

Analyzing Images of Culture

Overview

How are cultures represented by the images we see on TV, in the newspaper, in museums, on the Internet, and even in restaurants? How do these images shape our perceptions of other cultures? These are important questions to ask when learning about others. When we analyze images from newspapers, magazines, and other sources we realize that images of other cultures tend to have stereotypes embedded in them. This activity sensitizes students to the ways in which cultural perceptions are constructed through images. Students will analyze images, determine what information is being selected to represent a culture, and reflect on the reasons why. Students will realize that images are snapshots—moments frozen in time—and might not present how people truly live today. When representing certain cultures, modern day elements are often left out; why? What are some cultures that are represented in this way?

Concepts

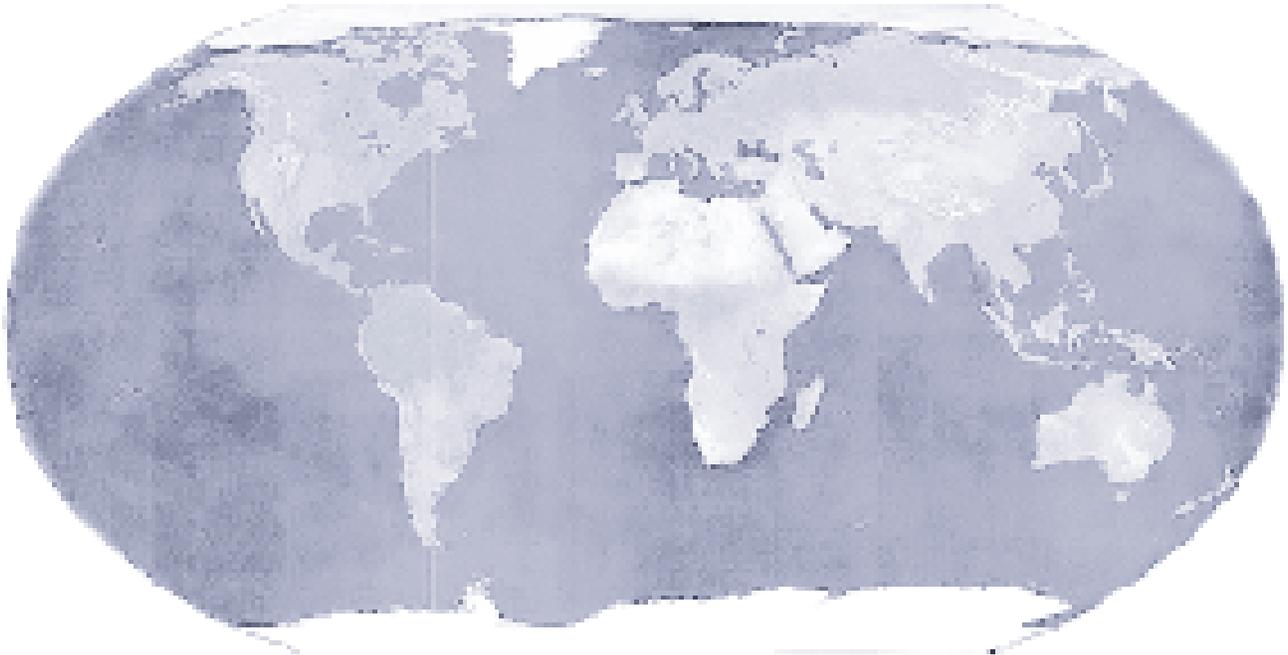
Cultural images, stereotypes, traditions, bias, point of view, cultural perceptions, observation, analysis, recognizing different points of view.

Objectives

- ▶ Observe and analyze cultural images to determine what information has been selected to depict which cultural aspects, and why.
- ▶ Determine which elements and/or stereotypes of different cultures are being portrayed, and how they might affect our perceptions of that culture.
- ▶ Detect bias, slant, and point of view in cultural images.
- ▶ Determine how cultures may have been affected by outside influences.
- ▶ Be able to ask critical questions about images, such as, What is the source, the context, the point of view? What information is missing that would provide a fair and balanced point of view?

