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Saving History by Using Professor-Museum Partnerships

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Abstract: This paper argues for more professorial engagement with middle school Social Studies and History courses as a way to reanimate the discipline of history and increase the number of history majors. The paper then describes one method, the in-school museum exhibit/presentation or reverse field trip, and gives details of one such exhibit delivered to 6th graders in the required Social Studies course “Contemporary World Societies.” The exhibit featured a series of objects, and discussed the cultural and historical significance of these items from India, Vietnam, and Mexico. These countries were selected because they drive Texas’s recent foreign-born population, while at the same time, giving students the opportunity to learn about the immigrant settlement process. Students also participate in engaging hands-on activities. In addition to describing the exhibits and what students learn, the article suggests that these exhibits have the potential to increase students’ cultural empathy, historical consciousness, and may even work to recruit students to study history.

“Saving History” offers one solution to reanimating the field of history. The field continues to experience unprecedented declines in numbers of undergraduate history majors—a 33% drop in ten years. By some estimates, history majors have hit an all-time low (Bessner, 2023).

Distinguished historians Hal Brands and Francis Gavin warned the profession is “committing slow-motion suicide” by failing to engage the public (Brands & Gavin, 2018). And Jill Lepore, the historian who first sounded the alarm

around this dangerous trend, placed blame squarely on the shoulders of academic historians in bringing about this “peril” because of their “retreat... from public life” (as cited in Goldstein, 2018 para 1). To reverse these dire numbers and give the field a fighting chance to stay relevant, historians must find effective solutions. One obvious strategy is to find allies or partners of interest. One such potential partner already exists: museums. Because museums have not experienced the same slide in public perception that universities

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rhave, they are essential partners in combatting history's fall. There is more trust in museums than any other institution for learning history, according to the authors of *Teaching History with Museums* (Marcus et al., 2011, p.8). Historians can extend their reach and authority while at the same time enhancing history learning for students of all ages with these partnerships. These partnerships are more necessary now than ever because if we want to stop the hemorrhaging of history majors, we must begin by engaging the public at large.

To be sure, recent efforts have been made to reverse this trend. For example, one important intervention has been the advent of Public History. Often dubbed "usable history" or "applied history" this academic field that was partially created to attract more students to the study of history (Weyeneth, 2013). Growth is limited, however. While public history programs have been established at more than 200 universities and colleges in both the United States and Canada, these programs still lag behind traditional history programs by more than 7 to 1 (Weyeneth, para 3). Even with this clearly defined career path, Public History programs cannot promise graduates will find employment. Public history programs face an uphill battle and despite the best intentions, the intervention of this subfield has not been enough to save history. The question remains, what can be done?

The quickest and most effective way forward is to connect college professors with museums. The idea is to make

museum concepts central to what ordinary non-public historians do. This partnership between museums and academic historians has the potential to benefit both. Where many museums are chronically understaffed, underfunded, and underutilized, academic historians could connect the institutions to staffing options, fund raising contacts, and potential visitors. Museums can capitalize on professor's access to college students and on the professor's knowledge base. More significantly, the partnership harnesses museums' authority, public esteem, and established reach. It also feeds academic historians' deep desire to share their knowledge and skills beyond scholarly publications and campus classrooms. The partnership can be a connection between town and gown, between the college and the surrounding community. For this partnership to succeed—especially when it comes to matters of Tenure and Promotion—professors (and the colleges they work for) must see this work as service. By working in museum outreach programs, professors serve the profession and the community simultaneously.

A key facet of existing museum outreach is centered on local schools, so professors must be prepared to work closely with area schools. The most pressing grades will be those in middle school, the years when, surveys show, many students begin actively disliking history (Strauss 2017). This is where history gets its reputation as a stuffy subject with little bearing on the world around middle-school students. If done right, this partnership could intercede at a critical moment,

establishing perceptions of the potential relevance to student's lives, preempting misperceptions of irrelevance before students' dislike of history becomes far too ingrained to combat. This approach is particularly important for middle-school students in Texas, where many teachers of history do not have a degree in history but instead degrees in Physical Education. In the Lone Star State, the perceived wisdom is that "anyone can teach history as long as you stay ahead of students in the textbook" (Ravitch, 2003 para 5).

Saving history from this attitude and from the state policies that perpetuate this attitude is possible. Middle school students are able to engage with history at a much more sophisticated level than previously thought, once it's approached in a less academic, more public-facing way. Rather than rote memorization and matching dates and events, students as young as elementary age can begin to ask questions, consider multiple perspectives, and create their own counterfactuals or thought experiments. Studies conducted among primary and middle school students show 6-12 year-olds can engage in "complex reasoning about the subject" (Barton & Levstick, 2004 p. 13).

As middle school students are now thought to grapple with differing perspectives and to analyze and understand historical nuance, professors can connect to these younger students without radically changing our approach. We must remember how consequential learning history is to a person's development. In addition to honing critical thinking skills and research

and analytical skills, history has been shown to increase levels of empathy and feelings of emotional connectedness. These feelings have been diminishing amongst college and younger students for over a generation now (Bryner, 2010). Studying history can act as an antidote to trends of social alienation. As historian Claire Bond Potter put it, "the study of history helps us become more human—developing empathy and compassion as we learn to understand not only our own past but the pasts of people unlike us whose lives and futures are tangled up with our own" (Potter n.d., final paragraph).

The field of history has often relied on others to spread the message of its importance (Brands & Gavin, 2018). We also rely on informal uses of history. In fact, people engage informally with history all the time when they log on to Ancestry.com or give an account of the onset of a recent illness at a doctor's office (Rosenweig & Thelen, 1998). However, these historical pursuits are not directly moving the needle upwards in the number of history majors.

The museum-professor partnership has a good chance to move the needle in a field which has seen the lowest number of majors in almost 75 years (Townsend, 2021). Only the few universities which have moved fully online with their programs are seeing a rise in history majors (Townsend, 2021). While the state of the history majors may seem a distant issue from middle school students' enjoyment of history, to ensure the continuing vitality of the field, the two issues must be addressed together. Similar

to how school districts have begun to grow and nourish their next generation of public school teachers with their “grow your own [teacher]” historians must begin actively cultivating their heirs (Jones, 2018). Seeding the next generation of historians is essential to “saving history.”

