American Jewish Material Culture: Identity, Memory, Performance and Display

Course Description:

“Material culture is made up of tangible things crafted, shaped, altered, and used across time and across space. It is inherently personal and social, mental and physical. It is art, architecture, food, clothing and furnishing. But more so, it is the weave of these objects in the everyday lives of individuals and communities. It is the migration and settlement, custom and practice, production and consumption that is American history and culture. It is the gestures and processes that extend ideas and feelings into three-dimensional form.”

--Simon J. Bronner, American Material Culture and Folklife

This course introduces students to a burgeoning field of American Jewish cultural studies that deals with what cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai calls, “the social value of things.” Focusing on the interplay between material culture and Jewish identity, thought, and practice in contemporary America, the course explores how Jews think about, work with, use, wear, display and “perform” objects in the course of their everyday lives, and in public arts, history and cultural institutions. This is not a course just on the production of fine art by or about Jews, so much as it is about the everyday arts of adornment, celebration, liturgy, spirituality, memorialization and identity and the ways in which these various meanings are negotiated within distinct domains of prayer, performance, entertainment and display.

Borrowing from the central concern of cultural commentator, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, we will pose the question, “What does it mean to show?”—or in this case, “to show, Jewishly?” -- and explore the agency of display in a variety of American Jewish settings: in the home, on the street, in houses of worship, on the body, in celebration and in public displays such as museum exhibits, world’s fairs, festivals, and other heritage and tourist attractions. We will look at how the everyday artifacts of American Jewish life are made to "perform" their meanings for us by the very fact of being consumed, collected, arranged, worn, addressed, touched, kissed, and carried, and about the powerful messages
Seriff, 2015
American Jewish Museums and Material Culture

conveyed not only by the objects themselves but by the specific ways in which these objects are addressed and interacted with. In examining the meaning and value of things in the context of religious practice and cultural display, students will have a chance to explore broader theoretical topics about what it means to be Jewish in a multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-denominational democracy such as the United States, as seen through an exploration of issues of memory, sense of place, identity, performativity, belief, and spirituality. Drawing from the fields of folklore, Jewish studies, cultural studies, religious studies, literature, museum studies, film, and photography, the course introduces students to the vibrancy and meanings of Jewish material culture in American Jewish life and thought.

The course will emphasize the development of critical thinking skills and cultural analysis. The class format will entail active, participatory, and empowering ways of learning based on class discussion, class field trips, and original oral historical and fieldwork-based research. The course is intentionally designed to be student-centered. Students will be discussing and presenting material during class sessions and interacting with one another and the instructor on a regular basis. Students will also have the opportunity to participate directly in the curatorial process of cultural representation, either through the planning and/or implementation of their own exhibit, or a critical analysis of a particular display of objects owned, made, collected, worn, displayed, used, venerated, and symbolized in American Jewish culture.

Readings and Requirements

This course requires that students complete a series of readings, which will form the basis of our class sessions. There is a significant amount of reading. Students will be tested on what they read and comprehend through weekly written responses to the reading, which form a significant portion of your grade. The course will be successful only if the participants come to class prepared to discuss the reading materials and the central concepts they contain.

Required Textbooks: These books will be available for purchase at the University Coop on the Drag (Guadalupe Street). A required course packet will also be available from IT Copy (under “American Jewish Material Culture, 2015” Dr. Suzanne Seriff); a representative will come to our class to sell these packets during the first week of class.


Course Packet: American Material Jewish Culture, 2015, Dr. Suzanne Seriff. Available for sale with IT Copy (Note: Readings from the Course Packet are listed in the schedule below with “CP” after the page no.s).

There are also a few short readings that are not in the course packet which I will upload to our Blackboard website before the required week. These readings are also required readings.

**Grading:** Semester grades will be determined as follows:

Final grades will reflect the +/- system option as defined by the University.

