

Art of the Ancient World (in-person)

Unlock the mysteries of the ancient world through works of art that tell us about life in this world and the next. Compare and contrast works made in Africa, the Americas, and Asia with objects from ancient Mediterranean cultures.

ARTWORK 1: Ancient Egypt, Coffin and Cartonnage of Lady Tashat, 945–712 BCE, G250

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Ancient Egyptians lived in Africa where the country of Egypt is today. They believed that people went to another life when they died. At death, many bodies were preserved through mummification to make sure their souls (kas) went safely to the next life.
2. This coffin and cartonnage (mummy case) were created for Lady Tashat, the daughter of an ancient Egyptian official named Djehutyhotep (pronounced “je-hooti-HO-tep”). The face you see is an idealized portrait of Tashat, who died as a teenager.
3. The cartonnage was molded to the body inside and painted with images of Egyptian gods (Osiris, Horus, Anubis, Maat), hieroglyphs (ancient Egyptian language), and other symbols to protect the body and soul in the afterlife. The artist has organized all the images and text into horizontal bands we call registers. The cartonnage then nests into the wooden coffin, offering more protection for Lady Tashat’s mummy.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What do you see? What do you think about that? What does it make you wonder?
2. If you could ask Lady Tashat a question, what would it be?
3. Spend a moment looking at the cartonnage. Which section or image (register) do you think was most important? Why? What are others’ opinions?
4. (For middle school/high school students) Lady Tashat’s body is within the cartonnage. Are there any ethical issues in displaying human remains in a museum? If you were the curator, would you choose to display this? Why or why not?
5. (For high school students) Egyptians today are proud of their ancient history and culture. This was purchased for the museum during a time of colonialism, when Egyptians were not in complete power and control of their own country. Western cultures took many ancient Egyptian sculptures and mummies back to their own countries. Should museums keep and display works of art that were purchased during such times? Why or why not? What more might you want to know in thinking through this issue?

Research resources:

Artstories: <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/97>

[Women in ancient Egypt](#)

Khan Academy: [Ancient Egypt, an introduction](#)

[Egypt in the Third Intermediate Period \(ca. 1070–664 B.C.\)](#) (and explore other essays on the [Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#) at the Metropolitan Museum)

ARTWORK 2: China, Cart with Ox and Farmer, 1st century

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This sculpture from ancient China shows an ox pulling a cart. A farmer guides the ox on its path. The sculpture is made of bronze (a type of expensive metal) and would have been put in the tomb of a wealthy person. When it was made originally, it would have been a golden bronze color, with painted details (still visible on the farmer's clothes). The greenish colors come from age and exposure to air and water.
2. The Chinese associated agriculture and the work of farmers with peace and prosperity, (being successful in life). A tomb object like this would have guaranteed prosperity for the wealthy person's afterlife.
3. In the ancient world, animals were domesticated (or made tame) by humans to help with their everyday work. Oxen or cattle were domesticated over 10,000 years ago.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take a moment to look closely at this sculpture. What are its main parts? (Play the [Elaboration Game](#)! Choose one part of the artwork and ask someone to describe what they see. Then ask another person to elaborate--or add--to the description with other details they notice. A third person can add further details. Then start over with a new part.)
2. What kind of help do animals give humans today?
3. Look at the bronze horse on display, then come back to the ox. Which animal do you prefer? (Hands up for horse, hands up for ox--or those who like the horse go stand by the horse). Will someone share their thoughts on why they chose the horse/ox)?
4. (For students 4th grade and up) The Chinese think that farmers are symbols of peace and prosperity. What kinds of symbols do we have today for peace? What about our symbols today for prosperity, or being successful in life?
5. (For middle and high school students) Compared to the ancient Chinese culture, in what similar or different ways do we think of our farmers and agriculture today?

Research resources:

Example of ceramic sculpture: [Man on Ox Cart from the V&A Museum](#).

