



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2025 Volume I: Objects, Material Culture, and Empire: Making Russia

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## Introduction

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When we think of Russia, we often imagine whimsical nesting dolls or gem-encrusted Fabergé eggs. These objects—with their charming bright colors and over-the-top luxury—have become synonymous with the paradoxes of Russian culture, at once modest in its peasant origins and exuberant in its expressions of imperial power. Taking such things as inspiration, this Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute seminar traced the rise and fall of the Russian empire through a series of objects. Together, we asked how things, and the materials they are made from, contributed to the articulation of a Russian national identity in the nineteenth century. How might a stone vase, wooden toy, silver pistol, or article of clothing reveal stories about the people who made, purchased, and used them? How might they unlock narratives about the environment, modern industry, and an ever more global state actor? Coming from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and grade levels, from kindergarten to chemistry, from Spanish language to visual arts, the Fellows who participated in this seminar found common ground in the practices of looking at and analyzing objects, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of taking an object-centered approach to academic study. What can things tell us? What can they not tell us? And why does this all matter? These were the driving questions of our seminar.

We took as our starting point the proposition that we might be able to track the history and culture of the Russian empire, from the eighteenth century to 1917, by remaining especially attuned to material culture. Reading works of literature, history, and theory alongside visual and material examples, we saw how the birth of Russian industry was inscribed into fine carved objects and fairy tales. We identified the myth of an ethnically and culturally unified Russia in the supposed “discovery” of folk crafts and medieval heritage. We read about virtuosic craftsmanship in Leskov’s “Lefty” and the obsessive possession of consumer goods in Gogol’s “Overcoat.” And we considered the artifacts of Russian colonial practices in Ukraine, Central Asia, and Siberia. Implicit in our discussions was the acknowledgement that few of the seminar participants would have the opportunity or need to engage specifically Russian material in their classes. Instead, we were united in our exploration of Russia as a case study for thoughtful, interdisciplinary, and innovative pedagogical approaches to object study. We anchored these approaches in rigorous methods of object analysis, refined through our reading of foundational scholars like the art historian Jules David Prown and put into action with our experimentation with writing object biographies. By far, the soul of the seminar was in the frequent visits to Yale collections, which gave us hands-on experience with analyzing and discussing objects in a seminar setting. We observed the material characteristics of Orthodox icons in the Yale University Art Gallery. We sifted through the eclectic Eurasian collection—from a fish skin Siberian robe to a carved wooden toy of a monkey—of the Peabody Museum of Natural History. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library offered

an opportunity to peruse the Romanov family photograph albums and wonder about the snapshot as an object. And for our final session on materiality and food, we indulged the senses as we read Chekhov's "Gooseberries" and sampled rye bread, pickled vegetables, and more.

The Fellows' curriculum units bear the imprint of this interdisciplinary approach to materiality. Both Sean Griffin and Natalie Ochoa take a historical frame, exploring how material culture can make a slice of the past present for students. Griffin leverages the rich collections of local and regional museums to supplement a lesson on Abraham Lincoln's assassination in his reading classroom and make a positive impact on his students' comprehension skills. In her history unit, Ochoa introduces key artifacts from a range of modern revolutions—starting with the Scientific Revolution, and moving on to the French, Haitian, and Russian Revolutions—to highlight how objects both emerged from and also contributed to such significant events. Maria Medianero and María Dolores Gómez López each bring an attention to objects into their Spanish language classrooms. Medianero bases her unit in the comparative musical and performance traditions of Panama, Russia, and the local Quinipiac tribe; exploring the instruments, costumes, dances, and sounds of each culture supports her students' ability to discuss and appreciate other cultures. López designs her unit around the various folktales and customs of Spain, grounding each individual example in the careful analytical methods of material cultural studies.

A commitment to method is also what unites the units of Dan Croteau, Katie Yates, and Charnice Hoegnifioh. Croteau and Yates each bring an object-based approach to the writing classroom. Croteau draws out the things of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* as inspiration for student writing on important objects in their own lives. Yates centers her unit on the collective writing of creative personal prose and poetry in the kinds of storytelling on display in a scrapbook. As a teacher of high-school science, Hoegnifioh takes a material approach to students' introduction to laboratory work; encouraging material literacy becomes a way for her to orient students with the things and practices of the lab, its norms, possibilities, and dangers. To know more about glass and beakers is, in her unit, to embody and activate the identity of a scientist.

This material awareness carries through in the curriculum units of Nadiya Hafizova, Kasalina Maliamu Nabakooza, and Carol Boynton. Hafizova's deep understanding of environmental ethics and the literature around object agency allows her to design a series of activities that will inspire students to think with seriousness about consumerism in their own lives. Nabakooza has immersed herself in blacksmithing practices to introduce this rarely taught practice to her art students, enriching it with how ironwork brings together such disparate contexts as the Russian empire and Uganda. And finally, teaching the youngest cohort, Carol Boynton starts with a classic of children's literature, *The Mitten*, and uses it to introduce her kindergartners to the Ukrainian arts of illustration and textile design.

Throughout the seminar our intention was to elevate our material literacy, remaining alive to the powers of observation, and the potential for objects to tell stories about people, history, and culture. In these creative and diverse curriculum units, each seeking to support student learning in material ways, we can see the intellectual and pedagogical impact of looking beyond text and image—to the things that make up our world.

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