1. **ESSAYS and/or ACTIVITIES: (40%)**

Two short writing projects based on readings, in-class materials, and student-initiated interviews and research. Instructor will hand out specific project assignments at least two weeks in advance of each due date. Please follow the instructions for the projects carefully. No credit will be given for projects that are not carried out as they are assigned nor for projects that are handed in late without prior approval from the instructor. Each project will be worth 20% of your final grade.

2. **FINAL PROJECT (30%):**

Each student will be required to do a final project that includes both a final multi-media presentation to the class as well as a final reflection paper to be submitted on the final exam day of class. Possible topics for these projects will be discussed during the second half of class. Projects can be based on academic library research, or first-hand ethnographic field research conducted by one or more students during the semester. This project can expand upon the topic of one of the smaller writing assignments conducted throughout the semester, or can tackle a completely new topic, and can take the form of an exhibit, a film, a documentary, a multi-media presentation, a booklet, a model, or some other creative format. Because of the in-depth nature of the project, however, assignments must be selected in consultation with (and prior approval from) the professor. Each student will be required to present and discuss her or his work to the class at the end of the semester.

3. **IN CLASS DISCUSSION and PARTICIPATION (30%):**
   - *Attendance:* You are expected to attend all class meetings on time and are responsible for seeing that your name is on the attendance sheet which will be filled out at the beginning of each class. If you are late and
therefore not present when the attendance is taken, you will be counted as absent for the day. You will be allowed one missed class with no penalty. I will start counting off 2 points for each class missed without an excused absence after that. If you miss as many as 5 unexcused classes, your grade will automatically drop at least a letter grade lower, even if everything else is perfect. (10%)

- **Blackboard Discussion Blog**: Students will be responsible for responding to a written prompt on Blackboard that addresses the readings for the week and will form the basis for class discussion the following class period. Your blackboard entry will be due at 9am on Monday, the day before our Tuesday class. There will be 10 entries in all, worth a total of 10 points for the class. If you miss a Blackboard post, you may write a 500 word review of a major Jewish museum or museum exhibit in the United States as a make up.(10%)

- **Leading Class**: Students will be assigned to lead a 15 min. discussion about the reading material once during the semester. I will pass a sign up sheet around the first few weeks so you can select a session to lead. Some weeks will be co-led by two students. Students are encouraged to be creative in engaging the class (using media, audio, etc.). Students will be graded based on delivering a brief summary and critical analysis of the main theoretical points of the readings, presenting some original audio-visual materials on the readings, and contributing questions to prompt a lively discussion. These student-led discussions will be held on Tuesday morning each week, unless we are on a fieldtrip or have a guest speaker. This will be worth 10% of your class grade. (10%)

**CLASS RESTRICTIONS**: Please place cell phones on silent or vibrate mode during class and put them away so that they are not visible, unless we need you to look something up on google. Your cell phone will be taken up for the duration of the class period if you are using it for anything other than instructor-assigned or approved class-related research. **Laptop-use is forbidden unless you have prior approval from the professor in order to take notes on your computer.**

**UNIVERSITY POLICIES**

**Scholastic Dishonesty**: Students are required to do their own research and work. All students are responsible for knowing the standards of academic honesty: [http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/scholdis.php](http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/scholdis.php). Plagiarism, using research without citations or using a created production without crediting a source, is forbidden; will result in a grade of zero for the assignment or for the class, or even expulsion from the university, depending on the severity of the plagiarism. This applies to any non-credited websites as well as written sources!

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, to **"plagiarize"** means

- to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own.
Seriff, 2015
American Jewish Museums and Material Culture

• to use (another's production) without crediting the source.
• to commit literary theft.
• to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward.

**All of the following are considered plagiarism:**

• turning in someone else's work as your own.
• copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit, including from a website.
• failing to put a quotation in quotation marks.
• giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation.
• changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit.
• copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of your work, whether you give credit or not.

