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Modern Britain (HIS 458) City as Classroom Project Report

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City as Classroom for Modern Britain (Hist 458)

British Material Culture

Philadelphia Museum of Art



Course Description:

This course will examine the political, socio-economic, and cultural history of modern Britain. Using a variety of primary and secondary texts, we will consider the development of parliamentary government, democracy, the modern state, empire, capitalism, and urban-industrial society as well as the cultural changes accompanying and informing these transformations, from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the late twentieth century. British modernity was indeed precocious, and we will seek to understand the context, causes, and consequences of that experience.

Project Description:

The goal of this assignment was for students to learn how to use material culture as an historical source. The PMA has a very diverse collection of British material culture from 18th-century Britain. Students were directed to visit the Museum, to select an object or space, and to write a 3-page paper assessing what that object/space reveals about society, economy, and culture during this period.

Outcomes:

This City-as-Classroom project was a success largely because of the interest, enthusiasm, and work of the students. They selected a variety of objects from Chinese porcelain to enamelled miniature portraits to the famous Lansdowne drawing room. They were able to link these objects to key themes from the 18th century, including the power of the British aristocracy and the transformations resulting from the development of global trade. The assignment was accompanied by appropriate readings. It was also scheduled early in the semester, which helped to generate interest in and momentum for the course. While this assignment was well-suited to a small, upper-division course, it remains to be seen whether such success could be replicated in a larger, core course.