Essay from the Met Museum: [Han Dynasty \(206 B.C.–220 A.D.\)](#)

Online exhibition from the Asian Art Museum: [Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries from China's Han Dynasty](#)

Khan Academy: [Han dynasty \(206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.\), an introduction](#)

Royal Ontario Museum: [Celebrating Lunar New Year: Oxen in Early China](#)

ARTWORK 3: Nopiloa (Veracruz), Figure (Ballplayer), 600–750 CE

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Mesoamerica was a region that extended approximately from central Mexico to Honduras and Nicaragua. Many early Indigenous peoples inhabited this region and developed complex cultures. The Mesoamerican ballgame was the very first team sport in human history. It was the first sport that ever used a ball made of rubber.
2. This rattle was made in the form of a Mesoamerican ballgame player, and it comes from the Nopiloa culture (located in current Mexico). The figure is made out of clay and some parts have been painted. Rattles like this one, as well as ceramic whistles, conch shell horns and drums, were used by fans to make loud sounds during the ballgame.
3. The figure wears an outfit to help him play the ballgame. He wears a u-shaped yoke around his hips, a kneepad (yugito), and a helmet with a harpy eagle crest on top. It is believed that players' hands were only used to put the ball into play, after which it was deflected with the hips, knees, elbows, feet, and head.
4. (For older students) At the end of the game, players from the losing team were sometimes sacrificed with the belief that human bloodletting and sacrifice were essential for the community's survival, helping their crops to grow and keeping their gods happy.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking at this figure and stand in this pose. How does it make you feel?
2. The outfit he is wearing is our best clue on how the Mesoamerican ballgame was played as archeologists have never found a rule book. What might his outfit tell us about how this ballgame was played? Is it similar to any games we play today?
3. If you could ask the ballplayer a question about the game, what would you ask?
4. We still admire and respect our athletes and sports teams today. Why?
5. The rattle was used to make noise at the ballgame. What do fans do today, to show they support their team during a game? (If K-2 students, you could also ask them to make a sound of what they think the rattle would sound like, if someone shook it.)

Research resources:

Wikipedia: [Mesoamerican ballgame](#)

[El Tajin, Pre-Hispanic City](#) video and [article on the site](#) (UNESCO/NHK)

Wikipedia: [Classic Veracruz culture](#)

From the Met: [Ball Player](#)

ARTWORK 4: Roman, Standing Deity Holding Horn and Bucket, 1st century (G241)

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. The figure probably represents a Lar, a Roman god honored as a guardian of a family's well-being. The Lar was worshiped by the Roman family in a shrine inside their house.
2. The god carries a drinking horn and a wine bucket. Wine is coming out of the drinking horn. The Lar wears a short, swirling cloak. These are all traditional attributes (visual symbols) of a Lar.
3. This panel comes from Pompeii, a Roman city that was located in southern Italy. This is a piece of a much larger wall painting. The inner walls of Pompeian houses were decorated with paintings like this and landscape scenes. Long ago, Pompeii was destroyed by the eruption of a nearby volcano, which preserved all the houses and paintings like this in the volcanic ash and lava.
4. The painting is a fresco. The artist would have drawn this directly into a layer of damp lime plaster with paint. The colors bind to the plaster as it dries, so then the work remains a part of the wall surface.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take a moment to look at this figure. What is the first thing you notice?
2. The Lar was a guardian of a family, so that is why they painted him on the wall in their home. Imagine you could paint an image that would be your guardian. What would your guardian look like?
3. How is this like the decoration we have in homes today? How is it not like the decoration we have today?
4. (For older students) The Romans had a shrine to the Lars within their home. How do people express their faith today? Are there similarities? Differences?

