

## History 1850G

### Object Lessons: A History of the World in Ten Objects

Winter 2026-27

Instructor: James Flath

Email: [jflath@uwo.ca](mailto:jflath@uwo.ca)

Office: Department of History, Lawson Hall 2234

Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00-3:00



#### 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

**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.

Cost of assigned readings: \$0.00.

**Methods of Evaluation:**

- 1) Essay Proposal (10% [pass/fail]): Due Feb. 9

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%): Due April 2

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 30

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.

Students may use Artificial Intelligence (AI) as research and editing tool, but AI cannot be used to write or otherwise create an assignment. To ensure appropriate use of AI students will submit a short "Video Reflection" on how they **did or did not** use AI when researching and writing their essay. The video

reflection will be treated as part of the essay assignment. Students may request an in-person interview in place of the video. Students who do use AI will be required to include an appendix detailing the prompts that were given to the AI. See OWL Brightspace for guidelines.

#### 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. **Note:** the automatically granted absences are NOT in addition to Student Reported Absences (SAR).

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

Unless otherwise noted, all readings can be accessed through the respective week on OWL Brightspace.

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 (and microscope)
  - a. Panek, *Seeing and Believing*, Chapter 1-2.
  - b. Meet at Cronyn Observatory.
  
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](#) )
  - c. George Butler, *The Endurance* (2003), on Kanopy (UWO Library).
  
7. Bic Ball Point Pen and Moleskine 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".
  - c. David Gartman, "Three Ages of the Automobile: The Cultural Logics of the Car"
  
9. Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor
  - Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl*. Selections TBA.
  - Vladimir Shevchenko, "Chronicle of Difficult Weeks". (On Kanopy, Western Libraries).
  
10. Weldon Library
  - James Ashby, "The D.B. Weldon Library by Andrews and Murphy: Modern Experiments in a Collegiate Gothic Campus"
  - Meet in front of University College.
  
11. The Toilet

- Barbara Penner, "A World of Unmentionable Suffering: Women's Public Conveniences in Victorian London"

#### 12. A Pirate's Cannon

- Dan Conlin, "The Golden Age of Piracy in Nova Scotia: Three Case Studies, 1720-1724"

#### 13) Conclusion/Group Project Presentations

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](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.