

Teacher Guide: Art and Composite Culture in South Asian History

Teaching Context

This lesson is can be used to explore multiple time periods/topics, including:

- Maurya Empire
- Birth and expansion of Buddhism
- Vijayanagara Kingdom
- Mughal period
- Contemporary India

Time

This full lesson will take ~165 - 200 minutes. If you are integrating it into your teaching about one of the topics above, you may want to expand Lesson Part 5 to provide additional historical context.

Supplies

All these documents are available on the ORIAS webpage, *Teaching about Art and Composite Culture in South Asian History*.

Link: <https://orias.berkeley.edu/resources-teachers/teaching-about-art-and-composite-culture-south-asian-history>

- *Elements of Art* and *Principles of Design* handouts from J. Paul Getty Museum website (1 per student)
- *Image Annotation & Analysis* handout (1 per group)
- large color printed copies of artworks, *without annotation numbers* (1 per group)
- image pages from [the ORIAS website](#)
- *Composite Culture Assessment* handout (1 per student)

Teacher Preparation

Prior to the lesson, the teacher should do the following:

- Review the *Elements of Art* and *Principles of Design* pages.
- Review the *Image Annotation & Analysis* handout.
- Review class textbook pages on selected period(s), if applicable.
- Thoroughly explore each image page, including linked resources.
- Create Lesson Part 5 (see below)



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Lesson Introduction

30 minutes

Introducing Composite Culture as a Concept

Over the next few days, we're going to learn how visual arts and architecture can offer clues into the societies, cultures, and politics of people in the past. Specifically, we're going to consider the idea of "composite culture."

Question:

Can you think of something you've experienced that was created through day-to-day interactions between people from two or more cultures? It could be a piece of artwork, a style of music, food, fashion, language, a holiday celebration, a religious practice, etc. It could involve combining aspects of multiple cultures to create something entirely new OR regularly incorporating an object or practice from one culture into you're a different culture. The important thing is that it came about because people from different cultures were living in close proximity to each other and regularly interacting.

Notes for teacher: familiar examples within the US include various styles of music, fusion foods, ways of celebrating holidays (e.g. having a Christmas tree), sub-cultures around sports, etc. Students in a particularly diverse school environment might also note language, fashion, or other elements of culture within the student community that specifically exist in the school environment.

Follow-up questions:

- Can you break that down more? Where did different aspects of [example] come from? Are any parts of it entirely new?
- How do you think [example] came about?
- Do you think [example] is evidence of extensive interaction between many people from different cultures? Or a handful of people who interacted across cultures?
- Did [example] emerge out of direct in-person interactions or indirect interactions made possible by technology? Does this difference matter? Why or why not?
- Do individuals or companies sell products associated with [example]? If so, who do these products appeal to and why?
- Do political leaders want to be associated with [example]? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What is your opinion about things like [example]? Does [example] make your community more/less interesting, inclusive, hierarchical, creative, wealthy?

Notes for teacher:

This conversation may expand into the realm of cultural appropriation. If that happens, it could be helpful to introduce the question of power. How does the relative power of one group over another influence students' feelings about who can borrow, when, and how? Are there ways that borrowing can be harmful? Are there ways that it is done well?

Students may want to draw on examples that emerge out of international interaction online. Push them to differentiate between instances when cultural production in one place gets adopted and adapted in a new place, versus situations in which people from different groups have to actively engage with one another.



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Composite culture is more than one single example of cultural mixing or adaptation. Composite cultures emerge over time in places where there is extended interaction between people with different cultural traditions. The term “composite culture” refers to *the whole set* of cultural practices that are shared by people from different cultural groups, even though these people also have their own distinct religious, linguistic, and/or ethnic cultures.

Because of its geography, long history of engagement in global trade, and its political and religious past, South Asia has a particularly rich history of composite cultures and we’re going to use artwork as a way of seeing evidence of that history.

Why Composite Cultures in South Asia?

Why are we focusing on South Asia? Why might we expect to see composite cultures in South Asia?

