OVERVIEW OF CURRICULUM UNIT

This unit conveys a different approach to learning about history and geography by having students analyze contemporary artworks that reflect upon collective memory and the cross-border impact of the Vietnam War and Pol Pot Regime. These artworks take the form of photography and mixed media, and demonstrate how contemporary artists attempt to document this regional history by appropriating historical imagery, documenting the landscape, and creating alternative cartographies. The unit is broken up into two lessons: the first focuses on a large photo-weaving by the established Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Le; the second lesson is tied to two artworks, one by Cambodian artist Vandy Rattana and the other by Vietnamese-American artist Tiffany Chung.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The origins of the Vietnam War date to the period of French decolonization from 1945-1954, which concluded with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. A conference held in Geneva resulted in an agreement that effectively divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel into two states: the Communist state of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (under President Ho Chi Minh) in the north, and the anti-Communist state of the Republic of Vietnam (under President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was placed and supported by the U.S. government) in the south. From this point onward, the Viet Cong (Communist-led guerrillas) escalated their resistance against the southern government. By 1963 they took control of the Mekong Delta. In 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive, American ground forces in Vietnam had reached 536,000.

In 1969 Nixon mounted a covert four-year bombing campaign in Cambodia targeting Communist supply bases and arteries. The U.S. military dropped 540,000 tons of bombs, killing anywhere from 150,000 to 500,000 civilians. Once this offensive was made public, the anti-war movement in the U.S. intensified. In Cambodia, the devastation wrought by the bombing increased rural support for the Cambodian Communist organization known as the Khmer Rouge, supported by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and China, and even at one point supported by deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk. A pro-American general, Lon Nol, who led the coup against Sihanouk, attempted to counter the growing Khmer Rouge foothold over the country. The civil war ultimately resulted in the Khmer Rouge capturing the capitol of Phnom Penh on April 15, 1975, evacuating its residents and dispersing the urban population into various rural provinces.

Following a policy known as “Vietnamization,” in which the U.S government attempted to extract itself from the conflict, in 1973 U.S. forces began to be withdrawn from Vietnam. In 1975, Communist forces
began to take over the south, seizing the southern capitol of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and subsequently renaming it Ho Chi Minh City. The country would later be renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This date is celebrated today in Vietnam as Reunification Day.

Under the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea (1975-1979), headed by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge attempted to carry out their vision of a utopian communal agrarian society, abolishing monetary currency, books, private property, and religion. The population was divided and forced to carry out hard labor, but the agricultural policies failed, and it is estimated that approximated 2 million people died due to starvation, exhaustion, disease, or execution in places like the Phnom Penh detention center Tuol Sleng.

Escalating tensions and border skirmishes with its former ally, Vietnam, resulted in full-scale war, and in January 1979, Vietnamese forces crossed the border into Phnom Penh and overthrew the Pol Pot regime. From 1979-1989, the Vietnamese backed the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, a nominally Socialist state. Because of the international community’s enforced isolation of Vietnam in the wake of the war, Cambodia was also isolated and received no support from countries outside of the Soviet-Eastern bloc.

Resources:

   http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/tl02.html
   http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/tl03.html
University of Houston: Digital History. “Overview of the Vietnam War.”
   http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/era.cfm?eraid=18
**Lesson I: Images of Cambodian History in Dinh Q. Le’s Photo-Tapestries**

**Overview:** Students research sources of imagery in one of Dinh Q. Le’s *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* artworks to understand how such references come together in the artist’s interpretation of a memorial. Prior to viewing the artwork, students work in groups to research and present on Angkor Wat, Tuol Sleng, and Southeast Asian textile traditions. In addition they watch a TED presentation by Sophal Ear to learn about the broader geographical scope and inter-regional context of the Vietnam War and the Pol Pot regime. Students then view the artwork and discuss its formal and conceptual properties in the Johnson Museum study gallery, following discussion questions from a worksheet. Students then write a short responsive essay integrating further contextual information drawn from two distributed articles.

