

E D U C A T I O N

SCHOOL GROUP SELF-GUIDE

ART OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Use this guide to prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



This guide will help you prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students. Use the links to the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, the curatorial department, and other areas on the Museum's website to access descriptions of works of art, thematic essays, and further relevant content.

Introduction

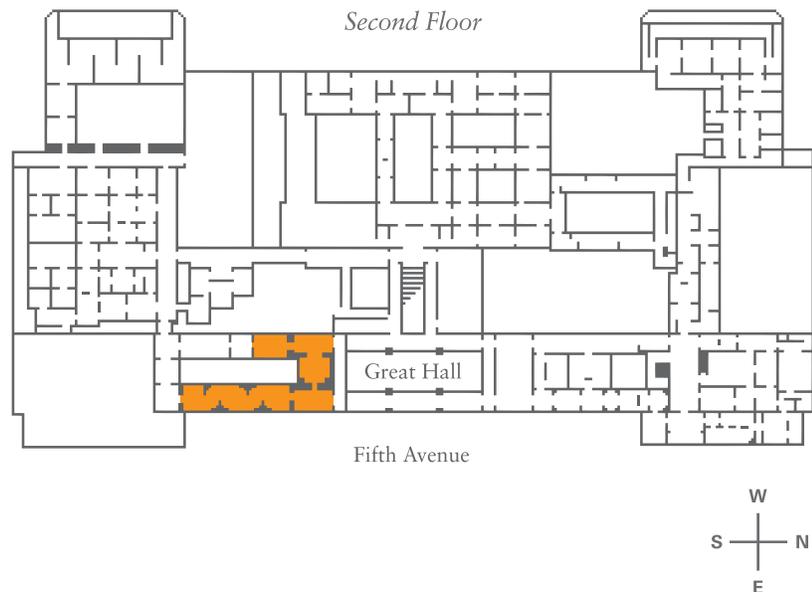
What we call the ancient Near East encompasses a vast and varied geographical area from Turkey to the Indus Valley of present-day Pakistan and from the Caucasus to the Arabian peninsula. It covers an equally vast time period between the first village settlements in the Neolithic period of the eighth millennium B.C. and the defeat of the Sasanian empire by the armies of the Islamic prophet Muhammad in the middle of the seventh century A.D. Many features of civilization—such as writing, urbanism, science, and metalworking, to name only a few—originated in these lands. Communities evolved from small villages of hunters, gatherers, and farmers into the first true cities in the fourth millennium B.C., particularly in Mesopotamia.

In its variety and diversity, the art of the ancient Near East reflects the rich and complex cultures that flourished there for thousands of years. One consistent aim of the art produced in the many cities, kingdoms, and empires of this region was to capture the relationship between the terrestrial and the divine. Much of this art was intended to communicate specific religious or political messages and was created for temples and palaces. Another primary function of the art was to glorify the ruler, whose roles included those of intermediary to the gods, builder of temples and palaces, hunter of powerful beasts, and victorious military leader.

Beyond its political and religious messages, the art of the ancient Near East is remarkable for the vivid depictions of animals, both real and supernatural; aesthetic choices such as the use of contrasting colored materials; and highly skilled and innovative craftsmanship, such as early developments in metalworking. This is not art for art's sake; ancient Near Eastern descriptions of exceptional works of art tended to focus on how expertly crafted these objects were, not on how inventive or creative in concept. Instead, images and objects were thought to be imbued with the actual life force of those they represented, and therefore able to function effectively on behalf of that deity, person, creature, or thing. This emphasis on the living image is crucial to the understanding of ancient Near Eastern art.

The Galleries

The galleries are on the second floor in the south wing of the Museum. Enter from the Great Hall balcony. The central gallery just off the balcony evokes a royal audience hall in the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud in present-day Iraq. The colossal gateway figures and stone reliefs of the king, his attendants, and protective winged figures are displayed here. Adjoining the Assyrian hall on the west side is a gallery displaying carved ivory furniture fragments excavated at Nimrud. On this side to the south, another gallery explores thematically the interconnections between ancient cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean and other regions including southwestern Arabia. The galleries on the east side are arranged chronologically, presenting works from Mesopotamia, Iran, Anatolia, Central Asia, Syria, the Levant, and the Indus Valley starting in the eighth millennium B.C. and ending in the early first millennium A.D.



Planning a Tour

When visiting the Metropolitan Museum with your students, prepare your tour with the following in mind:

- Less is more. Select five or six works of art to discuss over the course of an hour in the galleries.
- Choose works that are located away from doorways and areas that are heavily traversed by visitors.
- Include works that are visible to all students in your group for purposes of discussion and viewing.
- Make sure that there are enough chaperones in your group to divide the students into smaller groups for gallery discussions.
- While touring the galleries, please give priority to lecturers wearing Museum IDs who are guiding groups. If they are discussing a work that you would like your students to see, please select another work to view and discuss in the interim.

Please Note: *Although most of the suggested works in this guide will be on view when you visit the Museum, some gallery installations may be subject to change. We recommend that you use [Search the Collections](#) online or come to the Museum to verify that the objects you want to discuss are on display prior to bringing your group.*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's school tour program is made possible by the generosity of Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman.

Background and Themes to Consider

Use the following links to content on the Museum's website, which will help you prepare for your visit.

