

History 1850G

Object Lessons: A History of the World in Ten Objects Winter 2025

Instructor: **James Flath**

Email: **jflath@uwo.ca**

Office: **Department of History, Lawson Hall 2234**

Office Hours: **TBA**

This is a **draft** outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description:

In this course, participants will engage with ten carefully chosen objects that span different cultures, time periods, and geographical locations. Each object serves as a portal into its era, revealing insights about the people who made it, and how it made them. The course aims to foster a deeper understanding of how material culture reflects and shapes societal values, technological advancements, and historical narratives.

By the end of this course, students will:

- **Analyze** the significance of each object within its historical context.
- **Understand** the interplay between objects and their cultural environments.
- **Develop** critical thinking skills by interpreting how these artifacts have shaped human experiences.

The course will consist of ten modules, each dedicated to one object. Each module will include:

1. **Object Introduction:** A detailed description of the object, including its origin, materials, and function.
2. **Historical Context:** Exploration of the time period in which the object was created and its relevance to contemporary society.
3. **Discussion and Analysis:** Group discussions that encourage participants to share insights and interpretations based on their research and perspectives.

Prerequisite(s): None

This is a draft outline. 2025-26 version. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Materials:

All reading materials will be posted on OWL Brightspace, online, or available through Western Libraries. See below. It is recommended that you acquire a pen and a (paper) notebook.

Methods of Evaluation:

1) Essay Proposal (10% [pass/fail]): Due January 27.

Students will propose a topic and outline for their term paper. The topic must focus on a historical object of the student's choosing, and the proposal will be evaluated on a "pass/fail" basis. Any proposal not accepted in the first round must be resubmitted. Term papers will not be accepted without a pre-approved topic. See OWL Brightspace for guidelines on preparing a proposal.

2) Group Project (10%): date to be determined.

Students will be assigned to a small group, and the group will be required to demonstrate the use/presence/materiality of an actual or virtual historical object. The demonstration may be done live in class/tutorial, or prerecorded. Creativity is encouraged.

3) Research Essay (30%): Due March 27

As the capstone assignment for the course, the Research Essay develops the Essay Proposal into a fully articulated scholarly discussion of 10 pages in length.

*Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a powerful research tool. However, the student will not receive credit for work written by AI. If the student wishes to involve AI as co-author then the AI must be given credit, and that credit (50%) will be deducted from the student's share of the grade. Failure to give due credit to the AI will result in a grade of 0%. In case of discrepancy, the student may request an oral thesis defense.

4) Tutorial Attendance and Participation (TAP) (20%)

Students will receive the first half their TAP grade (10%) at the half-way point of the course.

5) Final Exam (30%)

* Students must receive a passing grade on the final exam in order to pass the course.

Late and Absence Policy: Assignments will not be accepted after the due date, except on the advice of Academic Counselling. Students are allowed two absences without incurring a reduction in TAP grade. Each additional absence will incur a 5% reduction in TAP.

This is a draft outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Schedule and Readings: (Readings are Subject to Change)

- 1) Introduction
- 2) A Rock (Uluru)
 - a. Barry Hill, *The Rock: travelling to Uluru*
 - b. [Subhash Jaireth](#), “Knowing and Unknowing Uluru”, *Axon: Creative Explorations*, Vol 9, No 2, December 2019. (Online).
- 3) The Sphinx
 - a. Alexander Stille, *The Future of the Past*. New York: Picador, 2002. (Chapter 1, ‘The Sphinx, Virtual and Real’).
- 4) Terracotta Army
 - a. Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*. (Chapter 3, “A Magic Army for the Emperor”)
- 5) Telescope
 - a. Readings: TBA
- 6) The Endurance and the Discovery
 - a. [Joe MacInnis](#), “Shackleton’s Grave”, CBC Ideas, Dec. 9, 2014.
 - b. "Ernest Shackleton's Endurance diary" ([Scott Polar Research Institute](#))
- 7) Bic Ball Point Pen and Moleskin Notebook (*This will be a “no screens” week. Note taking is to be done with pen and paper.*)
 - a. [Stephen Dowling](#), “The Cheap Pen that Changed Writing Forever” BBC, 29 October, 2020.
 - b. David Sax, *Revenge of the Analog*, Chapter 2, “The Revenge of Paper”.
- 8) Chief Pontiac Hood Ornament
 - a. [Larry McNeil](#), “Raven Asks Pontiac, 1999 Series”
 - b. [Karl Marx](#), “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”.
- 9) Weldon Library
 - a. Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (2012). Chapter TBA.
- 10) Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor
 - a. Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl*. Selections TBA.
 - b. Vladimir Shevchenko, “Chronicle of Difficult Weeks”. (On Kanopy, Western Libraries).

This is a draft outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

11) The Toilet

- a. Wald, Chelsea. *Pipe Dreams: The Urgent Global Quest to Transform the Toilet*. Basic Books, 2021.

12) Student's Choice

- a. Students will propose and vote on an object to be studied.
- b. Readings TBA.

13) Conclusion

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.