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Standards and Assessment

Standards

The materials in this unit are closely correlated to the National Science Education Standards, Standards for the English Language Arts, and Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. A listing of the standards follows. A check mark indicates the standards that are addressed.

Assessment

This unit provides tasks that can be used to assess students' understanding of the information presented. Use the following questions to assess each student's reasoning, responses, understanding, and interaction.

- How well did the student use his or her observation skills?
- How well did the student demonstrate an understanding of the information provided?
- How well did the student communicate the observations he or she made?
- How well did the student explain concepts and ideas to other students?
- Was the student able to use evidence to support his or her conclusions?
- How well did the student complete the tasks outlined?
- How well did the student participate in all aspects of cooperative work?

<h1>National Science Education Standards</h1> <p>National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment, National Research Council</p>		<p>GRADES 5–8</p>
<p>Science as Inquiry</p>		
<p>Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry</p>		✓
<p>Understanding about scientific inquiry</p>		✓
<p>Science in Personal and Social Perspectives</p>		
<p>Populations, resources, and environments</p>		
<p>Science and technology in society</p>		
<p>History and Nature of Science</p>		
<p>Science as a human endeavor</p>		✓
<p>Nature of science</p>		
<h1>Standards for the English Language Arts</h1> <p>National Council of Teachers of English</p>		<p>GRADES 5–8</p>
<p>Students read to build an understanding of texts, themselves, and the cultures of the United States and the world.</p>		✓
<p>Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.</p>		
<p>Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.</p>		
<p>Students employ a wide range of writing strategies to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.</p>		
<p>Students apply knowledge of language structure, conventions, and figurative language to create, critique, and discuss texts.</p>		
<p>Students conduct research; generate ideas and questions and pose problems; gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources; communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.</p>		✓
<p>Students use a variety of technological and information resources to gather and synthesize information.</p>		
<p>Students develop a respect for diversity in language use.</p>		

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

GRADES 5–8

continued

Culture and Cultural Diversity	
Compare similarities and differences in the ways cultures meet human needs and concerns.	✓
Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people of diverse cultural perspectives.	✓
Explain and give examples of how language, literature, the arts, architecture, other artifacts, traditions, beliefs, values and behaviors contribute to the development and transmission of culture.	
Explain why individuals and groups respond differently to their physical and social environments and or changes to them on the basis of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs.	✓
Time, Continuity, and Change	
Demonstrate an understanding that different scholars may describe the same event or situation in different ways but must provide reasons or evidence for their views.	✓
Identify and use key concepts such as chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity.	
People, Places, and Environments	
Elaborate mental maps of locales, regions, and the world that demonstrate understanding of relative location, direction, size and shape.	
Create, interpret, use, and distinguish various representations of the Earth, such as maps, globes, and photographs.	
Use appropriate resources, data sources, and geographic tools such as aerial photographs, satellite images, geographic information systems (GIS), map projects, and cartography to generate, manipulate, and interpret information such as atlases, data bases, grid systems, charts, graphs, and more.	
Locate and describe varying landforms and geographic features, such as mountains, plateaus, islands, rain forests, deserts, and oceans, and explain their relationship within the ecosystem.	
Describe physical system changes such as seasons, climate and weather, and the water cycle and identify geographic patterns associated with them.	
Describe how people create places that reflect cultural values and ideals as they build neighborhoods, parks, shopping centers, and the like.	✓
Examine, interpret, and analyze physical and cultural patterns and their interactions, such as land use, settlement patterns, cultural transmission of customs and ideas, and ecosystem changes.	