Asia Minor (Anatolia and the Caucasus), the Eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula

[West Asia, 8000–2000 B.C.](#)

[West Asia, 2000–1000 B.C.](#)

[West Asia, 1000 B.C.–1 A.D.](#)

[West Asia, 1–500 A.D.](#)

Gods and Supernatural Beings

[Mesopotamian Deities](#)

[The Gods and Goddesses of Canaan](#)

Communication, Writing, and Stories

[The Origins of Writing](#)

[Gilgamesh](#)

Recommendations for Engaging Students with Works of Art in the Galleries

- Allow your students to look closely at an object *before* beginning discussion. Give them time to take it in and organize their thoughts about the work.
- Begin with visual analysis. Ask questions and facilitate open discussion about the fundamentals of the work of art—line, shape, color, texture, form, subject matter, and composition. Challenge your students to articulate and describe what is right in front of their eyes.
- Build on their observations and help them consider an artist's choices when creating a work of art with a closer examination of composition, size, style, function, and medium.
- Finally, discuss when the work of art was created and how historic events, patronage, literature, science, or technology may have shaped or influenced its production.

Suggested Works of Art to Explore

Please note that titles, dates, and other object information on the website and on gallery signage may vary as the result of ongoing research.



Relief of King Ashurnasirpal II, Neo-Assyrian period, reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 883–859 B.C.

Excavated at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Mesopotamia

Gypsum; H. 92 1/4 in. (234.3 cm)

Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1932 (32.143.4)



Human-headed winged lion (*lamassu*), Neo-Assyrian period, reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 883–859 B.C.

Excavated at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Mesopotamia

Alabaster (Gypsum); H. 10 ft. 3 1/2 in. (313.7 cm)

Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1932 (32.143.2)



Figure of a tribute bearer, Neo-Assyrian period, 8th century B.C.

Excavated at Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Mesopotamia

Ivory; H. 5 5/16 in. (13.5 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1960 (60.145.11)



Kneeling bull holding a spouted vessel, Proto-Elamite period, 3100–2900 B.C.

Southwestern Iran

Silver; H. 6 3/8 in. (16.3 cm)

Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1966 (66.173)



Administrative tablet with cylinder seal impression of a male figure, hunting dogs, and boars, Jemdet Nasr period, 3100–2900 B.C.

Mesopotamia

Clay; H. 2 in. (5.3 cm)

Purchase, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gift, 1988 (1988.433.1)



Statue of Gudea, ca. 2090 B.C.

Probably Tello (ancient Girsu), southern Mesopotamia

Diorite; H. 17 3/8 in. (44 cm)

Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1959 (59.2)



Vessel stand with ibex support, Early Dynastic III period, 2600–2350 B.C.

Mesopotamia

Copper alloy, inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli; 15 3/4 x 9 1/4 x 9 7/16 in.
(40 x 23.5 x 23.9 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1974 (1974.190)



Standing male worshipper, Early Dynastic II period, 2750–2600 B.C.

Excavated at Tell Asmar (ancient Eshnunna), central Mesopotamia

Gypsum, shell, black limestone, bitumen; H. 11 5/8 in. (29.5 cm)

Fletcher Fund, 1940 (40.156)



Head of a ruler, Early Bronze Age, late 3rd millennium B.C.

Iran or Mesopotamia

Copper alloy; H. 13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1947 (47.100.80)



Cylinder seal and modern impression: royal worshipper before a god on a throne with bulls' legs, above human-headed bulls, Old Syrian period; 1820–1730 B.C.

Syria

Hematite; H. 13/16 in. (2 cm)

Purchase, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gift, 1991 (1991.368.5)



Shaft-hole axe head with bird-headed demon, boar, and dragon,

3rd–2nd millennium B.C.

Central Asia, Bactria-Margiana

Silver, gold foil; 5 7/8 in. (15 cm)

Purchase, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, and James N. Spear and Schimmel Foundation Inc. Gifts, 1982 (1982.5)



Panel with striding lion, Neo-Babylonian period, reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, 604–562 B.C.

Excavated at wall of Processional Way, Babylon, Mesopotamia

Glazed brick; H. 38 1/4 in. (97.2 cm)

Fletcher Fund, 1931 (31.13.2)



Vessel terminating in the forepart of a lionine creature, Achaemenid period,
5th century B.C.

Iran

Gold; H. 6.7 in. (17 cm)

Fletcher Fund, 1954 (54.3.3)



Head of a king, Sasanian period, 4th century

Iran

Gilded silver; H. 15 3/4 in. (40 cm)

Fletcher Fund, 1965 (65.126)

More on The Metropolitan Museum of Art Website

[Curatorial Departments: Ancient Near Eastern Art](#)
[Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)

Selected Resources

These and many more resources are available in Nolen Library in the Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education.

Aruz, Joan, ed., with Ronald Wallenfels. [*Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*](#). New York: MMA, 2003.

Aruz, Joan, Kim Benzel, and Jean M. Evans, eds. *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.* New York: MMA, 2008.

Benzel, Kim, Sarah B. Graff, Yelena Rakic, and Edith W. Watts. [*Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators*](#). New York: MMA, 2010.

Frankfort, Henri. *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996 (rev. ed.).

Roaf, Michael. *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.