

Museum Assignment/Exhibit Analysis (15%)

3-page essay, typed, double-spaced, plus notes

Due 10 October

[Walters Art Museum](#) (Baltimore) or [Freer|Sackler](#) (WDC)

You will need to visit one of these museums, in person, between now and 10 October. You will have two class sessions where we will not meet so that you may use that time to visit the museum.

Objectives:

- Artifacts?the objects we make and use?are part of Middle Eastern history. If we know how to look at them, they can be sources for better understanding the history. While textbooks focus on the great documents of the past, or the important events, artifacts can show us another kind of history, another way of approaching the past.
- Your essay will tell you how to look closely at artifacts and how to think about the ways they shape and reflect the history of the Middle East.

to examine the role of **context** in shaping how we understand evidence. Understanding how context and perspective shape meaning in this assignment will help prepare you to analyze multiple perspectives in your larger final project

to analyze the use of **interpretive questions** of the kind you will use to focus your own research this semester. An interpretive question, as the name suggests, is open to interpretation and has a range of possible answers, more than one of which may be accurate or plausible. As a result, an interpretive question is can be approached from multiple perspectives. Interpretive questions tend to start with ?Why?? or ?How??

Process Overview:

For this assignment, you will focus on the **Middle Eastern art in a museum**. In order to make the best use of your time at the museum, you will need to familiarize yourself with the **website** first:[Walters Art Museum](#) (Baltimore) or [Freer|Sackler](#) (WDC) . Spend a good 20 minutes browsing the site, making sure to explore the **location that houses art of the Middle East**.

Your assignment is to write a **3-page essay** in which you first **examine and analyze an object/artifact** offered in the exhibit.

The essay is the final step, but much of the work for this assignment will come at the museum and after, as you review, refine, and revise your notes, and make an outline of the finished paper. This means that, as the writer and field researcher, you should plan on **taking extensive notes**: summarize or copy down text; take pictures of artifacts, images, and statues. **Document your visit**: take a picture of yourself, alone or with your classmates, near one portion of the exhibit.

In entering this assignment - let's ask the question, **what classifies something as art of the Middle East?** There are a variety of possible answers to that question, ranging from

the **cerebral**: use of symbols, ability to imagine the impossible
to the **social or affective**: gathering at the hearth, customs

All of the answers you come up with focus on evidence: Think of the object you choose as part of a narrative, which offers a piece of evidence about the history of the Middle East, explains what that object tells us about the Middle East, and how we know that it tells us this.

Tips for reading objects. While all of these questions may not help you answer: what classifies something as art of the Middle East?, they will help you create meaningful background to answer the central research question and produce a strong paper.

- Is it intact, or does it look like parts are missing?
- Is it clean or dirty?
- Does it make noise?
- Does it look old or new?
- Is it handmade or made by a machine?
- Where was it made?
- Who made it?
- What is its function? How was the object used?
- Does it have a practical use or is (was) it used for pleasure?
- Has it been used? Is it still in use? Has the use changed?
- Where can it be found? Where could it have been found?
- What value does it hold to you and to others?
- Is it designed well? How?
- Is it decorated? How is it decorated?
- Is it aesthetically pleasing? How?
- Does it remind you of anything else?
- What type of person might have used this object?
- What type of person might have made this object?
- What does this object tell us about the maker and user?
- Is this type of object still being made today? Is it still in use? If not, why do you think it isn't used today?
- Should this object be in a museum collection? Why or why not?
- What questions do you have about the object that you can't answer from just looking at it?

****Please keep in mind that these are only a sampling of questions you could choose to discuss in your paper. You may not find you need to address all of them. Also, please organize your paper. Do not simply answer each of these questions in the order you see them above. You need to organize your paper by theme and convincingly defend your thesis throughout.**

Instructions for your time at the Museum:

Spend **at least 45 minutes** looking through the exhibit of your choosing. Once you have an overall sense of the exhibit, focus on an object that interests you the most.

As if you were preparing to describe your piece of evidence to someone who has not seen it, **take detailed notes** on your item. Try to ignore everything around it and focus on the artifact itself. Do not shy away from ambiguity; if the artifact is hard to categorize precisely, that may be an important factor in how it is used as evidence in this exhibit. Begin to consider the (multiple) ways your artifact could be used as evidence.

Use the questions above to help you analyze your chosen artifact:

Note: You may take pictures to help you remember the details, and you may include images in your essay. But your primary responsibility to your readers is to represent the object in words. Readers should not need to see the pictures to understand your paper.

Finished paper:

When you are home from the exhibit, use your notes to write a **3-page essay** that first analyzes how the artifact shapes an answer to the interpretive question, "What does it mean to be art from the Middle East?" and then demonstrates at least one other possible way of interpreting the evidence, substantiating your claims with reference to specific examples that support your claims. Remember is constructing your thesis think about:

Your emotional response, aesthetic reaction, why you liked it, and why you think it's important. Did it make you think or see things differently? Do they have a strong message? What clues does it give to the history of the Middle East?

As you would with any formal essay, make an **outline** that includes an introduction, thoughtfully organized supporting points (drawn from your notes), and a conclusion. The **thesis** of your essay will be your claim about how context and organization shape an understanding of what is classified as Middle Eastern art. It's up to you where to state and reiterate that thesis, but you will be evaluated on the clarity of your argument and the coherence and organization of your supporting evidence. You are encouraged to include visuals in your paper, but these should not substitute for text.

Your finished essay must be:

- Typed
- Double spaced
- In 12-point, Times New Roman font (no larger)
- With 1-inch margins
- Include word count
- Stapled (no covers or folders)
- Edited and with spelling checked

Have fun, and don't forget to bring the assignment with you.