American Jewish Material Culture and Museums
ANT 325L; JS 365; RS 346
T/TH 12:30-2:00; CLA 0.106
FALL 2017

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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, 1985

This upper level course explores the multiple ways in which Jews in America publically depict themselves — or are depicted by non-Jews — in American museums and other public institutions such as world’s fairs, archives, synagogues, and historic homes, now and over the past century. We will focus especially on the material culture — books, artifacts, architecture, ceremonial objects, jewelry, souvenirs, cookbooks, head coverings, sports memorabilia, and everyday household objects — through which these institutions and exhibitions tell stories and make meaning about Jews in America. Following material culture scholar, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, we will pose the question, “What does it mean to show?”— or, in this case, to show, “Jewishly?” Is there such a thing as a “Jewish Museum?” What—and who—are they for? Are they just a holding place for relics of the past? Do they perpetuate the idea that Jews are a vibrant, complex, but strange people that used to dwell amongst us, but don’t anymore?

We will take a look “behind the scenes” of these institutions to explore the powerful messages conveyed not only by the objects themselves but by the specific ways in which these objects are grouped, labeled, interpreted and displayed for a public audience— both Jewish and non-Jewish alike. What is the role of museums and other such institutions to define or construct the parameters of a people’s life, religion, civilization, history, or culture? Drawing from the fields of folklore, anthropology, American Studies, Jewish studies, religious studies, and museum studies, we will consider how makers,
owners, users, curators, collectors, and civic leaders re-create and re-negotiate new meanings for Jewish material culture objects, especially as they are carefully lifted from their originally intended contexts of prayer, celebration, memorialization, or commemoration, and re-purposed for a new life of education, entertainment, aesthetic enjoyment, performance, or exhibition in American museums and public institutions. This class includes field trips, guest speakers, and fieldwork-based research for a final class presentation.

**Course Objectives**

- Learn to identify, document, and analyze different expressions of American Jewish material culture
- Learn to identify, document and analyze distinct kinds of Jewish museums and exhibitions, and the stories they tell through their modes and methods of display.
- Become proficient in conducting original ethnographic research using fieldwork techniques of visual documentation, participant observation, and interviewing.
- Develop critical thinking skills and cultural analysis.
- Formulate and present original research in interpretive, analytical essays and multimedia projects, as well as in oral presentations.

**Required Readings**

We will be reading articles, essays, and excerpts from anthologies and ethnographies, as well as digital materials. You will find all of them uploaded to the MASTER Canvas website for our class, or listed by URL in the syllabus.

We also have one required book for the class. It is available for purchase at the University Coop on the Drag (Guadalupe Street):


It is essential to read all assigned books, articles, and digital materials in order to fully participate in class. Readings for the week are due before the Tuesday class session.

**Attendance**

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class. Students are expected to attend every class, arrive on time, and remain throughout the class session. This course includes special guest lectures, site visits and fieldwork trips, which are mandatory. Timely arrival is essential to avoid inconveniencing guest speakers, detracting from presentations, or disrupting trips. You are allowed one unexcused absence. Any additional absences will result in a deduction of 1 point from your final grade for participation. If an absence is anticipated, you must notify me prior to the class. In the event of emergency or serious illness, please contact me via email. Excused absences require a note from an official such as a doctor’s office, Dean, parent, or coach.
Classroom Environment
In this course we will cultivate an open and creative learning environment characterized by careful listening, critical thinking, curiosity, and respect. We will not discriminate against or criticize one another or others based on gender, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, or any other factor.

Personal Technology
I allow laptops and portable electronic devices in class as long as they are used for taking notes; however, phones must be turned off. I reserve the right to change this policy if misuse becomes a distraction.

Assessment
This course emphasizes student-driven learning through reading, discussion, written work, fieldwork research, and oral presentation. You are expected to complete all readings and projects, pose questions, and reflect critically on the issues they raise. You should come to class prepared to actively participate. Grades are based on attendance, class preparation and participation, weekly questions/comments (25%), one 4-5 page paper (15%), two written exhibit reviews (20%) a 2-page final project proposal (10%) and 10 page final paper/project and oral presentation (30%). All assignments must be completed on time. Late assignments will receive a reduced or failing grade unless you have received prior consent from me.

