

Beyond Borders: Imagining a Museum of the Future Lesson Plan

UMMA Teacher Workshop / October 27, 2018

Inspired by Dr. Bryan Roby's assignment for UM students "Imagining an UMMA of the Future."

Objective

Many of the artists in Beyond Borders address the hybridity of personal identity in the global culture of the 21st century. Just as these individuals have complex and layered identities, so do nations and populations but this is not always reflected in cultural organizations such as museums. This exercise is meant to get students to think about how we categorize and represent people. Central underlying questions are: Who do we include/exclude through a focus on physical objects? What do we privilege as a society, how is that displayed within museums, and how does that reflect on us?

Grades

Middle and High School

Materials

Google Art and Culture <<https://artsandculture.google.com/?hl=en>> includes virtual tours and representative collections of museums around the world. Links to a selection of traditional American collections from this site are included in this lesson plan. Many American museums are rethinking their displays of "dead white guys" but European-American art is still given pride of place in most major museums and that is what is included in this lesson.

Discussion

Start a discussion about museums and what they are for, focusing on art or history museums. Perhaps read the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of a museum:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

Or this one from Dictionary.com

A museum is a building or place where works of art, scientific specimens, or other objects of permanent value are kept and displayed.

Suggest that today you are going to see how many American museums reflect traditional values. You will also discuss whether these values resonate with you and if not, how you might change the display.

Ask students to visit an online museum collection from a well-known American museum such as one of these:

"Oil Paint" Museum Fine Arts Boston

<https://artsandculture.google.com/search/asset/?p=museum-of-fine-arts-boston&em=mo31cgw&categoryId=medium&hl=en>

"United States" Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth

<https://artsandculture.google.com/search/asset/?p=amon-carter-museum-of-american-art&em=mogc7wo&categoryId=place&hl=en>

"Oil Painting," The Frick Collection, NY

<https://artsandculture.google.com/search/asset/?p=the-frick-collection&em=mo31cgw&categoryId=medium&hl=en>

"Oil Painting," Philadelphia Museum of Art

<https://artsandculture.google.com/search/asset/?p=philadelphia-museum-of-art&em=mo31cgw&categoryId=medium&hl=en>

"Historical Figures" at MoMA

<https://artsandculture.google.com/category/historical-figure?hl=en>

Mention that these collections represent "traditional" values. Other museums will have different collections but these represent a predictable sample of art that would be seen in an American museum.

Ask students to first, scroll through this exhibition and just look casually at it. Then take some time to detail what you see. Is there a significant number of works representing specific themes, genres, time frames? What people are represented? How would you characterize them?

Ask students to imagine they are in the 24th and a half century and walking through this museum. What would they assume about their culture/society based on what is admired and preserved in museums? Do they think this is a good reflection of what they think of as "artistic" and "cultured?" Why/Why not? What would they include that is missing from this museum? Students could respond to this in conversation or writing.

Explain that the selection of museums they looked at were chosen to be representative of large, traditional American museums. Propose they visit the website of one of the newer museums on the mall in Washington DC such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Freer Gallery of Art (Part of the National Museum of Asian Art), National Museum of the American Indian. Ask students to consider why these museums were created and if they help complicate the representation of, and reflect a more accurate, American identity.