One way to ensure this happens is to take students to historical museums and historic sites as part of field trips. Field trips allow students to engage in what these sites and places do best: Highlighting historical perspectives, encouraging historical role playing, and learning outside the classroom. As authors John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking note in their widely referenced article “Recalling the Museum Experience” (1995) adults when questioned about their childhood field trips remember these museum visits with great clarity and vivid detail. A recent study conducted by researchers at Brigham Young University, Johns Hopkins University, and the Heritage Foundation measured the impact of the field trips on student learning and the results clearly showed that there was a measurable increase in test scores, in the quality of classroom assignments submitted by students, and an increase in student cultural sensitivity (Erickson et al., 2022). And yet, many school districts around the country have cut funding for school trips to museums and historic sites in an effort to save money (Bouchrika, 2023). Even before the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic, school districts deprioritized school field trips (Polochanin, 2008). While museums have retained the public trust to speak to teachers, parents, and students alike, the

students and their chaperones no longer enter these hallowed doors at the same pace they once did. And while correlation does not imply causation, the precipitous drop in field trips along with the steady decline in history majors across the United States may well reveal a cyclical pattern, given more study.

The fact is, just when we need the convergence of museums with students, they are further apart physically than they’ve ever been. To address this disconnect, museum staff have developed virtual museums and exhibits. These began with online galleries of exhibit materials as well as images of artifacts accompanied by text. As technological capabilities emerged, more robust virtual spaces with 3D tours of physical exhibit spaces and audio features appeared. Depending on the multimedia budgets at museums, these virtual museum visits can “provide an authentic historical inquiry for students that challenges them to consider competing perspectives and interpretations...” (Marcus et al., 2011 p. 168). While these virtual spaces provide opportunities to engage with museum resources for many students who would otherwise not “attend,” they are no replacement (Nespor, 2000).

Few studies have been conducted comparing online versus physical field trips. One such study offers intriguing evidence that virtual trips do provide learning opportunities, but they still fall short when compared to the “real” field trips. In M.C. R. Harrington’s study (2009), a small sample of students explored a local nature preserve in two

separate trips, one virtual and one physical. Using a number of data points as well as self-reporting, students stated that they enjoyed the virtual field trip more but felt they learned and retained more from the “real” field trip. The researcher concluded that, because all five senses were engaged and the physical trip allowed for “spontaneous” events to unfold, students encountered more and remembered more. Other anecdotal reports indicate similar sentiment when comparing online versus in-person schooling.

To provide a middle ground between virtual and “real” field trips, many museums now offer a third approach: outreach programs. With this strategy, sometimes called traveling museums, or reverse field trips, the museum travels rather than the students. By bringing their exhibits and museum collections (physical objects) to students at their campuses, the museums give students time with the objects. This approach also addresses the principle problem school districts have with field trips: cost. With a traveling museum, the school does not have to pay buses to transport students and their chaperones. The purpose of these traveling museums is to mimic as best as the museum staff and volunteers can the atmosphere and educational opportunities offered when students visit the physical building and interact with exhibits and objects in proximity. As detailed in *Teaching History with Museums*, (Marcus, et al., 2011) outreach programs offer a number of advantages including no-to-low cost, scheduling with content and curriculum objectives, and alignment with

curriculum standards. For instance, in Texas highlighting TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) standards and content would make exhibits more attractive to school districts and Social Studies teachers, who have countless standards to meet. Teachers are essential allies to university professors in the fight to save history. Teachers also trust museums and, according to scholars Marcus, et al., (2011, p.8), view the institutions as “repositories of authentic objects.”

And as the authors of *Teaching History with Museums* (Marcus et al., 2011 p. 8) point out: “[t]he power of the ‘real’ in instilling simultaneously a sense of awe about, and a connection to, the past cannot be underestimated.” Viewing authentic objects enhances the experience of history for students and teachers; interacting with those objects creates an even more powerful bond. These in-school exhibits offer students boundless opportunities for hands-on activities with the objects. Research has shown those experiences increase student retention and enjoyment of a field trip’s exhibition (Pace and Tesi, 2004). Objects that allow for hands-on activities are especially good at eliciting learning in students. A study conducted by Pace and Tesi (2004) showed a variety of both educational and social impacts on the participants when hands-on activities accompanied field trips. A whole host of benefits were seen when students participated in activities that included manipulating, touching, or engaging with an exhibition piece on a field trip, including helping students recall information learned at the excursion.

Another study states that hands-on activities and learning “help students improve their observational skills, develop an affinity for art and culture, and be more engaged in their studies” (Bouchrika, 2023, para 50).

To support this kind of hands-on learning in the local schools, the Denton County Office of History and Culture, which is in charge of the local museum, has dubbed its in-school program the “Traveling Museum.” Denton’s Traveling Museum focuses on Denton, North Texas, and the West more generally. The choices in programming by the museum curatorial staff show an awareness and effort to transcend the main challenges with an outreach program: creating a first impression of relevance. For instance, the Cattle Drive exhibit that features the Chisolm Trail that ran right through Denton. Another exhibit, the “Transcontinental Railroad” in addition to examining national railroad development also included decommissioned railroad spikes from rail lines in Denton. Similarly, the Native Americans of Texas exhibit highlights the history of archeological findings in Denton including the Clovis people. These exhibits are presented in a way that instantly engages students by emphasizing how history surrounds them. The exhibits build on this initial engagement to draw student attention to the crucial connections of local history.

The newest Denton Traveling Museum exhibit called “Contemporary Cultures of Texas” elucidates the history and heritage of some of the largest groups of first-

generation migrants currently in the state. No one living in Texas over the last few decades could miss the changing demographics of the state’s population. Even keen observers of contemporary Texas are surprised by the raw statistics: 1 in 6 Texas residents is an immigrant (American Immigration Council, 2020) or put another way, 17.2% residents were born overseas. In Denton County, the numbers reflect the state-wide trend with 15.6% of residents hailing from abroad (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Unsurprisingly, 51% of those born overseas come from Mexico while 6% are from India, and another 4% from Vietnam. These three nations have sent some of the largest groups of new immigrants to Texas.