Assignments (details at the end of the syllabus)

1. Weekly reading, online posting, and class discussion (25%)
   You are responsible for posting a written reaction to the readings in the Discussion section on our Canvas site each week by 9pm, Monday evening. These postings will help guide our class discussions for the week. You should find freedom in your responses to react honestly, creatively, humorously, and thoughtfully to the week’s materials. Your posts may raise questions about a case study, take issue with authors’ arguments, make connections to contemporary cultural circumstances, and share individual reflections on the subject. But they must, first and foremost, reflect a critical understanding of the week’s readings by referencing the readings themselves. There will be a total of 13 posts. (no posts on Week 1 and Week 15). Your attendance and participation grades are rolled into this assignment grade as well. As you read the articles, consider the following questions:

   • What questions do these scholars raise?
   • What types of evidence do they use to investigate their questions?
   • What methods do they employ to analyze their evidence?
   • What conclusions do they try to draw?
Seriff, 2017
American Jewish Material Culture and Museums

2. **Object Biography** (15%) 4-5 pages – DUE WEEK 4
3. **Jewish Exhibit Reviews** (20%) two reviews, 3 pages each – DUE WEEK 9
4. **Class Exhibition Project** (40%) Installation – DUE WEEK 15

**Grading Policy:**

Final grades will be determined on the basis of the following plus/minus rubric. Please note: to ensure fairness, all numbers are absolute, and will not be rounded up or down at any stage. Thus a B- will be inclusive of all scores of 80.00 through 83.999. The University does not recognize the grade of A+.

A = 94-100; A- = 90-93; B+ = 87-89; B = 84-86; B- = 80-83; C+ = 77-79; C = 74-76; C- = 70-73; D+ = 67-69; D = 64-66; D- = 60-63; F= 0-60

**Due Dates and Late Work**

All written assignments are due in person during class on the date specified on the syllabus. An assignment turned in any time after the end of class on the due date will be considered late, and the grade will be adjusted. If you must miss class when an assignment is due, you must email me to make arrangements to turn it in as soon as possible. **It is your responsibility to keep a copy of each assignment in case the original is misplaced**; faculty are not responsible for missing assignments. There is no penalty for work not handed in when you have a legitimate and documented absence. If you feel that a grade is not appropriate, please make an appointment to discuss it with me.

**Grade of Incomplete**

A grade of Incomplete will only be given under justified circumstances. If such a circumstance arises, please contact me to discuss whether an incomplete can be granted.

**UNIVERSITY POLICIES:**

**Religious holy days:** A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.

**Students with Disabilities:** Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You may find out more information on the Services for Students with Disabilities website: [http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/](http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/) and/or [http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/how-to-register-with-ssd/](http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/how-to-register-with-ssd/)

**Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty:** Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. One such common, and often unintended,
form of scholastic dishonesty is plagiarism—using research without citations or using a created production without crediting a source. Since such dishonesty harms the individual, all students and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced. It is the student’s responsibility to be familiar with all of the rules on plagiarism and other forms of scholastic dishonesty. For further information, please visit the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity website at http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/.

Use of E-mail for Official Correspondence to Students: All students should be familiar with the University’s official e-mail student notification policy. It is the student’s responsibility to keep the University informed as to changes in his or her e-mail address. Students are expected to check e-mail on a frequent and regular basis in order to stay current with University-related communications, recognizing that certain communications may be time-critical. The complete text of this policy and instructions for updating your e-mail address are available at http://www.utexas.edu/its/policies/emailnotify.html.

University of Texas Honor Code: “As A Student Of The University Of Texas At Austin, I Shall Abide By The Core Values Of The University And Uphold Academic Integrity.”

WEEKS at a GLANCE

Week 1       Aug 31 – Introduction
Week 2       Sept. 5-7 – Jewish Objects and Their Biographies
Week 3       Sept. 12-14 – Classifying the (Jewish) Material World: Art/Artifact
Week 4       Sept. 19 – Collecting the (Jewish) Material World
             **Object Biographies Due**
             Fieldtrip: Home of Collectors, Phillip and Sylvia Spertus
Week 6       Oct. 3-5 – Jewish Ritual Objects-From Religious Use to Public Display
             Fieldtrip: Dell Jewish Community Center Campus. Synagogue Agudas Achim and B’Nai Abraham Synagogue
             **One Page Identification of Exhibits and Outline of Reviews Due**
             **Exhibit Reviews Due**
Week 10      Oct 31, Nov. 2 – Collecting the Holocaust
             Guest Speaker: Gregg Philipson
Week 11      Nov. 7-9 — Holocaust Museums on American Soil. Case Study: The
WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Introduction to Jewish Material Culture – Aug 31
What makes something “Jewish?” What do we mean by the term “material culture”? What do we mean by “Jewish Material Culture”?

