

## **“It Belongs in a Museum!”: Treasure-Hunting Academics, Museums, and Public History**

### **Course Proposal for FWIS 217**

**Instructor:** Emily Lampert, PhD Candidate, History Department

According to the American imagination, archaeologists often carry whips, historians sometimes steal priceless documents—only to keep them safe, of course—and, occasionally, researchers might accidentally unleash an ancient curse (it happens to the best of us). The adventuring academic is a common trope in American film. Indeed, whether it’s Harrison Ford in 1981 or Sandra Bullock in 2022, the American public loves watching scholars traipse through jungles while searching for lost treasures. But what do these tropes tell the public about the practice of history? Must public history always be destructive in the name of preservation? Is archaeology always extractive? Do all lost treasures and ancient artifacts “belong in a museum,” to quote the great Indiana Jones? And, most importantly, who does history belong to?

In this course, students will be asked to analyze pop culture materials, largely films, that reference public history; this may include references to historians, archaeologists, museums, and artifacts. Through this analysis, students will gain a better understanding of the actual duties and responsibilities associated with being a public historian, archaeologist, or museum curator—in other words, they will become better acquainted with the realities of history making. Against the backdrop of films such as *The Mummy* and *National Treasure*, students will confront common tropes and myths about adventuring academics and the role of the museum in those adventures. Using these materials, students will enter into major debates in the field of public history, such as academia and “discovery,” the history and purpose of the museum, and ethical quandaries regarding repatriation, reparations, and global heritage.

In addition to the films listed below, this class will also employ two works of fiction to discuss aspects of history making that Hollywood often leaves out. Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* will be used to spark larger class discussions about the role of the archive in historical work, the archive as a manmade creation, and what gets left out of the history books. On the other hand, Danielle Evans’s novel, *The Office of Historical Corrections*, will open up discussions about revisional history and the role of the “truth” in history making. Through discussions of Hollywood films, well-known plays, and newly written novels, students will continually reevaluate what they think they know about history and history makers, separating fact from fiction.

### **Content-Related Course Goals:**

In this course,

- Students will learn to identify common myths and tropes present in pop culture about public history, especially popularly held ideas about historians and archaeologists, the museum and artifact collection, and repatriation. Students will also understand why such myths exist, why

they are so persistent, and why and when they can either be harmful or helpful to ongoing repatriation efforts.

- Students will understand the role of the museum in public history and the history of the museum itself.
- Students will gain an understanding of the ongoing scholarly debates about the ethical considerations and responsibilities of museums and repatriation efforts. They will also be able to engage in scholarly debate about who history belongs to.

### **Sample Assignments:**

#### *Sample Essay #1 (Contextualization and Description)*

For this first essay, students will be asked to visit a museum in Houston. I will provide students a list of free-entry museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts, the Houston Museum of Natural Science, and the Menil Collection, though students may visit others provided they email me in advance. During their visit, they should look out for an object that they find particularly interesting and be sure to take pictures of it. This is the basis of their paper. In a short, 2–4-page essay, they will identify their object, identify its provenance if possible, and give a brief historical contextualization of the object. If they cannot find specific information about their particular object, they can broaden it to similar objects (i.e., if they cannot find specific information on a specific plate from the Qin dynasty, they can broaden their contextualization to sources about any or all plates from the Qin dynasty). Students must also include why they chose this particular object. Finally, students should spend at least a third of their paper describing the object to their reader. What colors are present? What shape is it? Does it appear rough, smooth? How large is it? If you were to use it for its intended purpose, what would that experience feel like? Do we have a modern equivalent today, and if yes does it resemble that modern version? Does the object provoke any emotional response? Is it beautiful? Ugly? Why, and how so?

This paper is essentially a short, creative entry into academic writing. Being able to effectively describe an object is a basic but foundational skill that will translate to their ability to describe more abstract and difficult concepts as well as their own logic. They will build upon this in later argumentative writing. Students will have an in-class peer review session before the assignment is due, during which they should have a full but rough draft of their descriptive paper. During this session, they will both give and receive constructive criticism about their writing, especially their ability to effectively describe their objects. Students should also include their photos of the object with the rough draft and in the version they turn in. Additionally, students have the option of revising the paper and turning in an updated draft within two weeks, granted that they meet with me to discuss the original draft and comments—this goes for all writing assignments they turn in throughout the semester.

#### *Oral Presentation #1*

This oral presentation builds off of their descriptive essay. Students will prepare a 5–7-minute presentation that mirrors their paper with a visual element (so that we can see the object).