**Subject(s):** Arts, Social Studies, English Language Arts

**Target Education Level:** High School

**Student Learning Objectives:**

The student will:
• Conduct research on Cambodian art, history, and Southeast Asian textiles using multimedia and print sources
• Apply their research to an initial assessment of a contemporary artwork by Dinh Q. Le that addresses the Khmer Rouge period of Cambodian history
• Develop skills in formal and contextual analysis of contemporary art
• Integrate further research from art and cultural criticism in short written essays responding to the artwork as an alternative memorial and carrier of memory

STANDARDS ADDRESSED:

Visual Arts Standard 3. Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought. Students:
• use the language of art criticism by reading and discussing articles from artistic and cultural criticism, and by writing their own critical responses to works of art (either their own or those of others) (a)
• explain the visual and other sensory qualities in art and nature and their relation to the social environment (b)
• analyze and interpret the ways in which political, cultural, social, religious, and psychological concepts and themes have been explored in visual art (c)

Visual Arts Standard 4. Students will explore art and artifacts from various historical periods and world cultures to discover the roles that art plays in the lives of people of a given time and place and to understand how the time and place influence the visual characteristics of the art work. Students will explore art to understand the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of human society.

MATERIALS:

• Artwork Worksheet (one per student)
• list of research resources
• computer (one per group)
• print-outs of French and Roth articles (one set per student)
  o Roth, Moira. “Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Le, the Vietnam War, Photography, and Memory.” Art Journal 60:2 (Summer, 2001): 38-53. (Online access through library catalogue)

VOCABULARY:

Angkor Wat - Angkor Wat is a temple complex in Cambodia and the largest religious monument in the world. It was originally founded as a Hindu capital for the Khmer Empire, gradually transforming into a Buddhist temple toward the end of the 12th century.

Bas relief - A French term from the Italian basso-relievo ("low relief"), bas relief is a sculpture technique in which figures and/or other design elements are just barely more prominent than the (overall flat)
background. Bas relief is created either by carving away material (wood, stone, ivory, jade, etc.) or adding material to the top of an otherwise smooth surface (say, strips of clay to stone).

**Khmer Rouge** - A communist guerrilla organization primarily headed by Pol Pot, which opposed the Cambodian government in the 1960s and waged a civil war from 1970, taking power in 1975.

**Memorial** – 1. Something designed to preserve the remembrance of a person, event, etc., as a monument or a holiday; 2. Of or relating to memory

**Scale** - Scale and proportion in art are both concerned with size. Scale refers to the size of an object (a whole) in relationship to another object (another whole). In art the size relationship between an object and the human body is significant.

**Context:**
Dinh Q. Lê is the most established Vietnamese-American artist to date, having had a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (*The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2009) and shown at *dOCUMENTA* 13. He was born in Ha Tien, a Vietnamese town near the border with Cambodia, and in the late 1970s he and his family settled in the United States as refugees. *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* (1994–99) marked a significant moment in his practice, occurring around the time that Lê decided to return to Vietnam and make his home in Ho Chi Minh City. It is the first major series in which he used his signature method of interweaving strips of photographs, following bamboo mat weaving techniques he learned from his aunt during his childhood. Here he juxtaposes two different images associated with Cambodia: bas-reliefs of battle scenes from the twelfth-century temple of Angkor Wat, and photographs of prisoners from the Khmer Rouge detention center known as S-21 (now the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum). Lê creates a dialogue between two episodes of Cambodian history that he sees as intrinsically rooted in violence, producing an alternative means of memorializing these victims.

**Lesson Plan**
Should be carried out over 2-3 days, with the final assessment done as homework

**Class Starter/Hook:** Ask students to describe the characteristics and functions of a memorial. Then ask them whether or not a memorial should be a monument. What kinds of artworks could serve as memorials? How might they be more or less successful than a monument?