Week 2 – Jewish Objects and Their Biographies – Sept 5-7
What makes an object “Jewish”? Aside from the significance of the objects themselves, what can we understand from the actions of the objects’ makers and users—how they eat, collect, arrange, wear, speak to, carry, kiss, or even bury their objects? How might the meaning or significance of an object change depending on its context? How are the sensual, physical, and bodily pleasures or practices of material life related to religious thought or to the rhythms of Jewish experience? How do Jews concretize their encounter with the Divine? What is behind the Jewish injunction against the worship of “things”? (Thou shalt have no idols before me).

For class: bring in an object of religious significance, or cultural significance to a religious group – it may, but does not have to, be a “Jewish” object

Readings:


**Week 3 – Classifying the (Jewish) Material World: Art / Artifact / Sacred Object– Sept 12-14**

**Readings:**


**Optional/Recommended Reading:**


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**Week 4 – Collecting the (Jewish) Material World – Sept 19**

**Readings:**


Elisabeth Kaplan. *We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity*. The American Archivist, vol 63, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 2000).

**Optional Reading:**


**Fieldtrip:** The home of Phil and Sylvia Spertus.

**ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE SEPT 19: OBJECT BIOGRAPHY**

**Note:** No Class, Thursday, Sept. 21; Jewish Holiday of Rosh Hashonah.

For next week, please come to class prepared to talk about possible topics for the exhibit project. Are you interested in a particular genre of Jewish material culture, a particular era or place, a traditional practice, or an overarching issue or question? How do you plan to find objects and their makers / users to work with?

**Week 5 – Displaying the (Jewish) Material World – Sept 26-28**

**Readings:**


**IN CLASS: Exhibit Planning Session I: Collecting / Field Research**

In preparation, please read:


Come prepared to share your suggestions for our group exhibition. We will consider each suggestion in relation to the following questions:

1) What is a research question that we could answer by exploring this topic in an exhibition format?
2) Could we answer this question satisfactorily using the time and space that we have?
3) Does this topic/question serve our course mission?
4) Who will care?

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**Week 6 – Jewish Ritual Objects: From Religious Use to Public Display — Oct 3-5**

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? What happens to these objects when a synagogue shuts its doors?

**Readings:**


**Fieldtrip Oct 3: Dell Jewish Community Center Campus: Agudas Achim Synagogue and B’nai Abraham Brenham Historic Synagogue**
Week 7 – Patriotism, Patronage, and Patrimony: The Rise of the “Jewish Exhibition/Museum Movement” in America — Oct. 10-12

Readings:


Optional Reading:


Week 8 – From Artifact to Audience: The “Identity Museum Movement” in Late 20th c America — Oct. 17

Readings:


Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Carl Grodach. Displaying and Celebrating the Other: Ethnographic Museums in Los Angeles. The Public Historian, vol 26, No. 4 (fall 2004). Pgs. 49-64 (Note: Pgs 64-71 are optional reading)


Oct 19:

Note: October 19th will be a “research” day for Exhibit Review Papers. We will not hold class in SAC. Selection and Outline of Exhibit Reviews Due electronically on Canvas by 9pm.


Readings:


Optional Reading:


Virtual Exhibit: VIEW new LESTM virtual exhibit: http://tenement.org/exhibit.php
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:

Edward T. Linenthal. Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum, Pgs. 1-167

Guest Speaker: Gregg Philipson, Collector, Holocaust-Related Material Culture

Week 11 – Holocaust Museums on American Soil: Promoting Tolerance in a Multicultural Society – Nov 7-9

Oral Fieldwork Reports in Class Today

Readings:


Week 12 – The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation: Is There a Limit to What Can/Should be Exhibited? – Nov. 14-16

Readings:


IN CLASS:
Today we will write first drafts of our exhibition text for our in-class workshop next week. We will also finalize the title.

** Prepare and finalize all research and exhibition materials as they are due after Thanksgiving. **

Week 13 – Jewish Souvenirs, Jewish Kitsch and Other Secret Obsessions– Nov 21

Readings:


Note: No class during Thanksgiving Holiday, Nov. 23

Week 14 – “Performing” Community: Challenging Stereotypes; Building Bridges: Re-examining American Jewish Material Culture and Museums for a Post-Modern World – Nov 28-30

ALL EXHIBIT MATERIALS DUE TODAY (objects, texts, media, fieldwork)

IN CLASS: Exhibit Planning Session III: Layout and Design

Today, Nov. 30, we workshop our exhibition labels and finalize all decisions concerning exhibition design.

Readings:


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


Week 15 – Class Exhibition – Dec 5-7

Dec 5: IN CLASS: Exhibit Planning Session IV: Installation!