The state of Texas has attracted immigrant groups since its inception, including Germans, Czechs, and Poles as well as sizable numbers of Eastern European Jews during the early years (Jordan, 1969).

Immigrants from Western Europe including Irish and English were other early white settlers in Texas. But Asians, especially from Japan, also worked as rice farmers along the Gulf Coast from the 19th century onwards (Floyd, n.d). The Old West image of Texas as an Anglo/white place perpetuated by our state’s mythology eludes this diversity. Modern Texas was developed by multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial ranch hands, townspeople, and church founders.

By focusing on the cultural legacies of contemporary immigrants rather than nineteenth century immigrants, the

“Contemporary Cultures of Texas” exhibit’s objective was to open students’ eyes to the social population changes happening all around them. The main purpose of the traveling exhibit was to showcase Texas as an increasingly international and globally connected place, drawing students’ attention to the fact that history is unfolding right before their very eyes. These 6th graders were challenged to think historically and culturally about the world around them (Thorp 2020; Popa 2021).

The primary objective of “Contemporary Culture of Texas” was to showcase how the contributions of diverse cultures from Mexico, India, and Vietnam impacted the diversity of Texas. To meet that objective, topics such as food ways, architecture, immigrant-gathering places, traditional clothing, and cross-cultural influences were emphasized. To make sure the exhibit featured many hands-on activities and demonstrations that gave students’ opportunities to taste, smell, examine, touch, and hear – engaging all five senses – I selected a variety of physical objects. Finally, the exhibit showcased the many cross-cultural connections that exist between local, state, and global communities.

Beyond these cultural connections, the exhibit sought to awaken students to the fact that some of their very own classmates eat lunch with, and play videogames with are (along with the artifacts and stories) living, breathing cultural repositories of these far-off places. People and the objects they use are essential to keeping culture practices

alive and have the ability to engage us because of what they symbolize and how they are used, especially if their cultural significance has changed. To help students gain a sense of this change, the history of these artifacts, the ancient as well as the contemporary, were featured.

Objects have the power to connect us in a direct manner to other times and places. Using objects from a particular time and culture provides a unique way to engage with a place and people at a particular juncture. The key features of these objects, which included traditional Indian saris and colored rangoli rice, Mexican cochineal beetles and piñatas, and Vietnamese palm leaf hats, were discussed including the origins, original use, and current use. In some cases there was no change between today’s use and the past, while for others, the use was very different. This is a key feature of history —understanding and interpreting change over time. Finally, these objects were selected to tell many stories that were meant to surprise and ignite students’ excitement (and curiosity). Ultimately, the wish was that all students would retain a greater appreciation for the rich cultural heritage beyond the Old West myths of Texas. And, for those students recently settled in Texas, the exhibit could foster a sense of belonging.

Will outreach programs like “Contemporary Cultures of Texas” move the needle? Assessing the short-term benefits of the museum-professor partnerships should be clear: teachers scheduling these outreach programs for their students. Professors returning to the

middle school campuses. Students requesting more presentations. As for the long term, these too will be obvious: more history majors. For both short term and long term reasons, academic historians must cultivate these partnerships to do what they can to “save history.”

“Contemporary Cultures of Texas” took place in the school library. To facilitate the mood of a museum, library lights were dimmed to give a sense of what a real museum might feel like. Because middle school students have multiple classes each day, the presentation was delivered multiple times to different classes. A power-point presentation, a pull-down screen, and the library’s chairs placed in a theatre seating format, and objects placed on the bookshelves enhanced the exhibit.

Because the focal point of the presentation was the objects, these were front and center. Each presentation began with a map of the country followed by statistics including population, type of government, recent fun facts including women’s political roles, economic outlooks, and some features of the geography and climate of the country. Because of space constraints what follows is an abbreviated script of the presentations. There are YouTube videos of these presentations. To view these, please contact the author for the authorization code.

Mexico

The first object is thought to have been harvested in Mexico’s central valley for over four thousand years. [Point to a map of Mexico with the central valley highlighted including Mexico City.] Here

is a tiny jar of it (cochineal). Please pass this around and examine it closely. You can touch the contents inside. As the jar was passed around I asked: Has anyone ever heard of cochineal? Let’s take a look and see if we can guess what it is.

[The jar was passed around and several students proposed guesses, including peppercorns, seeds, or dirt] Once everyone sees the jar and its contents, flip to a slide that shows an image of the male and female cochineal. And as the same moment, I said, “it is a tiny jar of bugs.”

Figure 1.

Jar of Cochineal



Cochineal, you might be surprised to learn is an insect that feeds on cacti. You might remember seeing white dust on a cactus. Well, that is the nest for the female cochineal and where she raises her young. It acts as a protectant of the cochineal insect from predators since the female cochineal never leaves the cactus because she is wingless. “Many of you may have this very type of cacti in your yard, or in your neighborhood. And you may well have seen the female cochineal’s nest. If you see a white dust or white looking milky substance on a nopales, then you are seeing the protective cover t

he female creates for her young.”[Again, more gasps of recognition.] “You may even see red streaks on the nopales leaf if the nest had been disturbed.”

Then the question was asked, “Does it surprise you all to learn that this insect is the central ingredient in making the intense bright red in this rug?”

Figure 2.
Oaxaca Rug



This is an Oaxaca rug that is dyed with cochineal. The insect eats the red cactus berries and this color collects in their bodies making them bright red. This is not unique to cochineal; the color of their food changing their appearance. This similar process occurs in flamingos as well. This red also protects the female from predators because the red color acts as a warning—stay away because I am not a tasty treat! Monarch butterflies also use their color as a warning to predators. The cochineal processes the cacti into a carminic acid which is poisonous in large amounts.

Cochineal are incredibly finicky to cultivate and harvest. For these tiny creatures the conditions must be just right. Cultivating the cochineal requires the right cacti, dry conditions, and an understanding of the numbers necessary to

produce a reasonable amount of dye. On average it takes 80,000 to 100,000 cochineal to make a pound of dye. By 1770, at the peak of the trade, Mexico was exporting some half a million kilos a year of cochineal and was the only major producer and supplier of the dye. Despite the efforts by other Europeans, Mexican authorities were able to maintain their hold over the cochineal industry throughout the colonial era.