Most cases of plagiarism can be avoided, however, by citing sources. Simply acknowledging that certain material has been borrowed, and providing your readers with the information necessary to find that source, is usually enough to prevent plagiarism. Web site for more information:

• [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism)

**Documented Disability Statement:** Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone) or [http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd](http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd).

Students need to inform the instructor about their disability right at the beginning of the semester.

**Incompletes:** A grade of "I" is only given in cases of documented emergency or special circumstances late in the semester, provided that you have been making satisfactory progress. A grade contract must be completed and the criteria adhered to, in order to fulfill the requirements to take an incomplete. Please note that you must have some written documentation of your reasons for the incomplete—either from a parent, a counselor, a doctor, or some other official in charge of your mental or physical welfare.

**Withdrawals:** Students are responsible for finding out the appropriate dates for dropping the course and/or withdrawing without penalties.

**Use of Blackboard and Electronic Reserves**
The course has a Blackboard website which will be demonstrated during the first weeks of the class. Although our class is listed under three separate unique
numbers, we have created a “MASTER CLASS” blackboard site for all of us that we will all use together. This site will include an electronic gradebook and access to announcements and assignments.

Announcements concerning the course will also be made on Blackboard on the MASTER site. Students in the class are responsible for checking this website regularly, which you can access by clicking on “Blackboard” under “Popular Sites” on the upper left side of the UT home page. Students are also responsible for regularly checking the e-mail account that is registered with the University. All e-mails to the professor should either be done through Blackboard, or include “American Jewish Material Culture” in the subject line; otherwise they may inadvertently be missed.

The professor should be addressed in person and in all email correspondence as “Dr. Seriff” or “Professor Seriff.” And be sure to sign your name at the end of the correspondence so I know who it is from!

**Schedule of Topics and Assignments**
*(this schedule is tentative and subject to possible revision)*

**Week One, Jan 20th, 21st:** American Jewish Material Culture Intro: What is a Jewish Thing?


Guest Speaker: Rabbi Neil Blumofe, Congregation Agudas Achim Synagogue, Austin, Texas Jan 22nd

Blackboard Assignment #1: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard under “Discussion”. Due date: Monday, Jan 26th, 9am.
*Why did you sign up for this class? What is one thing you’d like to come away knowing from this class? What comes to mind when you hear the term “Jewish Material Culture”?

**Week Two, Jan 27th, 29th:** Biographical Objects; Objectified Biographies
What do we mean by the term “material culture”? What do we mean by Jewish Material Culture? Why is it so hard to identify things as “Jewish”? How are the sensual, physical, and bodily pleasures/practices of material life related to religious thought or to the rhythms of Jewish life? What is behind the Jewish injunction against the worship of “things”? (Thou shalt have no idols before me). How do Jews concretize their encounter with the Divine?
Week Three, Feb 3rd, 5th: A Step Back in Time: Fabricating Jewishness on the Urban Landscape
If you close your eyes and think of “Jewish America,” what sights, smells, sounds, and images come to mind? What sights, sounds, smells, and tastes are described and invoked in these two pieces by Anzia Yezierska and what are some of the differences between the autobiographical sketch and the short story? What do both of them tell us or show us about Jews in America at the turn of the 20th century? How is material culture used in the two pieces to evoke this image?

Readings:
Anzia Yezierska, “Hester Street” In Red Ribbon on a White Horse: My Story, Pgs. 25-36 CP

Anzia Yezierska, “Wings” and “Hunger” In How I Found America: The Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska, Pgs. 3-16 CP


**First Written Assignment Due in Class: Feb 19th**: “The Cultural Construction of the Lower East Side as a Romantic Representation of American Jewishness”

**Requirements are uploaded on Blackboard under “Assignments”**

Week Four, Feb 10th, 12th: **Lower East Side Memories: Constructing A Sacred Address for American Immigrant Jewishness**.
In what ways does the Lower East Side come to be a Jewish “thing” and “symbol” in American history? How does late 19th century urban space—most specifically the major immigrant destination of NYC’s Lower East Side—come to define Jewish thought, practice, and sense of identity? What does the Lower East Side have to do with Jews in Texas?