- South Asia generally includes 8 modern countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. (Some people use an extended definition that also includes Iran, Burma, and Tibet).
- 25% of the world’s population lives in South Asia. India is now the most populous country in the world. Pakistan and Bangladesh are in the top 10.
- South Asia was the site of one of the world’s oldest civilizations (the ancient Indus river valley civilization, including the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro).
- South Asia has been a geographic crossroads and center of global trade for thousands of years. For example:
 - People in ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt bought peppercorns and textiles from South Asia.
 - Buddhism began in South Asia, then spread into Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia.
 - Alexander the Great’s empire extended into South Asia, connecting South Asia to the Mediterranean world.
 - South Asia was integral to the Indian Ocean trading network. India was the pivot point connecting East Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Arabian Peninsula with China and Southeast Asia.
 - The overland Silk Road and the maritime Silk Road both went through South Asia (via Afghanistan and India).
 - By the year 1200, textiles, spices, and numerals from South Asia had spread through the Islamic World, Europe, and parts of Africa. (Our number system comes from South Asia).
 - South Asia was the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire.
- South Asia is the birthplace of four major world religions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism.
- South Asia is currently home to about 30% of the world’s Muslims; Muslims make up the second-largest religious community in South Asia.
- South Asia has two major language families (Indo-Iranian and Dravidian) and is [home to people who speak hundreds of different languages](#).

How this relates to World History



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World historians are interested in the movement of people, goods, and ideas from one place to another. They consider the movement of people through migration and conquest, but also travel and trade. They analyze the objects those people brought with them: technologies, foods, textiles, artworks, microbes, and more. They research the transmission of ideas – everything from religious texts to medical practices to ideas about beauty. They ask: How did this increasing interaction change the political systems, economies, environment, and cultures in different places? Composite cultures are evidence of this sort of human interaction.

Why Visual Arts & Architecture?

Visual arts and architecture are produced by people and those people all live within particular political, economic, religious/philosophical, and social contexts. Because of this, art objects and buildings can reveal all kinds of information about the people who created them and the societies they were a part of. In our case, we're using art and architecture to look for evidence of deep engagement between people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

To do this, you'll be following a step-by-step process. It is modeled on the process researchers use when they are trying to build an understanding of the past. It will involve you looking very closely at an object, making observations, formulating questions, and doing a bit of research.

Student Task

Rather than starting with a textbook, we're going to begin with a piece of art or architecture. You'll be working in groups and each group will begin by examining an image of this art object or building. As you move through the activity, you'll learn more about the artwork/building itself, plus the society in which it was created.

At the end I'm going to ask you how your assigned artwork/object shows evidence of composite culture. I'll also ask you to compare your assigned artwork/object with the other ones in the class.

For the Teacher: More on Composite Culture

In the US context: By “composite culture,” we refer to the mixed, hybrid character of the ensemble of cultural practices and beliefs that has evolved in the United States since the colonial period. By contrast, the idea of multiculturalism, though it may appear to be similar, implies more or less autonomous cultural centers organized around discrete ethnic groups, with much less interpenetration of cultural life.”

Alba, Richard and Nee, Victor. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*, Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674020115>

“Outside of South Asia, composite culture refers to ‘the mixed, hybrid character of the ensemble of cultural practices and beliefs’ that typify a particular society.⁵ In that sense, it has been used by sociologists and historians to describe the United States, Morocco, and Andalusian Spain.⁶ In the subcontinent, the phrase has a more restricted usage, indicating primarily the interpenetration of and interaction between two communities, Hindus and Muslims. It applies mainly to north India or Indo-Muslim cultures like that of Hyderabad in the Deccan.⁷ In the lexicon of Hindi and Urdu, composite culture is known as *ganga-yamuni (jamuni) tahzib*, *mili-juli tahzib*, *mushtarikah tahzib*, or *sanjhi virasat*. These phrases reference mixture and synthesis, expressed metaphorically as the mingling of the two rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna, or the coming together of day and night at twilight (sanjh).”



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“Unlike composite culture, [cosmopolitanism] does not rely on any historical precedent or long-standing relationship to the Other. Nor does it reify community boundaries to create an additive multiculturalism. Cosmopolitanism, like composite culture, is premised on the plurality of cultures and respect for difference. But it assumes a global platform rather than the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, enabling the subject to hold local, particular allegiances alongside of global, transnational loyalties.

Hansen, K. (2010). Who wants to be a cosmopolitan?: Readings from the composite culture. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 47(3), 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946461004700301>

5 Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream*, p. 10.

6 Gregg, *Middle East*, p. 322. Also, Reeder, ed., *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, p. 203.

7 This does not deny the usefulness of extending the concept of composite culture to other parts of the subcontinent, in which the constituent elements are differently identified. Proponents of composite culture in Pakistan, for example, might emphasise the pre-Islamic substratum, Sufi heterodox trends and regional folk literatures, alongside the more dominant Islamic traditions.