But by the 19th century, Mexico’s monopoly over the cultivation had disappeared. Other Latin American countries had begun their own successful industries, including Guatemala and Peru. Competition also developed when synthetic red dyes derived from petroleum and coal bases, appeared. These two developments almost eradicated the cochineal industry in Mexico and elsewhere in favor of synthetic dyes.

Fast-forward to today and you might be surprised to learn that cochineal is still widely used. Anyone want to guess where you will find cochineal today? You might be surprised to learn that cochineal was a widely used ingredient in food and drinks and was used only to add color to these items. It is often listed on labels as carmine, E120, natural red dye, carminic acid, and also just simply as cochineal. Starbucks’ Coffee was in trouble for using it without its customers knowing about ten years ago. While they phased its use out, other companies have not. So the next time you eat a strawberry yogurt, drink strawberry milk, spread raspberry or strawberry jam on your toast, purchase a pink pastry, look at the label

and see whether you see one of these listed. More than likely you are ingesting cochineal, an insect that was first cultivated and harvested in Mexico thousands of years ago.

Now, moving onto our next object of interest. This one might be familiar to most of you---you've probably either hit one or attempted to hit one at a birthday party—a piñata. Piñatas as we know them, are colorful decorated figures made out of paper mâché that are hung by string and filled with candies and other treats, and are most often associated with Mexico but in fact, scholars have uncovered that these birthday party staples may have originated in China and found their way to Mexico via Italy and Spain. The explorer Marco Polo reported seeing Chinese individuals hitting objects that sound almost exactly like what we would today call piñatas. Although other scholars have argued that the Aztec had a similar tradition of a decorated clay pot disguised with colorful feathers that was broken by a stick to celebrate the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli's birthday in December. When broken open, the contents inside would be an offering to the god, one of the two most powerful gods in the Aztec pantheon - the god of sun and of war: Huitzilopochtli.

When the Spanish first arrived in Mexico, they were desperate to convert the native cultures of Mexico to Catholicism and Spanish religious leaders of the time noted the similarities of the Aztec Huitzilopochtli's celebration to their piñata tradition that had become central to Easter celebrations in Italy. Catholicism, throughout its history, has absorbed pagan

traditions and rebranded them in the name of the Christian god – for example, the Roman cult of the vestal virgin was transmuted into the Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary. So it was with the piñata. In Europe, the piñata was a feature of the Catholic celebration of Easter. Understanding how to subvert and make use of this Aztec tradition, Catholic priests and friars began to use a piñata to explain the church's teachings about the devil weaving the two traditions together into a new assimilation. The idea was that the piñata symbolized evil or the devil and that once the piñata broke, evil had been overcome and the world was rewarded with many blessings, as evident with the scattering of the treats. You can see here a statue from Acolman, Mexico of a priest hitting a 7 pointed piñata commemorating this event.

Figure 3.

Statue of a priest hitting a piñata



Eventually, the star-shaped piñata with the 7 points or cones embodying the 7 deadly sins to be overcome, became widespread and closely associated with Christmas.

You can now find piñatas of all shapes at national chain stores through the United States and Mexico. Although traditionally, piñatas were made within families and created at home. Originally, they were produced out of clay pots but this later changed to paper mâché. And now more and more families and communities purchase piñatas rather than making them. Despite the fact that pots are easier to break since they do not swing as much as the lighter paper mâché, paper has become the main material. In Mexico, there are entire towns where most of the residents dedicate themselves to manufacturing piñatas to sell. Acolman, Otumba, and San Juan de la Puerta (areas around Mexico City) produce tens of thousands of piñatas each year. Star-shaped piñatas continue to be the most popular shape, but the tradition of birthday piñatas has pushed the industry to expand their creations to popular Hollywood figures. You are as likely to see piñatas at birthday celebrations as during traditional Christmas celebrations. The fun of hitting these treat-filled creations only grows. The next time you have the opportunity to break open a piñata, remember you are participating in a historical event!

The next tradition we will discuss is most often associated with Mexico, but is actually celebrated throughout Latin America – and that is Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. The dates for this celebration are November 1st and 2nd, which coincide with All Saints Day and All Souls Day. (Like the piñata and the Virgin Mary, these days were adaptations made by the Catholic church, in this case of pagan harvest festivals.) Like

Halloween, the Day of the Dead's roots are religious. The celebration honors the dead and celebrates life, following the agrarian calendar of harvest time. November 2nd is the day where families go and visit the gravesites of family members or close friends. During the visit, they often maintain the grave site by cleaning the gravestones and pulling weeds. Families also bring favorite foods to share with the deceased and add fresh flowers, most often marigolds. Marigolds in the Mexican belief system guide the spirit of the dead back to visit the land of the living by the strong scent emitted by these flowers and their bright colors. In addition, the family will bring photographs of the dead to display at the gravesite.

For families and friends who cannot return to the grave, the altar, or ofrenda, is another way to pay tribute and honor their dead ancestors. These altars are usually composed of 3 different levels representing: at the highest level, the sacred space; the middle level represents the earth; and the bottom level is the underworld. More elaborate altars can be made- up making seven different levels but the most common is the three-leveled altar. Altars can be created inside private homes or outside in public spaces to be shared with the community as shown here. Denton celebrates Day of the Dead by creating a public altar. Papel picado, colorful paper that represents wind as the paper catches the wind. An effort is made to represent the four elements: water, wind, earth, and fire.

Butterflies can also be prominent on the

Denton Day of the Dead ofrenda.

Figure 4.

Denton Day of the Dead Ofrenda



Monarch butterflies hold great meaning in Mexico as they symbolize the souls of the departed and their rebirth. As part of its Day of the Dead celebration, Denton releases monarch butterflies in what is called the Flight of the Souls Ceremony. Migration south to Mexico of hundreds of thousands of monarchs coincide with the day of the Dead.

You might be familiar with the holiday because of the Disney/Pixar film *Coco* where Miguel, a young Mexican boy, ventures on a journey into the land of the dead to solve some family discord. This movie was inspired by the Day of the Dead ritual of honoring and remembering the dead. Although it turns the concept topsy-turvy since Miguel, a living breathing boy, intercedes in the land of the dead whereas in the traditional Day of the Dead, it is the dead who are called upon to intercede for the living.