Research resources:

From the BBC, Pompeii Gallery: [Lararium from the House of the Vettii](#)

From Wikipedia: [Lares](#)

From Khan Academy: [Roman wall painting styles](#)

From SmartHistory (with illustrations): [Roman Domestic architecture: the Domus](#)

ARTWORK 5: Pakistan, Buddha, 3rd century (G200)

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Over two thousand years ago in India, a Hindu prince named Siddharta Guatama gave up all his wealth and left his family to find a way to end suffering for all people. The way he found to end suffering for people became known as Buddhism, and he became known as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One. The Buddha believed everyone had the power to follow this path he discovered. Over 500 million people practice Buddhism today.
2. We can identify the Buddha because he has a bump on his head (the ushnisha) that he received when he became enlightened; he has a little tuft of hair between his eyes (the urna) that emits light; and he wears the simple outfit of a monk because he gave up all his royal wealth.
3. On the pedestal, you see a meditating Buddha sitting in a cross legged position (lotus position). Meditation was a key to following the way of Buddha and achieving enlightenment. Buddha has two Hindu gods at either side of him, Brahma and Indra, showing us that some of Hindu gods became guardians in the new religion of Buddhism.
4. This sculpture of the Buddha is from Gandhara, a region in present-day northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan. At that time, Gandhara had trade with Greece and Rome, so we can see in this sculpture that Buddha's robe and facial features look a bit like Greek and Roman sculptures of that time. (When you get to the Lars either before or after, you could connect to this Buddha.)

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take a moment to look at this sculpture. How would you describe the Buddha? What is realistic about this sculpture? What is not realistic?
2. Looking at the sculpture, there has been some damage. Based on what you see, how do you think his arms were positioned?
3. Sit in the cross legged pose of meditation and take a few deep breaths. How does sitting in this pose feel?
4. (For comparison of Buddha's features) Find another sculpture of the Buddha within the gallery. What main similarities do you see? What differences?
5. The Buddha wanted to help people end all the suffering in the world. What are some things you can do to make the world a better place for everyone?

Research resources:

From the Met Museum: [Life of the Buddha](#)

From the Met Museum: [Gandhara](#)

From Wikipedia: [Standing Buddha from Gandhara, Tokyo](#)

[The Gandhara Gallery](#), The Lahore Museum

An online publication from the Met Museum: [The Art of Gandhara](#)

ARTWORK 6: Djenne, Equestrian figure, 1450

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This is an equestrian figure (a rider on a horse) made hundreds of years ago in the ancient West African kingdom of Mali. This wood sculpture was carved from a single tree trunk.
2. This man's jewelry, weapons, and huge size in comparison to his horse underscore his importance as a ruler and hunter. The bow and quiver (a case for holding arrows) were symbols of imperial power. Horses were introduced from north of the Sahara to West Africa around 1000 C.E. and soon became possessions associated with political power and wealth.
3. The rider's skull cap and beard were customary at the time, and may imply that the man is Muslim. Leaders of the Mali Empire embraced Islam as early as 1300.
4. The base of the sculpture presents a puzzle. The figure may have been a veranda post like those that decorated the homes of West African chiefs centuries later—or a stopper for some sort of enormous container.

Suggested Questions and Activities (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking closely at the sculpture. What tells us that this man was important and had power?
2. (Depending on the order of your tour objects) Compare the ox from China with the horse in this Equestrian figure. Which animal was more useful to people from the past in your opinion? Why?
3. Look at the posture of the man and his expression. How would you describe his personality? WDYSTMYST?
4. Sometimes we do not know how something made long ago was used. Based on the clues you see here and what we have discussed, what may have been a possible use for this sculpture? (Show some examples of veranda posts, to help with discussion.)
5. How do people show off their power and importance today?

Research resources:

ArtStories from Mia: [Equestrian Figure](#)

From the Smithsonian: [Mali Empire and Djenne figures](#) (including [Works of Art](#))

Khan Academy: [Seated Figure \(Djenné peoples\)](#)

For discussion of possible use, from SmartHistory: [Olowe of Ise. Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife](#)

ARTWORK 7: Assyrian, Winged Genius, c. 883–859 BCE

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. The Assyrians lived in the Middle East, thousands of years ago, where the countries of Syria and Iraq are today. Assyrian kings were powerful rulers who used art like this relief sculpture to communicate their high status. You didn't need to know how to read to understand the power of the Assyrian king! Their palace walls were decorated with stone carvings like this that reinforced their greatness. This sculpture was made for King Ashurnasirpal II.
2. This sculpture is called a winged genius. A winged genius is a god who is a guardian and a symbol of fertility. At one time, it was part of a larger group of similar sculptures. The god is very muscular and has big wings attached to his back. He wears a long open robe and has on fancy jewelry like bracelets, earrings, and armbands. At one time, this was painted with bright colors (see [this article](#)).
3. Look closely at the surface of the sculpture. You see rows of small inscriptions carved into the stone. The writing is cuneiform, the first written language of humans. The inscription tells of all the great things King Ashurnasirpal II did in his life, like building his huge palace and conquering his enemies. These events are repeated over and over.

