



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **Egyptian Tomb Art: Expressions of Religious Beliefs**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 85.06.07  
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Teaching world civilization to ninth graders is an experience akin to running a marathon, especially if the curriculum begins with the paleolithic and neolithic periods, and concludes with the Renaissance. As with any survey course, the temptation is to walk through the old and new stone ages; skip through the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, Greece, and Rome; jog through the Middle Ages; and “pour on the steam” to get through the Renaissance. The result is an exhausted teacher and a somewhat overwhelmed class. As my students and I recently reviewed the year’s notes, we looked back through a mountain range of material to discover that in our efforts to reach the finish line, we had only scratched the surface and that there were wide, appealing valleys between those peaks that we never noticed in our race to reach modernity.

To remedy this problem of superficial coverage of early world cultures, I am planning to identify a natural area of emphasis within each unit. One way to draw students into these cultures is to make them active participants in, rather than passive recipients of, their own learning. To illustrate this approach, I have chosen Egypt as my case study because it has become clear to me over the past five years that any attempt to present the history of Egypt must place its emphasis on art. Through analysis of Egyptian tomb art, students will find a different and, I believe, more effective way into Egyptian culture. While Egypt lends itself to an interdisciplinary blending of history, practices, and customs, the real change in this unit is the methodology and study techniques. Once used for the study of Egypt, this approach can be used with other cultures as well.

In his article titled “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” Jules Prown proposed a method of object analysis which helps students experience art rather than look at it. I intend to engage my students actively in the process of “encounter[ing] the past at the first hand” by giving them “direct sensory experience of surviving historical events.” Using Prown’s method of object analysis on four categories of objects, I will demonstrate how connections can be made between objects and the beliefs expressed about them by the people who made the objects. This unit teaches students how to see more when they look at artifacts and, more than that, it teaches them how to answer their questions about these objects (pyramids, mummies, shawabtis, and canopic jars) and others.

(Recommended for World Civilization classes, grade 9; World Cultures classes, grades 7 and 8; and Contemporary Issues—Middle East classes, grades 11 and 12)

### **Key Words**

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