To recap, we've examined the three cultural objects from Mexico that may be

encountered on a daily basis with what you eat or drink, at birthday parties, and if you venture to Denton Square in late October or early November.

India

Because more than 7% of all new residents to Denton County are from India and a similar proportion of first – generation Texan migrants hail from the subcontinent, this country features as one of the state's important contemporary cultures. Beginning in the 1990s, when U.S. laws around work visas began to loosen, the Indian population grew. By the year 2000, the population had more than doubled, and, today, Texas hosts the second largest Indian population of any state in the United States.

Texas also hosts one of the largest celebrations of the Indian fall festival called Diwali, which is a festival of lights. You will hear this pronounced with a 'w' and a 'v'. Diwali is a religious holiday celebrated across India and South Asia by Hindus and those of other faiths, including Jains and Sikhs. The word 'Diwali' derives from Sanskrit and means "a row of lights." Festivities include the illumination of lights, candles, firecrackers, and diya (clay lamps) to symbolize the victory of good over evil, inner light over spiritual darkness, and knowledge over ignorance. Diwali is a time for gathering with loved ones, celebrating life, and committing to making the right decisions in life. The largest celebration in the United States is located in the Cotton Bowl stadium in Dallas.

Many individual families celebrate by lighting small oil lamps outside their home to signify their inner light. They also create rangolis.

Figure 5.
Rangolis



These geometric patterns, religious symbols and floral designs are drawn on the floor of one's home, often using chalk and colorful powders, as well as other materials such as beans, rice, stones, colored sand, and flower petals. Today, we will be using colored rice.

Rangoli images are used to ward off evil spirits and welcome the good faith of gods and goddesses. The word "rangoli" is derived from the Sanskrit (India's ancient language) word "rangavalli" and roughly translates to "rows of colors," a fitting image for Diwali's message of light conquering darkness. Rangoli are made on the floor often near to the entrance of a house to invite goddess Lakshmi to enter. For some, it is a way to honor Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune.

Texas also hosts the largest celebration of Holi [pronounced holy], known as the Hindu festival of color. It is a celebration of the arrival of spring. Holi celebrations

start with a bonfire and prayers. The next morning is when the colors become center stage. People smear each other with colors and then drench each other with water from water guns and water-filled balloons. Anyone and everyone is fair game, friend or stranger, rich or poor, man or woman, children, and elders. The frolicking with colors occurs in the open streets, parks, outside temples and buildings. It is celebrated every year on the day after the full moon in early March.

A brief overview of India including the language, religions, and recent past follows. India's two most commonly spoken languages are Hindi and English but there are more than 22 official languages and over 121 other languages spoken. Like its languages, Indians follow many religious practices. The most popular are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, and Sikhism. India was a colony until 1947 and was important in the building of the British Empire for a century or more. The population of India itself is vast, at more than 1.3 billion people and has recently surpassed China in population. While geographically it is about one third the size of the United States, India has four times the number of people living in it. Because of its size, it is hard to narrow down all of the traditions and customs in such a large and populated place. Nevertheless, the exhibit highlights the objects most commonly associated with India and explains their significance. These include the Indian flag and its colors and symbolism; as well as the history that surrounds its adoption as a flag; the charkha [pronounced char-kuh] a traditional spinning wheel; the traditional

clothing from India, including the sari which is worn by females and the dhoti worn by males. We will end with a study of mehndi, Indian henna which is commonly associated with weddings and festivities.

Our first object will be the Indian flag. In general, flags of countries can tell us a lot about that place. We will examine the colors and designs that make up the Indian flag, what these symbolize, and how these representations have changed over time. Sometimes referred to as a tricolor flag or tiranga [teh-ring-eh], meaning it is made up three bands of color that are horizontal and of equal size, this is a fairly commonplace flag design. We have saffron (a type of orangish-yellow), white, and green. And in the middle there is a 24 spoked wheel in navy blue. These colors were first proposed because they represented the different religious groups in India. The saffron were the Hindus, the green were the Muslims, and the white group was all of the rest, including the Jains and the Sikhs. And in the center was the spinning wheel that Gandhi had used to push for economic independence from Great Britain. This is called a charkha. [chaar-kuh] But, as independence from Great Britain progressed, and as the country struggled with religious violence and strife, the colors as symbols of India's major religions was reinterpreted in nonreligious ways. Saffron is now representative of strength and courage; the white denotes peace and honesty, and the green is understood to represent prosperity and fertility. The central image of the Ashoka Chakra or the Wheel of Time with the 24 spokes that connote 24 hours in a

day is meant to remind the citizens of India that change can be adopted peacefully if laws are respected. Ashoka was a leader in the BCE era who brought a series of laws to the ancient Indians.

In 2021, India celebrated its 75th anniversary of independence, and here in North Texas, this was celebrated in Irving at the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Plaza and Statue. It took the community only four years, a remarkably short time for a project like this, and approximately \$800,000 to fund and erect the statue. The unveiling took place on Gandhi's birthday, October 2nd. Important dignitaries were invited including the great-great grandson of Gandhi himself who traveled halfway around the globe to attend, as well as members of Martin Luther King, Jr's family. Next year in August, you can join in this independence celebration at the statue, which is the center of North Texas's Indian community.

In India, to honor this important day, an enormous flag was created that weighed more than 3,000 pounds, is 225 feet long and 150 feet wide, and is just a bit smaller than a standard sized soccer field. This flag took nearly 3,500 hours to make by a team of 75 weavers to create the cloth. Indians have a great deal of respect for their flag and how and when the flag can be displayed. There are several laws and rules about its display including: The flag should never be used as a cloth to cover tables, lecterns, podiums or buildings, or be draped from railings. It cannot be used at private funerals or caskets but can be used at military funerals. And, whenever the flag is displayed indoors in halls at

public meetings or gatherings of any kind, it should always be on the right (observers' left), as this is the position of authority. And when the flag is displayed completely spread out, the saffron stripe must be on top.