**Preparation (1 hr-1hr30 min.)**
1. Make preparations to bring your class on a field trip to the Johnson Museum to see the artwork by Dinh Q. Le (accession no. 2014.001).
2. Break up students into three groups and assign each group one of the three research topics: Angkor Wat, Tuol Sleng, and Southeast Asian Textiles. You can provide the list of attached resources.
3. Before the field trip, have each group present what they learned from their research in a 10-minute presentation. Encourage them to use PowerPoint to show images.
4. Show the 6 minute TED presentation by Sophal Ear, “Escaping the Khmer Rouge” (http://www.ted.com/talks/sophal_ear_escaping_the_khmer_rouge?language=en) to equip students with the basic historical and geographical context of the Khmer Rouge period. This will help them understand the intra-regional impact of the Vietnam War and the Pol Pot regime.
Procedure (1 hr)
1. Before the field trip to the Johnson Museum, ask students to think about the ways in which Angkor Wat, Tuol Sleng, and textiles serve as carriers of memory. The last may be the most challenging, and you can broaden the focus on textiles to include more familiar references, like quilts. Have them try to define “memorial” in their own words and write down their ideas about how Angkor Wat, Tuol Sleng, and textiles serve as memorials.
2. Upon viewing the Dinh Q. Le work, ask students to spend time closely looking at the work and to make detailed notes about what they see and think in the attached worksheet. Use these questions to prompt class discussion at the museum.
3. Assessment: Have the students read the articles by Lindsey French and Moira Roth, and ask the students to write a short essay describing and analyzing the impact of the artwork as an alternative memorial of the Khmer Rouge period. Ask them to draw on their earlier research and also to integrate the arguments and reflections from the French and Roth articles. Tell them to articulate whether or not they think the artwork is compelling, and ask them to explain why.

Resources


Huntington Archive, “Angkor Wat, 1113-1150, built by King Suryavarman II (same regnal period as building period of temple).” http://huntingtonarchive.osu.edu/seasia/angkor.html


WORKSHEET

1. When you first look at the artwork – in this case, a “photo-weaving” or “photo-tapestry” – what is your first impression? What do you see and recognize first?

2. After spending 5 more minutes looking at it (and make sure you look from a distance, up very close, at its edges, etc.) what else appears more clearly? What else can you identify?

3. Describe the way in which Le has combined or woven together the two photographs. What effects are produced?

4. Look at the edges of the photo-weaving. Why do you think Le has treated the edges this way?

5. What effect does the size of the photo-weaving create on the viewer? Talk about the effect of scale.

6. In your opinion, has Le successfully integrated three sources (Angkor Wat bas reliefs, Tuol Sleng photographs, Southeast Asian textile patterns) in a visual manner? In a conceptual manner? What overall impression does the artwork leave with you?

7. What criticisms or questions do you have?
Lesson II: Mapping Memory: the Landscapes of Tiffany Chung and Vandy Rattana


Overview: Students use artworks by Tiffany Chung and Vandy Rattana to learn about the history of colonial cartography and Nixon’s secret bombing campaign in Cambodia. They can choose one of two art projects, or even do both. The first option is to create a mixed-media map of an old colonial map from French Indochina (or a map of their choice), following the example of Tiffany Chung’s Preah Vihear artwork. The second is to create a documentary photo-series of a place that holds hidden significance for the student, following the example of Vandy Rattana’s Bomb Ponds series.

Subject(s): Arts, Social Studies

Target Education Level(s): Middle School

Student Learning Objectives:

The student will:

- Use contemporary art and multi-media resources to learn about French colonialism in Southeast Asia, the present-day repercussions of colonial mapping projects, and the effects of Nixon’s bombing campaigns in Cambodia during the Vietnam War
- Use the contemporary artworks to think about alternative methods of mapping, such as abstraction and documentation
- Apply these artistic approaches to their interpretive map projects

Standards Addressed:
**Visual Arts Standard 4.** Students will explore art and artifacts from various historical periods and world cultures to discover the roles that art plays in the lives of people of a given time and place and to understand how the time and place influence the visual characteristics of the art work. Students will explore art to understand the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of human society.