Suggested Questions and Activities (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at the sculpture. What tells us this is a superhuman god?
2. Imagine you are surrounded by sculptures like this as you walk along the corridor in the palace. How do they make you feel?
3. (For younger students, preK-2) Stand in the pose of the winged genius. After they do that, have them pair share with a classmate next to them on how it felt. What was easy or difficult to do in matching the pose?
4. (For older students, 3rd-5th) Ask for a volunteer to stand in the pose. Have the other students act as directors, to make sure it is matching. What do they notice now about the pose? How does the person standing in it feel?
5. If our leaders today, like the President, had sculptures made to show their greatness, what do you think they would brag about in their inscriptions?
6. (For middle school/high school students) This is a great example of propaganda used by ancient leaders. (Define if needed: Propaganda is information that is controlled and delivered to manipulate public opinion, so asking people to believe in a particular opinion or view.) What kind of propaganda do our leaders use today? What form does propaganda take today?

Research resources:

[Winged genius](#) from Worcester Art Museum

From the Getty, a short video: [Assyria: Power and Propaganda](#)

[The Northwest Palace at Nimrud](#) (reconstruction from the Met Museum)

**ARTWORK 8: Attributed to the White Sakkos Painter, Red-Figure Hydria, 320 BCE
(Ancient Greek culture: G241)**

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Ancient Greeks developed many shapes of pottery (clay vessels) for different uses. This hydria is a water pitcher. In the same case, you see a *kylix* (wine cup) and an *amphora* (general storage vessel for grains, oil, or wine). The style in which this is painted is “red-figure,” meaning the painter left the figures in the natural red color of the terracotta clay and painted the background and details with other colors like black and white.
2. Because this hydria is so large, it is not likely to have been used. Instead, it was made as a decorative pitcher, perhaps in honor of a wedding. It was painted by an unknown artist called the White Sakkos Painter because of how he painted women wearing white bonnets (*sakkos*).
3. The ancient Greeks established colonies around the Mediterranean Sea. This hydria is from the Greek colony of Apulia (Puglia), located at the far southern end of Italy. Eventually, this was placed within a tomb there. Because of the focus on women and their belongings or activities, it most likely was placed in a wealthy woman’s tomb.
4. The painted scene is divided into bands (registers) of figures. At the very top is the head of a woman wearing a white cap called a *sakkos* (or bonnet). In the register below, a seated woman holds a fan, with attendants bringing her many things. The lower register shows women attending a grave monument, bringing offerings to the dead. In ancient Greece, women were responsible for taking care of the home and their ancestors’ tombs.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking at the hydria. (Students may need to stand up to see the vase fully.) What is going on in the pictures? WDYSTMYST? What more can you find?
2. (Look at all the ceramic vessels in the case.) What kind of containers do we make today for water and food? Do they have any similarities with the ancient Greek vessels here?
3. Who do you think is the most important woman in the paintings? What do you see that makes you say that?
4. (For older students) Many artworks from ancient cultures have been discovered in tombs. Why might it have been important to people to leave grave goods within the tombs? This hydria probably belonged to a wealthy woman. What kind of things from life did she want to remember in the afterlife, based on these scenes you see?

Research resources:

From the MFA Boston, another White Sakkos Painter vessel: [Vase for bath water \(loutrophoros\) depicting Pelops and Hippodameia in a chariot](#)

From the Getty: [Making Greek Vases](#)

From the Met: [Scenes of Everyday Life in Ancient Greece](#)

From the Khan Academy: [Greek Vase-Painting, an introduction](#)