For additional concrete examples to better understand/teach about how this kind of cultural interchange take place, see these videos from Museum of Food and Drink:

- *Jews and Chinese Food: A Christmas Love Story* (https://youtu.be/cb_e6MwwaX4)
- *Caribbean Chinese Fried Rice: An Afro-Asian Diaspora Story* (<https://youtu.be/VuZSJ4hjlQs>)

Lesson Part 1: Vocabulary

15 minutes

- Review the [Elements of Art](#) and [Principles of Design](#) concepts.
- You may want to project the [webpages from the J. Paul Getty Museum](#) site and have the entire class practice using the vocabulary to identify and describe parts of the image.

Lesson Part 2: Observation

20 minutes

1. Divide students into groups of 3 - 4 people.
2. Assign an image (see [Teaching about Art and Composite Culture in South Asian History](#)) to each group. If possible, it is best to provide a large *printed* version of the image for this part of the process so they can write directly on the image.
3. Explain to students that their task is to learn as much as they can by looking closely at their image. Give them the [Image Annotation and Analysis](#) handout and go over the questions 1 - 4. Then instruct them to respond to questions 1 - 4.
4. Emphasize the fact that they should describe what they see without interpreting/ascribing meaning.
5. If possible in your class context, have students write and draw directly on the image in response to the prompts.

Lesson Part 3: Interpretation

15 minutes



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1. Students respond to questions 5 – 7 on the *Image Annotation and Analysis* handout.
2. Emphasize the fact that they should use their earlier observations as evidence to support their interpretations.
3. Let them know they will need to report out after their discussion.

Lesson Part 4: Reporting & Questions

2 - 3 minutes per group

Ask each group to share 2 – 3 things they find interesting about their image + 1 - 2 questions they have about their artwork/object or the context in which their artwork/object was made.

Lesson Part 5: Historical Connections

30 - 60 minutes, at your discretion

In this lesson, students will be learning more about the context in which their artwork/object was created.

You may do the following steps in any order.

1. Provide students with additional historical context for their artwork/object. This could include one or more of the following:
 - a. read from class textbook
 - b. short lecture by teacher
 - c. view selected videos from resources links (@ bottom of each image page)
 - d. independent exploration of resources (@ bottom of each image page)
2. Direct students to look at the text excerpt and the annotated image(s) on their image page (on the website). The group should look at these together, then add to the answers for their *Image Annotation & Analysis*.
3. Read questions 8 – 15 with students (from *Image Annotation and Analysis* handout). Instruct them to use what they have learned to answer *any 3* questions to answer as a group.
4. While students are working, move between groups and ask them: What do you understand now about this artwork/object that you did not understand before?

Whatever materials you use, help students identify information about:

- geography
- political structures and institutions
- trade/economy
- religious practices and religious institutions
- social categories and hierarchies

Be aware that specific visual works may seem to contradict simplified textbook explanations. This does not mean student observations of artwork/buildings is wrong. Rather, it is a chance to talk with students about the way textbook narratives can erase complexity. Ask them if/how they would edit the textbook to reflect the evidence they found by analyzing their artwork/building.



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Lesson Part 6: Composite Culture Assessment

30 – 40 minutes

This part of the lesson has two goals:

- Reinforce student learning by having them teach about their own artwork/building and compare their own artwork/building to others.
- Reinforce student learning about composite cultures by asking students to assess each artwork/object as a piece of evidence.

Tell students they will be completing the *Composite Culture Assessment*. Assessment here refers to the fact that they are assessing the artworks/objects as evidence of composite cultures.

1. Students meet in groups for 10 minutes to discuss Question 1: In what ways is [their assigned] artwork/building evidence of composite culture?
2. Students interact with members of other groups to learn about other artworks/buildings.
3. Use jigsaw or speed-dating format for about 15-20 minutes. Whatever format you use, each student should have 1 - 2 minutes to speak when they encounter a new person. They can make notes in their Composite Culture Assessment chart.
4. Students reconvene with their groups to rank the artworks/buildings from the class and fill in their ranking chart.
5. Teacher collects 1 ranking chart from each group and use it to identify the top artwork/building according to the class. (Add up the rank number for each artwork/building; the one with the lowest score wins).
6. Report the winner back to the class & discuss.

Options for Student Assessment

There are many options for assessment during this lesson. Some examples include:

- Observe groups during discussions to check for use of visual arts vocabulary, understanding, historical connections, and engagement.
- Check image annotations for evidence of understanding.
- Ask students to submit a subset of Image Annotation & Analysis questions 5 – 15 in writing.
- Ask students to submit written responses to Composite Culture Assessment questions.
- Rather than jigsaw/speed-dating, have each group do a short presentation about their assigned artwork/object.
- After final group conversation and ranking chart, ask each student to write a reflection on the meaning of composite culture and/or an analysis of their assigned artwork/object.
- Extend the lesson to have students choose another artwork/object from a different place/time and complete this process independently.



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