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

GRADES 5–8

continued

Describe ways that historical events have been influenced by, and have influenced, physical and human geographic factors in local, regional, national, and global settings.	
Observe and speculate about social and economic effects of environmental changes and crises resulting from phenomena such as floods, storms, and drought.	
Individual Development and Identity	
Describe personal connections to place – as associated with community, nation, and the world	
Describe the ways family, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and institutional affiliations contribute to personal identity.	
Identify and describe ways regional, ethnic, and national cultures influence individuals' daily lives.	
Individuals, Groups, and Institutions	
Demonstrate an understanding of concepts such as role, status, and social class in describing the interactions of individuals and social groups.	
Analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture.	
Production, Distribution, and Consumption	
Give and explain examples of ways that economic systems structure choices about how goods and services are to be produced and distributed.	
Describe the role of specialization and exchange in the economic process.	
Explain and illustrate how values and beliefs influence different economic decisions.	
Science, Technology, and Society	
Examine and describe the influence of culture on scientific and technological choices and advancement, such as in transportation, medicine, and warfare.	
Show through specific examples how science and technology have changed people's perceptions of the social and natural world, such as in their relationship to the land, animal life, family life, and economic needs, wants, and security.	
Seek reasonable and ethical solutions to problems that arise when scientific advancements and social norms or values come into conflict.	
Global Connections	
Describe instances in which language, art, music, belief systems, and other cultural elements can facilitate global understanding or cause misunderstanding.	
Explore causes, consequences, and possible solutions to persistent, contemporary, and emerging global issues, such as health, security, resource allocation, economic development, and environmental quality.	

Teacher Strategies

MATERIALS

Provide or have students collect images of people and their surroundings from various cultures. Look for images in *National Geographic*, *Natural History*, or other magazines that report on cultural issues. Consider using images found in travel magazines or in the media, like the *Discovery Channel*, or on the Internet.

PROCEDURE

1. Have students choose an image to analyze, either in groups or independently.
2. Ask students to look carefully at their image and think about the different ways in which the person or culture is represented in that image. Have them analyze the image as if it were a diorama. Guide students' observations by asking questions suited to their age level, such as the following:
 - ~ *Where was the picture taken?*
 - ~ *What are the people wearing?*
 - ~ *What is happening in the picture?*
 - ~ *What, if anything, is surprising about the picture?*
 - ~ *How does the image make you feel?*
 - ~ *What do you see in the background?*
 - ~ *What is the most noticeable feature of the picture?*

3. Lead a class discussion. What did the students observe? Are there similarities from image to image in how cultures are represented? For example, are people portrayed doing similar kinds of activities, with similar kinds of landscapes? How many of the cultures depicted appear as traditional and untouched by outside influences? Encourage students to think about the world in which they live. Do they think there are places where certain people live in isolation? Many cultures that appear to live in remote conditions have access to certain modern materials through trade and travel. Why do students think some images portray individuals and cultures as not being modern even when they have some of the same objects that we have? Does this affect the way we think about those people?

Note: You can use the image of the Bedouin Tent diorama from the American Museum of Natural History and ask students the same questions.