Until recently, the flag was only allowed to fly two days out of the year. These were the Republic Day and Indian Independence Day. But this changed once billionaire industrialist Naveen Jindal pushed for more flag-flying opportunities. When Jindal returned to India, he was determined to do the same. He started first by placing an Indian flag on his place of business but a local government official told him he was violating the flag codes and must take down the flag, Jindal brought the case to court. He argued that as a citizen he should be able to fly the flag to show his pride in his country. He ended up winning this case, so that ordinary Indians had the right to fly the flag any day of the year. He went on to overturn other flag laws including the right to fly the flag at night as well as the right to wear a flag lapel pin in India's Parliament.

International flag experts, known as vexillologists categorized India's flag laws as among some of the world's most restrictive. Now, because of Jindal's efforts, India has loosened some of its strictest flag policies. As Jindal argued, "When a person displays a national flag, then they rise above their political, regional, or caste affiliations...[The flag] is a great unifying factor" (Arnoldy, 2010, para 5). And when a person waves a flag, they are taking an oath to be "a

responsible citizen." (Arnoldy, 2010, final paragraph). Not only does India have strict laws around displaying the flag, requiring the flag's material be made from handspun and hand-woven cloth, what is called khadi cloth. The flag's material continues to remind the people of India of their independent struggles against Great Britain centered on cloth.

It was during the movement for independence that Gandhi encouraged Indians to spend time each day spinning thread to make khadi cloth as a way to show support of the Indian movement for independence. Gandhi also encouraged all Indians to wear khadi instead of British-made textiles. This boycotting of British-made cloth became a central feature of the Indian independence movement. In India, all spinning wheels regardless of their size or design are called charkhas.

Figure 6.
Indian charkha



This type of spinning wheel requires turning by one hand while the other hand pulls the thread off the spindle. For Gandhi, the charkha represented the common man and their sufferings and

fight against colonial rule so when the charka was replaced by the Ashoka wheel on the Indian flag, he was dismayed and bitterly opposed to it.

Although it has been replaced on the national flag of India, the charkha has become a central feature in some people's daily lives in India. Spinning the charkha has changed from a required way to show your anti-British feeling to a way to relax. Instead of yoga and deep breathing, many in India are now turning the charkha as a form of meditation. Gandhi himself said "Take to spinning. The music of the wheel will be as balm to your soul. I believe that the yarn we spin is capable of mending the broken warp and weft of our life..." (Gandhi, n.d. para 9). His advice found an audience. Nowadays you will find doctors and mental health experts extolling the benefits of spinning for calming the mind and bringing peace and tranquility to the senses. There are workshops and meditation retreats that teach novices how to spin.

Despite this recent popularity of hand-spinning cotton, generally speaking, cotton spinning has been mechanized in India. And there is a lot of cotton in India to spin. Cotton cultivation and production are of great importance to India's economy with more than 26% of all the world's cotton is grown and harvested in India. And approximately 60 million Indians are directly dependent on cotton production. There is even a region of India called the Cotton Basket. As cotton is such a big industry in India and with such a long history, it is unsurprising that the traditional clothes in India would also be

primarily fabricated out of cotton. Sari/sarees made of cotton are the most widely found because of the hot climate and wide availability of cotton cloth.

Worn by females of all ages, sari/sarees are a strip of a cloth, usually 4 to 8 yards of fabric and about a yard wide. There are various ways to wear saris—the most common is the Nivi style, which requires a pulla, a petticoat and a blouse. The petticoat is basically a skirt that ties around the waist. The blouse can be any material but often these will match the fabric of the sari. The pulla is where the sari rests on the shoulder and is the end of the sari. There's the koli drape which makes a skirt. And although the sari are associated with India, they are worn all over South Asia, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In general, more rural communities wear saris for everyday use than urban residents. There are hundreds of ways to wear a sari.

The sari is not just a Hindu dress but Jains, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians also wear it. A recent survey revealed that eight out of ten households in India had purchased a sari. The one group that does not wear a sari are the citizens of Punjab, who are mostly Sikhs. They have their own traditional clothing that is called Salwar Kameez. It is not one piece of cloth but a tunic and trousers with a short shawl that drapes in front of the neck along the collar bone called a dupatta.

Men also have traditional clothing in India and theirs is called the dhoti. It is like the sari in that it too is one piece of cloth

(approximately 4 yards by 1 yard) and when it is arranged it gives the effect of pants rather than a dress. It is light weight and comfortable, perfect for the heat of India. In rural areas, it can be everyday-wear while men in urban areas don the dhoti for special occasions such as weddings.

While red and green are often the colors associated with a Hindu wedding, Christian Indians will wear white saris. Indian weddings are huge events. Entire villages of thousands of people will attend the multi-day event. In more urban areas, the wedding is still enormous by American standards with hundreds of guests rather than thousands. Although the color of the sari itself can vary depending on the family's religion, one traditional feature of the wedding that continues is mehndi or more commonly known as henna. Henna is a widely used product and although it is mostly associated with India's culture, it is widely used in the Middle East, North Africa, and the other South Asian countries.

Henna is a dye that, when used at a wedding, is applied to the hands and feet of the bride a few days before the wedding. It is derived from a henna plant. The leaves are collected and then dried. This plant grows well in the hot arid climate of India and this application has been a cultural practice in India since the 300s. The leaves of the henna must be dried in the shade outside or else the color will diminish. It can take a couple of weeks to process the leaves to optimum color. They must then be ground with a mortar and pestle or and mixed with flour

and a bit of water to get the consistency necessary for use. Although debates continue about its origins, whether Egypt, North Africa, or India, using the red dye that derives from the plant continues to be popular.

The Mehndi ceremony is part of the 16 adornments of the bride in Hinduism. Designs created for the wedding ceremony often include peacocks, floral motifs, and the name of the groom. Most designs start with a circle then spiral out with petals around the circle. These are often filled in with straight lines.. In India the best dye with the most intense color comes from Rajasthan in a town called Sojat. Bridal henna unlike festival henna reaches up to the elbows and knees. Today henna has become popular outside preparations for weddings and there are henna shops popping up in Texas that will apply the dye just for fun. In Dallas alone, at the last count, there were more than 12 henna shops.

