

Journey into Time – Art of the Ancient Mediterranean

Title: How Heavy is Your Heart?

Developed by: Willie Reid

Suggested Grade Level(s): 9 –12 (may be adapted for younger students)

Suggested Length of Class Time: Two weeks of one-hour per day classes

Subject Areas: Language Arts, History, Visual Art, Drama, Music

Rationale:

Civilizations have long speculated on what awaits us in the afterlife. The Book of the Dead was, for ancient Egyptians, a collection of spells, songs, and prayers meant to ensure a deceased person's safe passage to and a prosperous life in the other world, provided, of course, that their pharaoh was properly mummified! Portions of the book portray, in pictorial splendor, the dramatic events that would allegedly unfold when the deceased soul arrived in the land of the dead. Osiris, Egyptian god of the dead, would quiz the newly arrived soul (looking much like its person when alive) on the nature of her/his life and how well it had been lived. Inherent in the questioning process was the belief that good and truthful persons would proceed towards a fulfilling and happy afterlife while those who hadn't, were consumed by Ammut, a monster amalgam of crocodile, hippo and lion. The measure of the quality of one's life was established by the weighing of one's heart on a scale balanced by a feather, which depicted goodness and truth.

In this lesson, students will be asked to consider the many perceptions across world religions and cultures of "goodness" and use this knowledge to create a lighthearted dramatic comparative representation of an ancient Egyptian and a modern day "crossing over to the other side".

Logistics:

Classroom setup – Access to Internet and library facilities will aid in student research. Once the drama is about to unfold, a large classroom or AV room space will be required.

Materials

- Paper and pencils
- newspapers containing obituaries of both ordinary and famous individuals, (in particular, The Globe and Mail “Lives Lived” section)
- materials for props and costumes (if required)

Suggested resources/images:

- www.metmuseum.org (links to ancient Egypt)
- www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk (links to Ancient Egypt)
- www.near-death.com/religion.html
- www.crystalinks.com/egyptafterlife.html
- additional sites that refer to various religious beliefs about the afterlife
- excerpts from biographies of ordinary and famous individuals

Suggested Outcomes:

Students will be expected to:

- examine the influence of the dramatic arts and their relationship to daily life and culture
- respect and value the arts as a record of human experience and expression
- understand the important cultural aspects of Ancient Egyptian society; religious beliefs, funerary practices, artistic traditions
- demonstrate their knowledge through aesthetic expression
- explore the arts as a way of expressing ideas and points of view

Introduction:

From ancient times to modern day, communities and civilizations are bound by efforts to live well together in the face of conflict. As students explore various sites and resources, they will learn of the importance placed on the afterlife in ancient Egypt. The walls of Egyptian tombs portrayed images of their beliefs about life and death. They believed that in order to gain favour in the next world, they must practice kindness and generosity to their fellow citizens. They will be introduced to the various “players” in transition scenes from the book of the dead such as Osiris, god of the dead, Anubis, god of mummies, Ammut, the fearsome monster, Thoth, god of scribes, and Ma’at, goddess of truth.

Students will also examine beliefs of other religions as they pertain to “goodness” and ponder what it means to live life well.

Suggestions for Teaching and Learning:

Following an examination of the beliefs in afterlife in Ancient Egypt as well as those of other cultures, ask students to explore, in groups, the language used in biographies and obituaries that describe the positive characteristics of both ordinary and famous people.

Pose the following questions for group, then full class discussion:

- What does it mean to live well together?
- Describe what you consider to be a “good” person?
- Does the definition of *goodness* in your set of beliefs differ from that of others? If not, why not?
- Do sets of prescribed rules in both schools and in society help people to live good lives? If not why not?
- How do you wish to be remembered?

Encourage many points of view in lively discussion and debate. Sensitivity may be required for students who may, for whatever reason, find the topic upsetting. Respect for individual differences in beliefs is also an essential part of the process.

Once ideas are shared, invite half of the students to think about and create a lighthearted dramatization of entrance to the afterlife based on Egyptian beliefs, featuring their gods and goddesses and the other half, a modern day transition featuring today’s “gods” and “goddesses”. Encourage humour and diverse views in the presentations.

Students will require time to discuss and write scripts, prepare storyboards, if this is useful, and to gather or create costumes and props if desired.

Extension of ideas:

- Stage and video tape, for further discussion, the performance of both scenarios for classmates or for a larger audience
- Divide students into smaller groups to represent afterlife beliefs of various world religions
- Work with art teacher to create masks and props for use in the dramatizations
- Organize a debate on question 4 (above).

Suggestions for Assessment:

- Sketches, research notes, and personal writings on the topic may be kept in a journal for self assessment
- Note participation and contribution to the discussions and the dramatization process using, for example, a class made rubric
- Invite students to write an essay on a person they know who is living what they consider to be a good life
- Ask students to create an artistic response (through visual art, drama, music, or photo essay, etc.) on how they wish to be remembered