Final drafts of all exhibition texts are due.

Dec 5: IN CLASS: Exhibit Planning Session IV: Installation!

Exhibition Open House; Walk Through and Evaluation

ASSIGNMENT DETAILS

1. Object Biography (15%) 4 pages – DUE WEEK 4

Object Biography: Each class participant will create a short object biography. An object biography is a description of the object from creation to consumption, and beyond. Feel free to think big and choose an object that holds fascination for you. The objects selected should pose special questions in relation to their “Jewishness.” You may select a ceremonial or ritual material, an everyday object used in food preparation or consumption, an object of decorative or visual arts, a multimedia installation or performance, including dance, an architecture or feature of the landscape, an item of clothing, or a food item. These biographical sketches will form the basis of your final paper / projects (end of the semester).

See examples of object biographies here:
- Southern Things: http://southernthings.web.unc.edu
2. Jewish Exhibit Reviews (15%) TWO 3-page essays – DUE WEEK 9

In TWO 3-page essays, you will analyze two museum exhibitions (from different institutions but both on Jewish topics) paying special attention to the “created environment” and how issues of culture, identity, art, and history are presented to the audience. What story is the curator trying to tell? What sources of evidence (e.g., objects, text, audiovisual materials, etc.) is the curator using to tell that story? How successful is the exhibit based on the criteria we’ve been discussing in class? Selection and Outline of Exhibit Reviews Due Week 8

Each review should be 3 pages long, double-spaced (not including map or other sketches). To write such a short but meaningful essay, you must be very precise and intentional about your language! How can you convey a great amount of information in so few words?

See an example of a published exhibition review here: http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/mar/article/view/18/28

Each review should include 1) a map / floor plan of the exhibition; 2) 3-page essay.

Map / Floor Plan

The map / floor plan should incorporate the following information:

- Layout of space and grouping or categories of objects within the space
- Placement of relevant objects / signage
- Entrance, exit, some idea of intended flow of movement

Essay

The essay should incorporate the following information or address the following questions:

- Briefly describe the institutional context of the museum: (What type of museum is it? Where is it located? How big is it? What are the other galleries in the museum like? Who is the intended visitor (age, gender, educational level, etc.) and what factors did you use to infer this?
- What are your immediate impressions of the “created environment” when you enter (cluttered, open, colorful, noisy, etc...think adjectives)?
- Describe the physical environment (humidity, temperature, darkness or lightness, general “feel” of the place, etc.)
• What is the show about?
• What is the main point of the exhibit?
• How is this main point conveyed to the viewer (through labels, objects, take-away printed text, etc.)?
• What kinds of objects are on display (general categories)? Describe a few specific objects you find particularly relevant, important, or revealing to the show’s purpose.
• In addition to objects or labels, what kinds of supporting materials are used (audio recordings, videos, photographs, maps, etc.)?
• How are the objects contextualized?
• What are the labels like? (negatives: too many, too few, too hard to see/read, too challenging, too simple, too boring; and positives: well organized, clear, interesting, etc.). What kinds of information are included? Notice and comment on the size of label copy, font, color, placement in relation to object, etc.
• How do the principles of conservation/preservation apply to this environment (you may have to infer this based on things you can see, e.g. filters over lights)?
• What questions does the display raise and leave unanswered?
• How are issues of religion, culture, and identity being addressed? Who and what is being represented in this exhibit? How are individuals and groups of people being presented and characterized? Do they have a “voice”?
• Whose perspective is primary to interpretation? Is there a single institutional viewpoint or multiple viewpoints apparent?
• No exhibit is perfect. What do you like and dislike about this exhibit? What do you think it does well? What do you think it does poorly?

3. Class Exhibition Project (40%)

Each student will contribute to a class-curated exhibit (to be discussed in depth in class). Throughout the semester, we will discuss issues related to determining exhibit topics and themes, conducting fieldwork, developing exhibition materials, writing label copy, and respectfully representing people and their cultural experiences.

Exhibit Timeline:

- Week 1 – 4: Consider possible and practical exhibition topics
- Week 5: As a class, determine topic, goals, and research agenda
- Week 6 – 10: Period of collection / research
- Week 11: As a class, determine plan for interpretation
- Week 12: Prepare text/media, follow-up with collaborators
- Week 13: Finalize installation design and materials
- Week 14 – 15: Installation
*ALL EXHIBITION MATERIALS* (detailed in class) *DUE WEEK 14.*

Our class exhibition will be displayed in the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies, CLA. We will have a luncheon reception for the exhibition opening from 12:30-2:00 on December 7th, 2017.