



Smithsonian
National Museum of Natural History

TEACHER'S CORNER: INTRODUCTION TO ARCHAEOLOGY & ART ARTIFACTS

by Stefanie Elkins

Grade Level: 6 - 12

Timeframe: one 50 minute class period (not including optional activities).

Overview

This lesson introduces the student to the concept that even though archaeology is considered a science, archaeologists study man-made structures, art objects and artifacts in order to make interpretations about cultures of the past.

Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) Objectives

Standard 14: Expands and develops a personal position on aesthetics: Why do people create art? Does art have to be functional? Must art be beautiful? Why are certain objects considered art and others are not? How do we justify these arguments about what is art?

National Arts Standards for Arts Education

Content Standard 4: Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

Lesson Objectives

1. The student will define the role of an archaeologist and how this science makes determinations about our past through the man-made art objects, or artifacts, that ancient cultures have left behind.
2. The student will engage in a discussion about what defines art and artifacts and the differences between modern Western notions about art versus views that ancient societies held.
3. The student will participate in small group activities where he/she will analyze, describe, and draw conclusions about the culture whose “remains” will be contained in a folder and correctly complete the corresponding “Magazine Culture Survey Worksheet.”
4. The student will learn through discussion how important it is to know the context in which an artifact is found in order to understand the culture that created it.

Teacher Resources

Folders containing laminated magazine cutouts that depict man-made objects - one folder for each group.

**Optional:* Examples of ancient artifacts (laminated photos or PP presentation)

**Motel of the Mysteries*, by David Macaulay (1979)

Student Materials

Pencils

Magazine Culture Survey Worksheets (one for each group of three to four students)

Motivation/Hook

As soon as students are seated, present the following scenario and questions:

“Imagine that it is the year 3000. A team of archaeologists has recently started to uncover the classroom you are in now. The team has documentation that a massive earthquake happened in the year 2007, instantly destroying and burying this area. As the team begins to dig through the remains, they slowly uncover artifacts that reveal the lifeways of the people that occupied this room.”

Ask:

- What would have survived the earthquake and been preserved? What would have decayed?
- After studying the artifacts that would have survived, what do you think the archaeologists would conclude about your culture?
- Would they find enough evidence to determine that this room was part of a school?
- What do you think archaeologists would conclude about your hobbies, lifestyle, and families?
- What would an archaeologist speculate about the things you worship or idolize?
- How about the things you ate?

This scenario allows students to engage in a discussion that introduces the concept that the things they create, wear, and surround themselves with says a lot about the culture in which they live. It also creates an introduction to a discussion about the definitions of art and an awareness that art is a reflection of the influence a culture has on the beliefs of an individual.

Ask:

- What is the difference between an art object and an artifact?
- Is an artifact considered art if it is aesthetically beautiful? What if it is crudely made or considered not attractive? Is it still art?
- Do you think that ancient craftsmen considered themselves artists? Were the artifacts they created intended to be beautiful or serve a specific purpose?

These questions should stimulate conversation about how we define art and how other cultures, past and present, defined art. It also opens the way for students to understand that unless we understand the culture in which an art object was created, we may never fully understand its meaning and therefore make false assumption and conclusions about that culture.

Ask:

- Do you think the archaeologists could come to any false conclusions about your culture? Why or why not?

**** Optional Activity 1***

Allow five minutes for questions and discussion. You may want to use this time to introduce the difference between an archaeologist, anthropologist, and paleontologist. Even though this lesson focuses on archaeology, it is important that students be able to differentiate between the various roles that scientists play in an archaeological dig and how art is a vital and unique part of archaeology. This distinction also shows the overlapping of subject areas and how each one depends on the other, thus reinforcing cross-curriculum ideas.

Activity

1. Divide class into groups of 3-5 students.
2. Hand each group a folder that is filled with laminated magazine cutouts. Have each group sit around a designated desk or table and empty the folder contents. Because these cutouts are from modern magazines, students will recognize a lot of the “artifacts.” Emphasize that we are interested in interpreting what the artifacts are and what they say about the person/people who owned them. State that all of the folders contain “artifacts” they will recognize, but it is up to them to determine what the artifacts and remains say about the people who owned them. They should only use information in the pictures.
3. After examining the “artifacts” for several minutes, each group should discuss and draw conclusions about the culture that created the “artifacts” using the Magazine Culture Survey sheet (described at end of article). Allow 15 - 20 minutes for this activity. Each group should fill out a survey sheet for each artifact.
4. Each group then appoints a spokesperson or selects group members to address certain questions. First of all they should present the rest of the class with the artifacts they found. Then, depending on the grade level, you may ask questions from the Magazine Culture Survey or let them present their findings in front of the class (this would be appropriate for high school). Each group should be prepared to describe why they came to the conclusions they did about their folder’s “culture.”
5. Allow each group at least five minutes to answer the questions or to present their conclusions.

Optional Activity 2

1. Students may remain in their groups.
2. Hand each group a few pictures of ancient artifacts. Note that these artifacts will be ones that the students may **not** recognize.
3. Each group will try to guess the identity of the artifact and its purpose.
4. This activity should cement the idea that unless one understands the culture and context of the art object/artifact, it may be impossible to identify the object and its purpose.

At this point it might be fun to introduce the book, *Motel of the Mysteries*. This book is only 96 pages, full of great illustrations, and has a 7th grade reading level that is appropriate for high school students. The book tells of future archaeologists discovering the buried remains of an American motel room in the 41st century and the misidentification of just about every artifact found. The book hilariously explains the traps that archaeologists may fall into when trying to explain the past using present day knowledge and

sensibilities. The events portrayed in the book show the reader just how easy it is to make mistakes when one does not fully understand the culture in which one is excavating. Introducing the book also allows for inter-curriculum connections with English and literature.

Closure/Review

Emphasize that the “remains” just analyzed say a lot about the people who left them behind. Suggest that they think about what archaeologists might conclude about the remains left in their own homes or bedrooms. Remind them that artifacts and art remains reflect everyday life and thus are extremely important to archaeologists when they make conclusions about past cultures. This could also lead to a discussion or spin off lesson about modern art and what it says about our culture today.

Assessment

- Did the student express understanding of the role of an archaeologist?
- Did the student participate in active listening and participate in class discussion about what defines art and artifacts?
- Did the student actively participate in the group activity on magazine culture?
- Did the student show through participation that he/she grasped the concept of how art reflects the culture in which it was created and thus can tell us much about the past?
- Did the student complete the activity sheets correctly?

Magazine Culture Survey Worksheet

Prepare a chart with the following nine headings for the students to fill in describing each artifact:

Food:

What did they eat? Where did their food come from?

Geography:

Where in North America did they live?

Time Period:

What time period did they live in?

Economy:

How did they make their living?

Religion:

How and what did they worship or believe in?

Leisure Time:

What did they value or do for recreation?

Natural World:

Evidence of other life forms such as animals?

Values:

What is considered important in the society?

Other conclusions:

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