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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Jewish Representation in the Advanced Placement Art History Curriculum: Site Visit to Wilshire Boulevard Temple

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Abstract

Advanced Placement (AP) Art History is an expansive and exciting course that introduces students to cultures and a way of thinking that most have never experienced. The curriculum provides an overview of the art and cultures of the world – 25,000 years of art. Though the course was rewritten in 2016, moving away from the traditional Western canon, Jewish art and architecture were largely overlooked, with only one work of Jewish art (compared to over 30 works of Christian art, and many works representing Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism). A significant portion of the course is dedicated to understanding sacred architecture, and yet, there is not a single representation of a Jewish religious space.

In 2021, students from Marlborough School, a private independent girls school in Los Angeles, petitioned the college board asking them amend the curriculum to include more Jewish art and architecture ([Here](#) is their letter). Many of the suggested structures are in the U.S., including the [Wilshire Boulevard Temple](#) in Los Angeles and [Temple Emanu-El](#) in New York.

This lesson is designed to be taught with the existing AP Art History curriculum until the College Board includes more examples of Jewish art and architecture. In addition to learning about Jewish religious texts and tradition through the study of the [Golden Haggadah](#), Dura Europos, and Yad Vashem, students visit a synagogue (in this lesson, the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles). Students will be able to analyze the syncretistic quality of the synagogue, discuss the stylistic attributes, and determine how iconography and the architectural form facilitate ritual, and support belief.

Essential Questions

- How does the structure facilitate religious practices?
- How does the iconography and design of the building reinforce religious beliefs?
- To what extent does the design of the synagogue reflect the historical and cultural context of the United States, and Los Angeles more specifically?
- To what extent does the design of the synagogue derive stylistic characteristics from other traditions? What are specific examples of this? What do these stylistic elements communicate?

Learning Objectives

Learning Objective 1.4: Students analyze form, function, content, and or context to infer or explain the possible intentions for creating a specific work of art.

Learning Objective 2.3: Students analyze the influence of a single work of art or group of related works on other artistic production.

Learning Objective 3.3: Students analyze how contextual variables lead to different interpretations of a work of art.

Materials

iPad and pencil, or printed copies of the interactive guide (linked below) and pencil.

Process

1. Student preparation for the site visit- *Reading:* [God, Torah, and Israel](#) (The Pluralism Project) and [Art and Architecture of the World's Religions](#).
2. On the day of the visit, students arrive for a 90 minute interactive tour of the synagogue.
3. Students are in groups of three as we tour the temple together using [this interactive guide](#) on their iPad (or PDF)

Learning Activities

Exterior of the Temple: Students do a quick sketch of the entrance and label the drawing. They discuss the following question with their group: How does the building announce its sacred function? Use specific visual evidence.

The Structure: Students enter the synagogue and draw a floor plan. They share their drawings with their group and explain the features of the structure.

Comparison: Students compare the floor plan of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple to that of the Pantheon. They fill out a T-chart while discussing the similarities and differences. This lesson can be adopted to include a different work of architecture as needed.

Analysis: After having a moment to reflect, there is a whole group discussion on the following question: Given what you have learned about the history of Judaism and the Roman Empire, why might the architect adopt this plan?

Comparison: Three Domes Students look at the domes in the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, the Pantheon, and the Mosque of Selim II. They discuss the following question in their small groups: How do each of these domes communicate different religious beliefs? Use specific visual details? For other temples, another architectural feature may be chosen.

Ritual and the Jewish Synagogue: Students use [this link](#) (A British Broadcasting Corporation Teach publication on the inside of a synagogue) to read about some of the features of a synagogue. They then take 5 minutes to find the ark, the Torah scrolls, the Bitma, and the Ner Tamid. Students take a picture and insert it on their document.

Architecture and Function: Whole Group Discussion—Students return with their images. We discuss the following question: How does the architectural form support ritual?

Pictorial Program: Students examine the pictorial program of the synagogue. With their group, they choose one pictorial aspect to study. At the synagogue, they will be looking specifically at the murals, but in other temples, they will look at other aspects, such as stained glass, or the lack of iconic representation. They take a photograph, and insert it into their document. While discussing, they annotate the image looking at the subject matter, aspects of earlier Jewish narrative art, such as the frescos of Dura Europos and the Golden Haggadah, and also aspects of other religious art, such as the Sistine Chapel and the Arena Chapel (applicable for the Wilshire Temple) or Hagia Sophia, and the Dome of the Rock.

Final Discussion: With the whole group, students discuss the following: In this class, we have looked at many examples of religious and non religious architecture that borrow architectural vocabulary from other structures and other cultures in order to communicate something to the contemporary world. What larger messages might the Wilshire Boulevard Temple communicate about Judaism and its place in this specific American urban environment? Use specific examples from today's tour of the temple.

Optional Extension: Students Read “OMA Expands the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles with a Striking New Pavilion” (<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/oma-expands-the-wilshire-boulevard-temple-in-los-angeles-with-a-striking-new-pavilion>) They answer the following: How does the new addition at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple extend or modify what the structure communicates to our contemporary setting? Think about structures such as the MAXII Museum of Twenty First Century Art by Zahad Hadid, Yad Vashem by Mosce Safdid, and the Guggenheim in Bilbao by Frank Gehry.

Works Cited and References

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