

# The Challenge of the Reliquary : Some Thoughts on Teaching “ Area Studies: Europe ” in a Japanese University

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# The Challenge of the Reliquary. Some Thoughts on Teaching “Area Studies: Europe” in a Japanese University

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## Abstract

In this article, I introduce a class called “Area Studies: Europe (A History of Europe in 13 objects)” that I have been teaching in Kansai Gaidai University. I present its key concepts (object biography, invention of tradition) and the tasks assigned to students (writing short essays, writing sets of questions, drawing, creating time-lines, ...).

**Keywords:** Content class, object biography, invention of tradition, Europe, Area Studies

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I would like to present a class I have been teaching these last two years in Kansai Gaidai University. It is my hope that the reader will forgive my impressionistic nature in these pages and find here ideas about teaching a content class in English in a Japanese university. The course is called “Area Studies: Europe” ; it is independently taught by several teachers: it is offered in Japanese or in English. Most of the students who registered in English-speaking classes are highly motivated and confident in their English ability, but some of them are there not because of any interest in English or in Europe, but because of schedule constrictions. Student opinion about their level of English is not always accurate. In addition, some students, because of their family history, are better English speakers than this teacher, who happens to be a native French speaker. Thus, a wide range of English abilities can be observed in the classroom. For this reason, I imposed the following language rules to the class: students can freely use Japanese among themselves to do the activities proposed to them in English, but the result of their discussions and efforts must be conveyed in English to the teacher. All written communication (assignments and tests) must be submitted in English.

## 2. Schedule and enrollment

Classes are composed of ten to thirty-five students. They meet twice a week for a term of 15 weeks and a written examination session. Most of the students are first year students, but 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students have also attended the class, which changed students' interactions on a few occasions.

## 3. Course objectives

According to the instructions I received, the class should be taught in English and be about Europe; it is primarily addressed to 1<sup>st</sup> year students. This information leaves many open questions to the teachers as they are preparing their classes: What is the class for? What are its objectives? What might be interesting to the students? How can it be helpful for their future life and career?

To this teacher, because of the widespread use of mobile phones connected to the internet and the existence of informative websites like Wikipedia, it seems clear that providing information cannot be the main objective of the class. Further, using Internet everyday does not necessarily teach the critical assessment and evaluation of information, nor how to link and establish new connections between ideas and facts. Moreover, to go against the flow and the quick pace of internet available information, I wanted to try and teach students to stop, pause and take time to observe something and develop their own opinion on a specific item by connecting it to other objects and their European context as well as by linking it to the students' own culture and background.

For these reasons, I have started elaborating a class based on the concept of object biography, that would allow different objects to tell their stories about Europe, that would transform some objects into teachers of European studies by enabling students to observe them and ponder their use, meaning, origins and future. The long span of an object life, from the quest to get its constituent material and the inspiration to its makers to its first use, its reuse, its posterity and its final study now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century allows students to explore transversally and sociologically the cultures of its makers and of its observers (On "object biography" , see Appadurai 1986, Gosden-Marshall 1999, Pitt-Rivers 2013).

#### 4. Textbook and other material

While I was pondering about what to do with the class, chance struck with the venue in Kobe of a British Museum organized travelling exhibition, “The History of the World in 100 objects”, and I decided to use its Japanese catalogue as a textbook (大英博物館展：100のモノが語る世界の歴史 2015). I selected 13 objects of European provenance to be treated individually and separately each week of the term, leaving the first and last weeks for introduction and wrap-up discussion and conclusion. Some students have objected to using a book about 100 objects from all around the world to study only thirteen objects from Europe, but I find that this decision has two important merits: first, it teaches that Europe cannot be separated from the rest of the world (like any country or region on earth contrary to what the organization of history classes in Japanese high schools, where national history and world history are separate, seems to indicate); second, it encourages comparative studies and connections to be made as often as possible in the class between European and non-European objects. Moreover, it is the hope of this teacher that students will keep this reasonably priced beautiful book after the end of the class, and that it will not know the sad destiny of most university textbooks, one of immediate discard at the semester’s end.