Readings:


Film Clips: Selections from: The Jazz Singer, (1927) Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg, Crossing Delancy, Hester Street, An American Tale, Simpsons (Klutz the Clown)

**Blackboard Assignment #3: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, Feb 16th, 9am.**

**Guest Speaker: Rabbi Neil Blumofe, Congregation Agudas Achim Synagogue, Austin, Texas, Feb 12th**

Week Five, Feb 17th, 19th: **Adorning the Body: Clothing, and the Jewish Immigrant Experience**
How do we understand the first half of the 20th century Jewish immigrant experience as a balancing act between the inheritance of the past and the embrace of the future? In what ways does clothing become both a metaphor for this balancing act and a marker of the transition? In Philip Roth’s story, “Eli the Fanatic,” why is Eli called “the fanatic?” What does clothing have to do with this label and the issue in the community? In what ways is the coat symbolic of something else and what is that “something else.”?
Week Six, Feb 24th, 26th: The Synagogue as Sacred Address: From Urban to Suburban

Situate the writings and person of Mordecai Kaplan in the movement of second generation American-born Jews to reconstruct their concept of a synagogue from solely a house of worship, to a center of Jewish life, including a place for study, entertainment and prayer. How does Kolton-Fromm’s notion of Kaplan’s “obsessive” journal writing reflect this notably “American” idea of what a synagogue should be as a physical place, a thing, a center for Jews in America? How are the old folks that Barbara Meyerhoff writes about a product of this 20th century movement toward a new concept of a synagogue-center?

Readings:

Jeffrey S. Gurock, “The Emergence of the American Synagogue,” In The American Jewish Experience, Pgs. 219-236 CP


Possible Field Trip: Synagogue Agudas Achim, Dell Jewish Community Campus. Hart Lane 2/24.

Blackboard Assignment #5: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, March 2nd, 9am

Week Seven March 3rd, 5th: Hiddur Mitzvah—Hand-Made Liturgical Objects and The Art of Adorning the Torah
What is the Jewish concept of “hiddur mitzvah” and how does that concept of beautifying the Torah amplify the meaning and significance of both the act of decoration and the handmade objects that are found in most American synagogues?

Readings:


Blackboard Assignment #6: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, March 9th, 9am.

Week Eight, Mar 10th, 12th: The Domestic Culture of American Jews: Jewish Home as “Domestic Temple”


Second Written Paper Due in Class, April 2nd. “What Makes a Jewish Home Jewish?” Please note: This paper requires a first person, in-house interview so please allot enough time to set this up.

Wk Nine: Spring Break: NO CLASSES!

Week Ten, March 24, 26 Kitchen Judaism: Tables, Cooks and Cookbooks
Why do Jews always seem to be eating? Does it make a difference with whom Jews are eating or what they are eating? What is the significance of “Jewish foods” as a symbol of Jewishness in Jewish history/culture? How does ‘eating Jewish” become a manifestation of Jewish identity for Jews in America—both historically and in present day?

Readings:
Jenna Weisman Joselit, “Kitchen Judaism,” ch. 5 IN The Wonder of America, Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950, pgs. 171-218 CP


Film Clips: Annie Hall (Woody Allen—food as clash between Jew and Gentile), The Jazz Singer (Al Jolson, 1927—food as symbol of clash between the “old world” and “the new”); Crossing Delancey (food as symbol of sex); Munich (food as symbol of home for both Palestinians and Israelis).

Kosher Hollywood: Jews, Food and Film (The Magnes Museum lecture)

Blackboard Assignment #7 Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, March 30th, 9am.
Week Eleven, March 31, Apr 2nd: The Materiality of the Jewish Life Cycle: The Tradition of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah in America

Readings:
Mark Oppenheimer, “Introduction,” and “Chapter 1 The Partyers” In Thirteen and a Day: The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Across America 2005. Pgs. 3-20, 21-52. CP


Film Clips: A Serious Man; Keeping Up With the Steins; Keeping the Faith; The Simpsons, “Today I am a Clown.” Frazier

Additional Reading on Jewish Life Cycle Rituals TBD

Blackboard Assignment #8: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, April 6th, 9am.