To recap, we've examined the three cultural objects from India that tell us a lot about the country and its people. We've examined India's flag, a spinning wheel called a chakhra that is unique to India, some of the traditional clothing worn daily by some and for special occasions by others, and finally you've seen the beautiful custom of mehndi/henna as an important element to Indian wedding ceremonies. As India's population continues to grow and flourish, you may begin to see more cultural events that celebrate Indian's heritage here in Texas.

Vietnam

Vietnam has one of the fastest growing economies in the world, even outdistancing China's. Today, Vietnam's growth is averaging around 8% a year which is incredibly high. And, like China, Vietnam is ruled by one party, the Communist Party which organizes and plans the country's economic and industrial growth. These countries' economies are often called Planned Economies where the government is central in economic decision-making.

Most people in the United States think of Vietnam only in relation to the Vietnam War when the United States was trying to stop the takeover of the country by Communist party and worked to try to end a Communist-style government. The war was incredibly destructive to the country, and millions of Vietnamese were displaced during two decades of conflict. Eventually, the Communists won the war. For those displaced by the war, the United States offered a safe place to begin again. Many Vietnamese arrived in Texas in the 1970s and 1980s as refugees after the Vietnam War (or as it is called in Vietnam, the American War), and settled in the Gulf Coast region of Texas (Rosen, 2015). Thanks to its climate and proximity to the sea, this region felt very similar to Vietnam by these new arrivals.

By the end of the 1980s, Texas hosted the second largest Vietnamese population in the country. There is even an area in Houston called Little Saigon. At the last census, Texas was home to more than 200,000 Vietnamese-Americans. Closer to

us, there are large populations in East Dallas, Arlington, Carrollton, and Richardson. In fact, Garland has now made Vietnamese its third district language and teaches ESL classes to Vietnamese students. The DFW area is now considered the 4th largest Vietnamese city in the US (Looney, 2021).

Initially, many Vietnamese who settled here in Texas moved to the Gulf Coast region and settled into shrimp, oyster, and crab fishing. Rockport was the epicenter of the community along the coast, but this was not a welcoming community at first with many violent clashes erupting between the newcomers and the already established fishermen, some even becoming violent. At one point, the Klu Klux Klan began to burn crosses in shrimp boat fishermen's yards to intimidate them. One fisherman was even murdered. Eventually, the Vietnamese filed a federal lawsuit that successfully stopped the Klan's activities and disbanded their paramilitary militia and intimidation (Burnett, 2018). The community eventually flourished and became the dominant fishermen of the Gulf Coast. While newcomers to the region, many Vietnamese had been fishermen before the onset of the Vietnam War, and they brought these skills and their know-how to Texas.

Today, Vietnam continues to be a global leader in fishing. You can see looking at the map that Vietnam has an enormous coastline. On a map, the country of Vietnam is recognizable because of its S shape. It lies to the far east of the peninsula called Indochina with a

population of 97 million people. It is long and narrow, at more than a thousand miles long, and because of its length, Vietnam possesses not only a long seacoast but a varied geography with many climatic zones. This diversity enables Vietnam to grow different food crops including rice, mangoes, coffee, black pepper, and cashews. Because of this variety of foods, Vietnam is considered the food capital of the Indochina peninsula. And you may have encountered some of this food here in Denton at two long-established restaurants, Vietbites and Pickled Carrot. If you have not tried Vietnamese food, I urge you to!

Only recently has Vietnam become the world's leading producer of cashews. Cashews are grown in Vietnam but they also import cashews from neighbors to process and then export them to the rest of the world. Cashew trees produce a fleshy pear shaped growth called a cashew apple. Under this cashew apple is a kidney shaped appendage called the drupe. Inside the hard shelled drupe is where the edible seed we eat called a cashew is located.

The drupe shell must be broken and the cashew split in two. It was only in the late 1990s that the Vietnamese invented the mechanical shelling and splitting machines. Even time and labor-saving machines, the nature of this multi-step processing — and the fact that just one nut comes from one drupe explains why cashews are pricier than other nuts, and why Vietnamese food does not feature a lot of cashews. Instead, you will find the cheaper peanut more often.

Another food commonly found in Vietnam is the lotus. As the national flower of Vietnam, it grows in both north and south Vietnam. It is known as the flower of the dawn and is the symbol of purity, commitment, and optimism for the future. At night the flower closes and sinks underwater and rises and opens again at dawn. The lotus is found throughout Vietnam in the muddy water of lakes and ponds. The main difference between the lotus and lily: the lotus flower and stem rise above the pad by at least 10 to 15 inches.

It might surprise you to learn that this beautiful flower is also a food. While the lotus flower is used for tea, the stem and root are used in salads. Slices of lotus are often featured stir fried rice noodle dish. The leaves of older plants are commonly used to wrap food, such as steamed rice and certain kinds of fish. Lotus tea and lotus seeds come also from the lotus flower. The roasted seeds of young lotus flowers make for a tasty snack. They are rich in protein, B vitamins, as well as thiamin and manganese. Lotus tea is very popular in Vietnam. The creation of Vietnamese lotus tea is attributed to a 19th century emperor who had a taste for the lotus. Supposedly the emperor's servants would row their boats out to a lake where the lotus flowers bloomed, stuffed the flowers full of tea leaves and then retrieve the tea in the morning.

The lotus is also an important symbol in the Buddhist religion, the most popular religion in Vietnam. The lotus symbolizes Buddhist detachment which is letting go of unnecessary wants, cravings, or desires.

For Buddhists, the way that water slides off lotus petals represents detachment. This is one of the reasons why many statues and images in Buddhist cosmology are depicted sitting on a lotus. In Vietnam, summertime is when the lotus flowers emerge on the many ponds and lakes. They typically survive for about two months. Every village in Vietnam boasts a lotus pond and celebrates the arrival of the lotus. Today you will have the chance to create your own paper lotus out of origami paper. You'll have a chance to select what color you want.

Figure 7.
Origami-making session



Once you have, we will watch this step-by-step online video “How to make an origami Lotus Flower-the simple way” to create this together (Origami Princess, 2019).