The textbook is in Japanese, but it is an adaptation of English material (MacGregor 2012), and it has kept many of its original features, which comes in handy for use in an English-speaking class in a Japanese university. However, its main advantage lies in the multiple supplementary materials readily available on line. The British Museum exhibition was a follow up of a successful radio series on BBC 4 channel (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/>). The BBC website keeps one hundred podcasts archived, each with a written transcription and other supplementary material (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nrtd2/episodes/downloads>). It is also possible to acquire a CD set. This oral material might be an interesting tool for teachers. The official British Museum website also provides an impressive quantity of material, particularly useful for objects that were selected for the Kobe exhibition but were not part of the original BBC radio series and consequent British Museum exhibition ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_world.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx)).

Finally, Wikipedia contributors have created a remarkable page on this cultural event, enriched by many images available in open access on Wikimedia Commons, which makes the task of the teacher easy and frees her mind of any legal question related to the copyright of images used inside the classroom ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_World\\_](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_History_of_the_World_)

in\_100\_Objects).

## 5. Assignments

Each week students receive an assignment related to the object they will study. It consists of drawing the object, of writing in English a short commentary and of imagining 5 questions related to this object.

### a) Writing 5 questions

Before writing their assignment, students need to read their Japanese textbook's notice about the object they study that specific week. Then they need to imagine five original questions that cannot be answered in reading the notice. They will ask these questions during a group activity to other students, who will try to answer them. At the end of the task, each group must select the five most interesting questions (out of twenty) in their group and submit them to the teacher, who might use them for the next lesson in the week.

With this exercise, students are encouraged to think out of the box, independently, and go beyond the information they are provided with.

### b) Writing a short commentary

Students are asked to write in English a very short essay of 70 words minimum about the object of the week. They are encouraged to separate clearly the essay part and the questions part of their assignment, and to be personal and creative. Some of my students would simply summarize in English what they read in Japanese, which is a good start for the lesson, while others would be more adventurous and personal, drawing comparisons with their own life or knowledge acquired before the class.

The teacher does not correct mistakes and, as this is not a language class, students get credit for submitting their essay if the teacher understands what they mean and word length requirements are met.

### c) Drawing

The most original part of the assignment is a drawing. Students must look at the picture of the object of the week in their textbook and draw a sketch on a B5 sheet of paper. If students are first reluctant or afraid of this task, it quickly becomes their favorite part of the homework. At the beginning of the term, their mind is promptly put at ease by the exhibition of drawings made by the professor, who has not much talent to brag about in this domain. This is not an art class, and again as soon as students submit their drawing they

receive credit for their grade if the drawing fulfills size requirements and if the teacher can recognize the drawn object (for instance, for a Greek statue, checking that the student has not drawn a generic statue but that she has observed and depicted the specific statue used for the class) (Teachers who would like to develop this aspect of the course might find interesting the following books: Brunetti 2011, Barry 2014).

The purpose of the exercise is to train students in carefully observing and for a minimum period of time on something they might at first find not interesting. The drawing procedure is also and most importantly a tool for starting a conversation among students.

The professor has established a routine for the first class of the week. The first five minutes, students are asked to have a free discussion and show their drawing. They can use and read their assignment if they wish. Groups are made of 4 or 5 students. Each teacher should use the group management techniques she likes. After this free moment, for classes of more than 12 students, I give students a written set of questions they need to collectively answer in writing. Half of these questions are the same each week (for instance “What do you like in your partners’ drawings?” , “What do you find interesting with this object?” ), and half of the questions change according to the object of the week and will help the teacher to instruct his lesson. Eventually, each group needs to select out of twenty questions they wrote in their assignment the five most stimulating or interesting questions. As they fill in this questionnaire, the teacher walks around the class and tries to stimulate discussion and interaction among students.