Week Twelve: April 7th-9th : Materializing the Rhythms of Jewish Life: The Ritual Arts of the Jewish Calendar
What is the relationship between material things and spiritual pursuits in Judaism, especially as these are tied to the weekly, monthly and yearly rhythms of Jewish life? How do objects point to or enable spiritual experiences as opposed to just providing aesthetic pleasure or fulfilling our desire to consume pretty things?

Readings:
Ken Kolton-Fromm, “Material Presence: Abraham Joshua Heschel” In Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America, Pgs. 141-180 CP


Excerpt from The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel (Blackboard).

Blackboard Assignment #9: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, April 13th, 9am.
Guest Speaker: Rabbi Neil Blumofe, April 9th

Student final Presentation Conferences this week. Sign up on sheet for timeslot

Week Thirteen, April 14th, 16th: Inscribing the Body: Jews and Tattoos
Can a tattoo express a Jewish identity, especially given the prohibition in the Torah against marking the human body which has been made in G-d’s image. “You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.” Lev. 19:28. Tattoos will be weighed against biblical and Talmudic injunctions, historical allusions (Jewish tattoos in relation to Holocaust victims) and cultural standards.

Readings:
Andy Abrams, “Kosher Ink: The Emerging World of Jews and Tattoos, IN Jewish Choices; Jewish Voices: Body, ed by Elliot Dorff, Pgs. 93-98 CP

Rebecca T. Alpert, “Lynn’s Tattoo”, IN Jewish Choices; Jewish Voices: Body, ed by Elliot Dorff, Pgs. 99-106 CP

Elliot Dorff, “Second Case Study: Tattoos: Questions, Traditional Jewish Sources; Contemporary Sources,” In Jewish Choices; Jewish Voices: Body, ed by Elliot Dorff, Pgs13-19 CP


Film: Tattoo Jew (documentary by Andy Abrams)

Guest Speakers: Jews with Tattoos

Blackboard Assignment #10: Answer Discussion Board question on Blackboard. Due date: Monday, April 20th, 9am.

Student final Presentation Conferences: T and Th 2-3

Week Fourteen, April 21-23: The Arts of Memory
Six million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust of WWII. Those who survived have spent a lifetime grappling with the painful memories of this horrific period of genocide in our history. Some survivors have harnessed the power of art to use these memories to create a transformative tale of hope, endurance and an unquenchable passion to bear witness. For those of us who
have come after, these beautiful and poignant renditions are some of the only things that stand between memory and forgetting. What is it about the power of the material gaze to define American Jewish identity in a post-Holocaust era?

Readings:


Film: Through the Eye of the Needle: Fabric of Survival

Week Fifteen, April 30: New Ways of Defining the Sacred Through Material Culture

Note: Tuesday’s class period will be a student research/day for final projects

Readings:
Norman Kleeblatt, “Passing into Multiculturalism” In *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. by Norman L. Kleeblatt, CP


Rabbi Susan Schnur with Anna Schnur-Fishman, “How Do Women Define the Sacred? In Lilith Magazine, Fall 2006. [http://www.lilith.org/pdfs/tallit_fall06.pdf](http://www.lilith.org/pdfs/tallit_fall06.pdf) (Blackboard)

Week Sixteen, May 5th, 7th.: Student Final Presentations.

Student final presentations will take place the last week of classes, as well as our classes’ designated three hour final exam period: Friday, May 15th, 2:00-5:00pm)

*May 15: 2:00-5:00pm Final Exam Time*
(All students must be present during this exam period unless they have made previous arrangements with the professor). Please do not schedule your trip home before our exam time!!!