

explore PLACES

Classroom Resources

World Views: Maps in Art

Who doesn't like looking at maps? They're the wings we use to fly over places, the grid we superimpose on the natural and man-made world. We map what we need to know.¹

Jerry Saltz

At first glance, the three images included in these resource materials may appear to have nothing in common. The objects—a mandala from a sanctuary in Nepal, an illustration of Mecca from a Muslim pilgrim's guidebook, and a photograph generated using computer graphics software—may seem to have more differences than similarities. They come from different cultures, span many centuries, and are made of different materials. Yet each provides a view of the world that could be called a map.

A common definition of a map is a drawing that represents the surface of the earth. It can include natural features (like lakes, oceans, and mountains) and built features (like roads, buildings, and bridges). Maps often have a practical function: We use them to find the best route from here to there. Yet maps can also suggest other possibilities. Each of these images provides a different way to look at and think about maps. They also offer an opportunity to examine how maps—and works of art—reflect the world view of the culture and historical period in which they originated.

What Aspects of a Place does a Map Represent?

As the quote above suggests, "we map what we need to know." If you think about maps you've used recently, chances are each map represented a different part of the world. A city map, for example, shows just a small portion of the earth; a map of the United States shows a larger portion; and a map of the solar system includes not just the earth, but other planets and the sun as well. Notice how much of the world is represented in each image. The map of Mecca includes the features that would be most important to a worshiper making a pilgrimage to the city. The mandala includes the physical world as only one aspect of the universe. And you might be surprised by the scope of the landscape that artist Cindy Bernard records in her photograph.

As you look at the images, consider which features seem most important, and how these features are highlighted. For example, the focus of the mandala is at the center of the map: Worshipers who use the mandala as a meditation map work their way from the outer circles toward the center. On the map of Mecca, all the paths lead to the Kaaba in the center of the map, the most important site in the holy city.

Every map abstracts, or simplifies, the world in a different way. Even the most detailed maps include certain features and leave out others. On a map, less can be more: A map that includes only the most important details can be easier to use. For example, the map of Mecca shows only the buildings and locations worshipers would need to visit during a pilgrimage, not everything in the city. As you study the images, think about what's included, what's excluded, and why. In the mandala, for example, our everyday world is represented only by a narrow ring.

LACMA

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

How was it Used?

As you look at these images, consider how each view of the world reflects what the people who made or used it needed to know. How does the format of the map—what aspects it includes and excludes, what features it highlights or emphasizes—support its function? The map of Mecca was created as part of guidebook for worshipers making the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is small—so it could be carried easily—and it includes only details of the holy sites in the city.

Is it a Map? Is it Art?

*Societies that have a mapping tradition appear to experience the twin pull of practicality and imagination—science and art.*²

Yi-Fu Tuan

Can a map be both practical and beautiful? Can a work of art be both beautiful and practical? Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that maps tend to idealize the world, making cities and other places look better than they are "because maps use conventional signs, and signs exhibit pattern; and pattern is by its nature aesthetic, whether it represents tulips or sewage pits."

These objects all come from the collection of the art museum. Some of these objects, however, were not considered works of art when they were made. The mandala, for example, was used during religious meditation, and the map of Mecca was drawn for travellers who used it for navigation. Only *Topography: Dry Head Agate* by Cindy Bernard was created solely as a work of art. To make it, however, Bernard did not use traditional art materials. Instead, she adopted the computer technologies that contemporary mapmakers use to create topographical maps.

- Which of these three images seem the most like works of art to you? Like maps? Does a map have to be of practical value? Can a map depict an imaginary place? Can a map include both physical and spiritual worlds? Can you imagine being in each of the places represented in the images?
- Find maps from a place and time period of interest to you. What do these maps reflect about the culture in which they were made? In what ways are they different from maps in use today? What might people in the future think about us from looking at present-day maps?

1. Jerry Saltz, quoted in Robert Silberman, *World Views: Maps & Art* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 27.

2. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Maps and Art: Identity and Utopia" in Robert Silberman, *World Views: Maps & Art* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

Portions of the text in these resources were adapted from Evenings for Educators teacher packet materials by Margaret Pezalla-Granlund and Natalie Rusk.

Art Education Experiences at LACMA are made possible by grants from The Times Mirror Foundation, Ronnie and Vidal Sassoon, Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, Sara Lee Corporation /All-Pro Broadcasting, and Credit Suisse.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the California Arts Council, the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, and the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education.

LACMA

Los Angeles County Museum of Art