**Students:**
- demonstrate how art works and artifacts from diverse world cultures reflect aspects of those cultures (a)
- demonstrate the ways in which some particular art works and artifacts reflect important aspects of the diverse cultures of the world (b)
- create art works that reflect a particular historical period of a culture (c).

**Materials**

For map artwork:
- Photocopies or print-outs of old maps – these can be maps particular to French colonialism in Southeast Asia (see Maps section under Resources) or it can be something closer to home for the student, perhaps a map of their neighborhood or of the school area (these can be printed out from Google Maps)
- Tracing paper
- Thick construction paper
- Glue
- No. 2 pencils
- Colored pencils and markers
- Yarn
- Sequins
- Buttons

For documentary photography project:
- Disposable cameras
- Poster boards in different sizes
- Glue
- Photocopier

**Vocabulary**

**Documentary photography** - A genre of photography that aims to objectively chronicle a subject or event.

**Photo-essay** - A series of photographic images related by some aspect held in common (ex. a certain mood, subject matter, technique, function or purpose). Example: a set of documentary photographs taken by a photo-journalist on the subject of a current event.

**Abstraction** - The process of creating art that is not representational or based on external reality or nature.

**Cartography** - the production of maps, including construction of projections, design, compilation, drafting, and reproduction.

**Landscape** – a) a representation of a view of natural inland scenery; b) the artistic genre of such depictions; c) a delimited topography of a region; d) a portion of territory that can be viewed at one time from one place; e) a particular area of activity: scene <the political landscape>
**CONTEXT**

The Kel Pass played an important role in the numerous re-mappings of the border between Cambodia and Thailand by colonial powers in the early twentieth century, contributing to the escalation of tensions over the ancient Hindu-Buddhist temple of Preah Vihear, built during the 10th-12th centuries at the height of the Angkorean empire. Located in close proximity to the national border between the two countries, Preah Vihear has been an ongoing source of conflict as it has been and continues to be claimed by both Thailand and Cambodia as national patrimony and cultural heritage. Situated on the Thai-Cambodian border, which witnessed major flows and push-backs of Cambodian refugees attempting to flee to Thailand, the area continued to be haunted by violence during and after the Khmer Rouge period. Many of Chung’s abstract cartographic depictions of such sites, based on historical and present-day maps, focus on the histories and geographies of territorial conflict and its impact on human populations.

Chung describes her process of crafting these maps:

*Each map involves my doing research, drawing layouts of old maps (from the periods of those traumatic events) on canvas, embroidering railways, roads and river systems. At the final stage I pierce holes on canvas and secure them with painted metal grommets and buttons one by one, mapping all areas with colored dots and eyelets. This painstaking process meditates on the memory and experience of trauma and tragedy, which leave mental scars in the human psyche – whether it’s a cessation of feeling, psychic closing off, or sensory panic.*

Vandy Rattana’s 2009 series *The Bomb Ponds* captures the enduring effects of the military quagmire of the Vietnam War and President Nixon’s covert bombing campaign in Cambodia. Between 1964 and 1973 the U.S. military dropped an estimated 2,756,941 tons of bombs on regions of Cambodia suspected of providing cover for Vietnamese communist guerilla troops. This figure was publicly acknowledged only in 2000. Vandy’s dissatisfaction with his own lack of knowledge about this particular history, and with the larger absence of documentation on the subject of the war and its repercussions in Cambodia, led him to search for and document these craters in the areas most heavily bombed during the war. The bomb ponds represent indelible traces of violence in tranquil, picturesque landscapes, enacting a moment of uneasiness for the viewer upon realization of what is being portrayed. To describe the impact of seeing the bomb ponds, the artist quotes a popular Khmer proverb: “You can hear something a thousand times and not know it, yet if you see it with your eyes just once, you know.”