## 6. Object biographies and time lines

One of the purposes of the class is trying to make students think about history and memory, and about the presence and relevance of the past in present times. The concept of object biography is useful for this purpose. I will use as an example here one of the objects in the class for whom a long timeline can be established. Although this object, the “Reliquary of St Eustace” was not part of the original BBC series and British Museum exhibition, the wealth of information available on the British Museum website made the exercise possible, as well as the availability of many images free of copyrights on Wikimedia Commons.

### [Illustration 1]

One important lesson of this exercise is to make students realize that they are now part of the biography of this medieval European object based on the legendary life of a Roman soldier, that their English class in a Japanese university, made possible because of the

sheer existence of the internet, is a good illustration of globalization and its unexpected consequences.

This object also allows for a good introduction to the tumultuous history of religions in Europe and to modern religious practices like processions, which can be compared to Japanese matsuri. Despite a first reaction of disgust by students to the function of the reliquary and the mention of human remains, the object showed itself to be an interesting bridge between 21<sup>st</sup> century Japanese students and the Roman Empire, or Greek art.

The fact that the British Museum sent back to Basel cathedral the relics (bones fragments) that had been kept in the reliquary and discovered only after a thorough cleaning in 1956 also offers a good opportunity to discuss afresh the case of the Elgin marbles, antiquities trade and museum acquisition policies all around the world (the case of the Miho Museum in Shiga was also discussed in relation with a lesson about a coin depicting Alexander the Great).

## 7. Invention of tradition

Object biographies and time lines are also interesting tools to convey the concept of “invention of tradition”, a useful way to teach critical thinking (Hobsbawm-Ranger 1983). By observing how objects’ use and meaning change through time, students can learn about the use of history by politicians, merchants or movie directors.

Two objects in the course are particularly effective in this regard: a metope from the Parthenon is used to introduce the different meanings the word “democracy” can adopt, and a counterfeit soccer club shirt serves as an introduction to the history of sports and the public use of sports and leisure.

## 8. Blogs and Wikipedia

All material shown in the class is made available on a blog (<http://nakamiyaeurope.blogspot.jp/>), as well as supplementary material like news articles or videos. Statistics provided by the blog platform show that students use this blog only for revising a few days before the mid-term and the final test.

As Wikipedia, particularly Wikimedia Commons, is an important resource for the course, I try and devote one or two classes to explain how Wikipedia works and the main

characteristics of the electronic encyclopedia and I encourage students to use it critically. I also organize some short exercise to make students modify and improve Wikipedia, to create and add original content to the encyclopedia:

- by writing Japanese captions for images available on Wikimedia Commons (a simple addition of information, but potentially useful for Japanese key word searches on Google or other search engines)
- by creating new Japanese articles on the Japanese version of the encyclopedia in relation with the objects studied in the class. This exercise introduces students to the practices of writing an introductory summary and of using footnotes. The articles created are rather short, but students are legitimately proud of their achievement, and it is a highly motivating task for them (See for instance the articles [アレクサンドロスの顔が刻まれた硬貨](#) or [聖エウスタキウスの聖遺物容器](#)).

I do not have place here to elaborate on this part of the class, but I would like to mention the problem caused by the difference in the way the professor and the students access the internet. As a proud owner of an old, “galakei style” mobile phone, I exclusively use computers or tablets to access Wikipedia or the blog platform, while students use almost exclusively their smartphones. If ever I were to develop further this part of the class, this technological gap would be an important point to consider, and would require adaptation.

## 9. Problems with the course

The course is not without its problems, and there is place for much improvement. The first complaint students express is that it is difficult. Of course, this is not an original or unknown hurdle to most teachers in the world, and its causes are manifold: lectures in a foreign language, preliminary knowledge shared unequally among students, use of concepts unheard of by students, the busy social and working schedules of students, the limitations of the teachers. Some of these causes are out of the professor’s reach for improvement, but much work can be done to explain better contents and concepts of the class, and I am making efforts to clarify the course lines and listening to students’ suggestions for better communication.