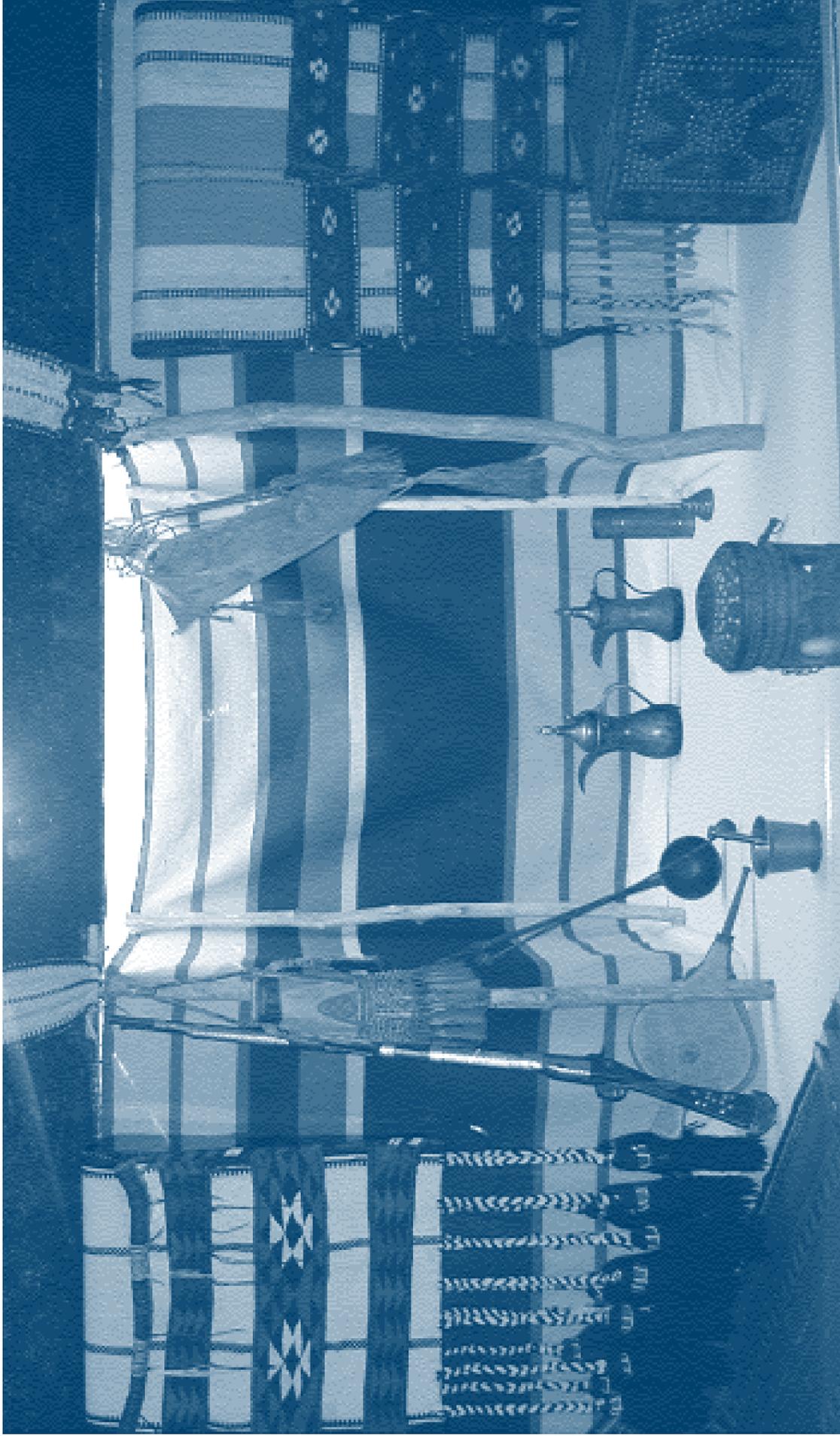
NEXT STEPS

1. Continue the discussion. Explain to students that these images are a kind of snapshot. Depending on the photographer—journalist, member of the culture, or artist—the image may be biased. Ask students to do research on the Internet, in magazines, or in the paper to find images that provide another story—a different perspective from the one in the image they analyzed. Compare and contrast the two images noticing similarities and differences. Consider using the following questions to guide the analysis or discussion.

- ~ *Who took the picture?*
- ~ *What is the purpose of the picture?*
- ~ *Where did you get the picture?*

2. Bring in current events magazines and study images of other cultures, such as Middle Eastern or Central or South Asian groups. Ask students what images they have seen of these groups of people. What aspects of Muslim or Arab culture are being represented? What is not being depicted? How has this shaped what we think about Muslims, Arabs, or Afghans? Students will soon discover that the media images of these groups of people tend to focus on the sensational, the violent, and the picturesque, rather than on daily life. They leave little room for depicting the diversity within these groups. These images, for example, often perpetuate the stereotype that “Muslims” are identifiable by their head covering. If students saw an image of a man in a suit, on a busy New York street, would they say he is Muslim? Why? Why not?

MIDDLE EASTERN & CENTRAL ASIAN CULTURES
Analyzing Images of Culture



Photograph of diorama of the Bedouin Tent from the Hall of Asian Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History.