**PREPARATION**

1. Distribute map handout of areas bombed during Vietnam War and map of Kel Pass (see Maps under Resources)

2. Recommended: Show students Vandy Rattana’s *Bomb Ponds* (2009) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2or7FwayP4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2or7FwayP4))

   This is a short documentary film made by the artist that will provide students with further context prior to viewing the artwork. They may also benefit from watching a short clip from the Guggenheim Museum website (http://www.guggenheim.org/video/vandy-rattanas-bomb-ponds-photographs-and-video), where the artist describes the inspiration for and process of making the photographs of the Bomb Ponds.

3. Set up field trip to Johnson Museum to see the artworks by Tiffany Chung and Vandy Rattana. You can make an appointment with the Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Coordinator for Academic Programs to look at the artworks in the Study Gallery, where students can look at the artworks together with the map printouts that they have brought with them.
4. In the Study Gallery, you may want to ask the students the following questions:
   a. Do you consider these artworks to be maps or landscapes? How are they different? Can they be the same?
   b. What do you like or dislike about the artworks? Why?
   c. Without their titles, what would these artworks convey to you? If you look at them for a long time, how would their meaning appear or change?
   d. Why do you think the artists chose to represent these places this way?

**THE LESSON PLAN**

(this can be a multi-day project depending on whether the class carries out both activities)

**Class Starter/Hook:**

Ask students the following questions: What is the purpose of a map? How are maps used? What do historical maps tell us? Are maps meant to be realistic? What don’t they tell us?

**Learning Activity:**

1. Ask the students to think about what other kinds of information could be put on a map, for example, places that have been forgotten, sites of destruction, or places where special events have taken place.

**ACTIVITY I: Crafting an Abstract Map after Tiffany Chung’s Pass at Kel Map**

2. For the crafted map activity, distribute the map printouts and have students selectively trace outlines from the maps with no. 2 pencil. Once they’ve finished tracing, they can turn the paper over and go over the lines with pencil on the other side. Now they can choose which side they’d like to transfer onto thick construction paper. Place that side face-down on the paper and use their pencils to firmly go over the outlines. This will press and transfer the pencil outline onto the construction paper.

3. Once this is done, they can color and embellish the map using a secret “key” of their choice. Encourage them to apply sequins, buttons, and yarn to demarcate areas that they think hold significance, or that symbolize something personal that isn’t on the original map.

**ACTIVITY II: Creating Photo-Documentation after Vandy Rattana’s Bomb Ponds**

4. Ask students to think about special or important places that have become invisible. What do they see in their daily landscape that holds special meaning that they know about but others don’t? You can cite the Khmer proverb “You can hear something a thousand times and not know it, yet if you see it with your eyes just once, you know” to prompt them to think about a place, or an aspect of a place that they could photograph to convey this meaning. It could somewhere in or near their home or school. You can encourage them to use the disposable cameras to photograph the subject in unusual ways – close-up abstraction, or a series of documentary images capturing the subject at different times of the day.
5. Distribute the disposable cameras and give the students a deadline to complete their photographic documentation. On the deadline, they will turn in their cameras and you can have the prints developed and returned to the students a few days later.

6. The students can now manipulate, reproduce, and arrange their photographs on the poster board. They can keep the prints as they are, or they can photocopy them to make black and white images, or they can use the copy machine to make more abstract and enlarged images. Ask them to create short and provocative titles for their photographs. Ask them to write 3-4 sentences describing what they have photographed and why it is important. Include this text on the poster board.

Closing/Assessment

The students can mount a display or an exhibition of their maps. During one class session they should have an opportunity to go around and look at each other’s works, and to have a brief discussion where they can each talk about their projects and ask each other questions. Ask them to tie in their approach to making their maps from what they saw and learned from the artworks at the Johnson Museum.

RESOURCES


Maps


The University of Texas at Austin Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/vietnam.html