The main difficulty of the class lies in its isolation within the curriculum, which might sometimes lead to students becoming demotivated. Again, I try to better convey that the methods and concepts learned for one course can be useful for the rest of their curriculum



and for their personal development. Dialogue between students and teachers is an absolute necessity to overcome this issue.

Another difficulty is more linked to the content and organization of the course, and it will require some more thought and preparation: the issue of scale. As they are focusing too much on individual objects, sometimes, the students and the professor get lost in unimportant details and forget about the general character of the course, which should remain a general introduction to Europe. The fight to keep a balance between vague generalities and hyperdetailed explanation is sometimes lost.

Eventually it should be possible to address more women's issues and teaching more about women history by offering another selection of objects to present in class. Further thought must be taken as how the objects selected for the class might represent the totality of humanity.

## 10. Conclusion

Teaching "Area Studies: Europe" in Kansai Gaidai is extremely rewarding for the teacher despite its difficulties and challenges. It leads to interesting discussions with students; it allows for a great deal of learning and improvement for the teacher. It is my hope that I will be able to keep teaching this class and improve on both its contents and methods.

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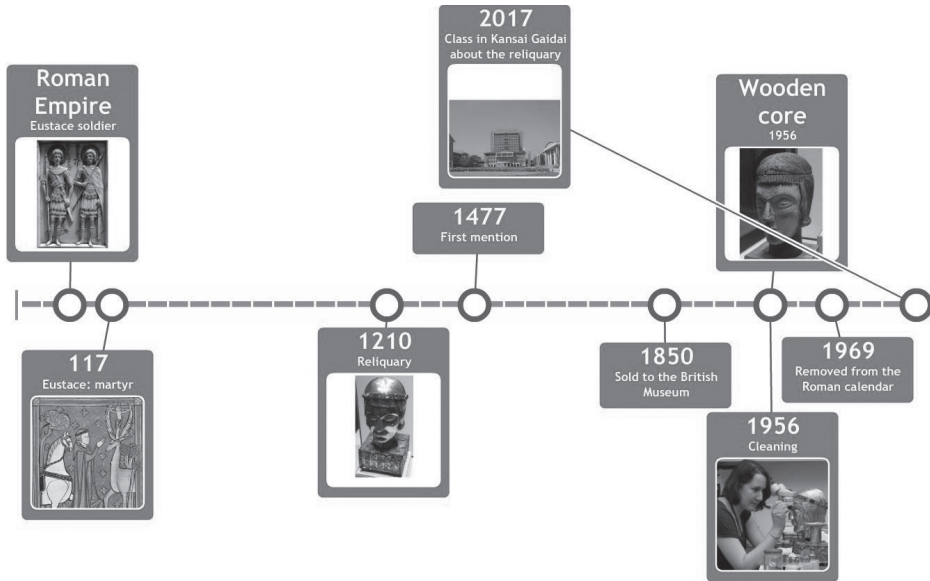
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## Appendix 1: Objects studied in the course Area Studies: Europe

Objects	Suggestions for discussions about contemporary issues
1. Minoan Bull leaper	Bull fighting in Europe
2. Gold coin of Croesus	The Euro currency
3. Parthenon sculptures	Ancient and modern democracy
4. Coin with the head of Alexander	Art traffic and criminality
5. Head of Augustus	Political propaganda
6. Hoxne pepper pot	Dietary changes in Europe
7. Lewis chessmen	Scottish separatism; Brexit
8. Hebrew astrolabe	Antisemitism in Europe
9. Reliquary of St Eustace	Religions in Europe
10. Manilas	Slave trade and compensations
11. Suffragette defaced penny	Feminism
12. Russian revolutionary plate	Communism and post-communist Europe
13. Counterfeit football shirt	Sports and globalization

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Illustration 1



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