn at wedding ceremonies in North Africa where marriage is a significant public statements



of both families' status, wealth and honour. The bride wears this fabric during the ceremony and its pattern is associated with different aspects of fertility and domestic harmony. Wearing it also denotes the transition of the woman into a new phase of life, where her duties as a wife commence.

For protection

Several layers of textiles together can create a strong and protective material. Under most metal or leather armour, a thick layer of fabrics provides additional protection, strength and comfort. In the case of this horse armour from North Africa, two layers of cotton have been stuffed with *kapok* - wool-like strands from the silk cotton tree - to create a quilted effect.



The great armies of the savannah regions south of the Sahara, such as those from the Hausa, Mali and Ghana, dressed their armies and horses in this brightly coloured armour. Although this would have been worn in battle under metal or leather, for special events and military parades the outer layer was removed and the bright colours were exposed.

For display

Textiles can be displayed as hangings or rugs which both decorate and insulate a room. Unlike cloths where both sides of the fabric are likely to be visible, only one side of a tapestry or hanging for display will be seen. This enables the artist to create images and pictures with much greater freedom as they are not concerned by the look of the reversed image. Tapestries first became popular in



Greece in the 3rd century BC although few remain from the early period due to the susceptibility of fabrics to decay over time. The most widely-known tapestries date from the 14th to 16th centuries in Europe when the industry thrived, especially in France and Flanders which boasted many textile towns. However, this fragment is a beautiful early example of the Hellenistic style found in Egypt. It shows two *erotes* figures

who represent Eros, the god of love, recognisable with their wings. Apples are visible in the background decoration, another symbol of Eros. One of the figures steers the boat whilst the other appears to be fishing. Their playful expressions are typical of depictions of Eros, a god known for his mischievous character. The leafy border decoration is known as *guilloche*, a style from the Greeks which influenced Roman and Coptic art. It is likely that it would have hung on a wall or lain as a rug on the floor.

As a home

This canvas-backed appliqué hanging in two halves probably formed the doorway of a tent, made by the Berber people of North Africa. The Berbers are a farming society who move their tented homes around, seeking fresh pastures for their sheep and goats. Highly decorated tents are used for celebrations and special occasions by those living in the cities in the region.

The elaborate pattern on this tent doorway is created using the appliqué technique. This is a form of decoration



which is made by sewing other fabrics onto a foundation fabric. Both the attached fabric and the stitching form part of the decoration and create bold, clear designs. This technique is particularly used for decoration or script to be seen from a distance. This decoration includes two kinds of design – brightly coloured patterns with geometric designs and regular repeating patterns. Around the inner border are Arabic scripts with quotations from the Qur'an and words of welcome.

To keep warm

Textiles are used worldwide to make clothing to cover the body, whether for reasons of tradition, modesty, insulation or to keep cool. Thick fabrics are essential for insulating



those living in the Arctic regions. These socks would be worn inside rubber boots by the Meqqileriffik people of Greenland. The first evidence of felt being used dates to 6500 BC, making it the earliest known form of fabric created by humans. The process requires friction and moisture, through rubbing fibres together over a long period which binds them together. It is aided by adding soap or a binding agent to the water. These socks have been embellished with blanket stitch in navy blue thread along the rim to reinforce the edge of the fabric.

Further reading

We recommend the *Fabric Folios* series from British Museum Press, which discuss technical and cultural aspects of the textiles and are illustrated with superb photographs. Current titles in the series are:

Embroidery from India and Pakistan (Sheila Paine)

Embroidery from Afghanistan (Sheila Paine)

Embroidery from Palestine (Shelagh Weir)

Textiles from Mexico (Chloe Sayer)

Silk in Africa (Chris Spring and Julie Hudson)

Textiles from Guatemala (Ann Hecht)

Printed and dyed textiles from Africa (John Gillow)

Miao textiles from China (Gina Corrigan)

Also see:

Harris, Jennifer, *5000 years of textiles*, British Museum Press, 2004 new edition

General discussion

- Discuss what different kinds of textile (woven, machine made, woollen etc) are suitable for different purposes and why.
- List words to describe how textiles feel to the touch.
- Consider other examples of status and power through clothing. In each case, consider what makes the textile suggest status – for example cost, craftsmanship, quantity, materials.
- Seasons and weather – what makes different textiles and clothing styles suitable for different seasons? What other factors come into play (tradition, convention, modesty)?
- Explore how textiles in some cultures are used to tell stories or use patterns to convey meanings.

Projects and activities

Primary

Animal armour

Create an animal army – bring in soft toys and make felt armour for them either through sewing or using Velcro.

Feltmaking

This is an easy process which students enjoy, as it is wet and active. Research on the web or bring in a freelance artist.

Class quilt

This simple group project starts with each student working on the same size of fabric which will be sewn together at the end (perhaps a parent can help.) There are different ways of decorating - embroidery or silk painting. For an effective final result, limit the colour palette to give the piece some unity.

Primary continued

Tents

Think about different types of tents and other moveable housing around the world. Create a 'tactile picture' of your own tent design using off-cuts and swatches of material.

Secondary

Appliqué

Find other examples where appliqué is used and create an appliqué piece inspired by a modern artist such as Klimt, Klee or Matisse, using big bold pieces of fabric.

Dyeing

Explore the traditional dyeing techniques in some cultural areas, such as the adire of Nigeria. This sophisticated technique uses indigo as its base colour – examine the variety of patterns they are able to make and experiment by trying these.

Futuristic clothing

Consider visions of the future and design an item or range of clothing which is protective against danger or weather conditions. Think how various predictions for future climate or lifestyles might alter the design of these garments.

Illustrations

Woman's ceremonial garment (*biskri*)

from Jerba Island, Tunisia

Late 20th century AD

length 3.92 m x width 1.42 m

Quilted cotton horse armour

from Sudan, Africa

19th century AD

length 170 x width 84 x height 135 cm

Textile with *Erotos* figures in a boat

Fragment of linen decorated in multi-coloured wool loops

from Akhmim, Egypt

4th century AD

length 94 x width 83 cm

Tent doorway hanging

Appliqué

from Cairo, Egypt,

Early 20th century AD

length 285 cm x width 172 cm

Pair of felt socks

Made by Meqqileriffik

Narsaq, South Greenland

AD 2001

length 27 x width 22 cm

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