The lotus also features in architecture and is further celebrated in choreographed dances and annual festivals. There are both ancient and modern lotus inspired architecture examples in Vietnam. One public building in Nha Trang called the Thap Tram Huong Tower was built in 2008. Its concrete façade is shaped into

distinctive curves and forms that are meant to represent the lotus petals.

Figure 8.
Thap Tram Huong Tower



The ancient example of a Vietnamese lotus-shaped building is the One Pillar Pagoda. Located in Hanoi, this temple sits atop a single column or pillar. It is said to represent a lotus flower growing up out of the water.

Figure 9.
One Pillar Pagoda



You may access the pagoda by staircase. The legend of the One Pillar Pagoda tells of a spring night in 1049 when the Vietnamese emperor dreamed he was met by Quan Am, a Buddhist goddess who brought him to the lotus pond where she handed him a baby boy. Soon after the dream, the emperor married and had a son. To memorialize this event, he ordered this pagoda to be built to honor Quan Am.

Quan Am is a very popular Buddhist goddess in Vietnam and you can find her in Buddhist pagodas, sitting in the altars in homes, and along stretches of mountainside highways. This statue holds a vase in her left hand filled with water and a willow twig in her right hand. Willow symbolizes healing and the water is considered a purifier.

Figure 10.
Statue of Quan Am



Here in Texas, Quan Am is important to the Vietnamese community. As a way to honor and recognize her importance, the Vietnamese in the Houston area commissioned a huge statue of Quan Am. Built in 1998, the Sugar Land Quan Âm is a cast concrete statue that was created by sculptor Mai Chi Kim. With the base included, the statue stands at 72 feet tall, making it one of the tallest statues in the United States. To give you a sense of its height, this is the equivalent of a five story building. For more than 20 years, it held the claim to being the largest Buddhist statue in the western hemisphere until 2021 when Brazil completed its construction of a Buddha statue.

Most Vietnamese Buddhists pray to Quan Am at all points of life. If seeking a baby, she's a fertility goddess. If struggling with money, she's a generous giver. And she provides guidance on how to make life better. In addition to the statue, there is an annual festival honoring her. More than 10,000 people from all over the United States attend the festival. It is also a celebration of the Vietnamese immigrant community's settlement and prosperity in their new home. Many see it as a chance to give thanks to Quan Am who many credit with easing their transition to living in the United States. According to one Vietnamese attendee: "We came to America with empty hands, depressed, stressed and no heart. Quan Am gave us freedom, strength, and hope even when everything seemed hopeless: now we give her thanks" (Chitwood, 2012).

At this festival you will encounter traditional food and dances. Some of

these dances include the lotus dance, the fan dance, and the hat dance. As a group, these are called harvest dances. Dancers with hats will twirl around gracefully while they exchange and maneuver their large bamboo hats, called non la. The dance is a homage to the farmers who work hard in the fields and provide grain. These hats are closely associated with Vietnam and a common sight throughout the country, especially in rural settings. The origin of the hat is shrouded in legend but we do know that they have been worn in Vietnam for centuries. The legend goes that once upon a time, during a torrential downpour of rain that lasted weeks, a goddess descended from the sky wearing a giant cone shaped hat made of four large leaves stitched together by bamboo sticks. This hat was so large that it guarded the people against all the rain, allowing the people to return back to a normal life.

Figure 11.

Traditional Vietnamese hat



These hats are seen everywhere in Vietnam both in rural and urban settings. They are a big business as well, especially for the tourist industry. After collecting the bamboo and palm leaves, these are left

in the sun until they are no longer green but have turned a silvery-tan. Then they will be paper-thin, but durable. To make sure the dried leaves are flat, they are ironed. These flattened pieces are then placed and fitted onto a series of hoops that form the conical shape. Normally there are 16 tiers of hoops as seen with this example.

The hats are manufactured everywhere in Vietnam, however one village outside Hanoi, Chuong, is the most famous because hats have been made there for hundreds of years and are the most prized non la.

These hats are then hand sewn with tiny stitches which makes them incredibly time-consuming and arduous to produce. The stitches must be short and have small openings so that the non la is round, tight, and smooth from the edge of the leaves to the seams. It takes years of experience to achieve this flat uniformity. As a last step, turpentine oil is applied both inside and outside. This oil preserves the hat from mold and moisture, making the hats waterproof. Because they are the finest quality and the most finished of all non las, Chuong's hats are the most expensive, sometimes 2 to 3 times what hats from other places cost.

Non La is a central feature in the Houston war memorial to the Vietnam War. Erected in 2005, it was designed by a Vietnamese sculptor named Phạm Thông for a Houston shopping center in the heart of Little Saigon. There are two features of the memorial, one sculptural grouping is an American and South Vietnamese

soldier standing side by side. The second group is a Vietnamese family of five fleeing the war-torn land as refugees with a few belongings, including a non la, which sits atop one of the central figures. Pham created this second set of figures to honor the refugees who have established vibrant businesses, religious centers, and neighborhoods, and continue celebrating their culture through dance and food. As one Vietnamese American who arrived in Texas just after the Vietnam War said, “Here in America, you can merge into the mainstream if you want to. You can achieve anything you want if you work for it” (Sweets, 2010). This statement is a testament to the resilience and determination of the Vietnamese in Texas who began life in Texas penniless and unwelcomed. Feelings of belonging are central to the settlement process of new arrivals. And though this can be a difficult transition, the Indian, Vietnamese, and Mexican communities of Texas have found numerous ways to ease their transition to a new life in a new country. Their efforts deserve to be honored and celebrated.

These presentations were written and created to honor and celebrate these cultures and histories. And the students from these immigrant groups responded positively. In each presentation, a student volunteered more information about a ritual, a song, or a festival. One student sang the “Dale Dale” song to us after we discussed the piñata with the Mexico presentation. With India, a male student shared how his neighbors held large balloon fights to celebrate Holi. And then, finally, a Vietnamese student talked about

and described in detail some of his favorite dishes. Each moment proves that these in-school field trips are unique settings for student learning and teaching. These students’ spontaneous participation is a far more powerful testimony than a pre or post-survey or questionnaire. It demonstrates unequivocally the potential of these presentations (and partnerships) to educate and motivate the next generation to “save history.”

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