Presentations should focus on the contextualization portion of their paper, address why they found the object interesting and chose it, and the intended purpose/use of the object. Students should also point out the key elements of their description, including color, texture, aesthetics, and potential feelings attached to it.

### *Sample Essay #2 (Argumentative)*

In a 4–5-page, thesis-driven essay, students must address the following question: “is all public history, in some sense, destructive?” This question necessarily arises from many of the movies we will discuss as a class (students will watch movies outside of class); in nearly every single academic adventure seen on screen, “discovery” goes hand in hand with destruction, be that of ancient temples, eighteenth-century lost ships, or simply the nature around them. However, there are also instances of actual public history that, during an effort to preserve or acquire artifacts, the site itself was damaged. Students may answer this question in any way they choose, provided they can support it using materials from class and at least *one* outside academic source, such as an article from an academic journal, chapter from an anthology, or historical monograph.

This paper is designed to teach students how to craft an argumentative thesis. Because of this, students will bring a physical copy of their thesis and introduction to class for peer review roughly one week before the paper is due. This paper also works to introduce students to academic research and scholarly sources, especially since their next paper requires more substantial research. The class before the essay is due, students must turn in a brief, roughly 150-word summary of their chosen outside academic source; like an entry in an annotated bibliography, this should include a brief summary of the source’s main argument and why it is useful for the student’s paper. Again, students have the option of revising the paper and turning in an updated draft, provided they meet with me to discuss the original draft and comments. Seeing as this is their first argument-heavy assignment, students are also highly encouraged to visit the CAPC before their essay is due.

### *Sample Essay #3 (Podcast Script)*

For this essay, students will get to experiment with another style of writing by producing a 5–7-page podcast script. First, students will choose from a selection of contentious museum holdings (for example, the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles). Students will then research the history of these holdings, why exactly they are considered contentious, and what different parties argue should be done with them. This research will form the majority of their podcast script—essentially, they are planning a podcast episode in which they explain the history of an object and its provenance, break down the debate surrounding the object, and finally give their own opinion on what should be done and why. Because this is a larger project in terms of research, students will have multiple small “checkpoints” to complete along with way. These include small group discussions of their research progress, outlines of their scripts, and a peer review session for drafts of their scripts.

This assignment is essentially a creative introduction to writing a research paper. The podcast format also stresses the importance of clear and succinct writing and emphasizes the importance of audience awareness. As always, students will have the option of revising the paper

and turning in an updated draft, provided that the meet with me to discuss the original draft and comments.

### *Oral Presentation #2*

Instead of presenting their scripts in front of the class, students will record their podcasts. Before they are due, I will have a colleague who is a professional podcast producer visit our class and discuss the basics of audio etiquette. However, because of time and resource restraints students will simply record on either their phones or a computer. After students turn in their recordings, they will be assigned another student's podcast to listen to and give substantial feedback on using a rubric. While this is an exercise in effective oral communication, it is also another chance for them to work on their ability to give positive and constructive criticism.

### Sample Essay #4 (*Compare and Contrast*)

For their final essay, students will choose two films, at least one of which is from the class, and compare and contrast them to support an original thesis. In addition to the two films they are discussing, students will also be asked to support their arguments using scholarly sources, at least one of which must be from outside the class readings. Students will meet with me individually in advance to discuss their chosen films and what they plan to argue. There will also be several stages of peer review; students will be asked to bring their thesis and introduction to class, and then a full outline. Students will have the chance to revise and resubmit their papers after meeting with me to discuss comments and feedback.

## **Example Readings**

### Academic Books and Articles

- Cherstin Lyon, Elizabeth Nix, and Rebecca Shrum, *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* (selections) (2017)
- Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (selections) (2016)
- Susan Sleeper Smith, *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives* (selections) (2009)
- Alice Procter, *The Whole Picture: The Colonial Story of the Art in our Museums & Why We Need to Talk About It* (2020)
- Anne Pyburn, "Public Archaeology, Indiana Jones, and Honesty" (2008)
- Liv Nilsson Stutz, "Archaeology, Identity, and the Right to Culture: Anthropological Perspectives on Repatriation" (2021)

### Novels and Plays

- Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993)
- Danielle Evans, *The Office of Historical Corrections* (2020)

### Films

- *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

- *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984)
- *The Mummy* (1999)
- *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001)
- *The Rundown* (2003)
- *National Treasure* (2004)
- *Night at the Museum* (2006)
- *The Monuments Men* (2014)
- *The Lost City of Z* (2016)
- *Jungle Cruise* (2021)
- *The Lost City* (2022)
- *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023)