

Unfolding History

Grades – 6-12

Time - 2-3 class periods

Essential Questions

- What events can you think of that occurred in different places during the same time period?
- How can photographs tell stories about a time and place?
- How do historical events continue to impact nations, communities, and even families today?

Key Concepts/Vocabulary/Art Elements

Installation, dark room, documentation, collage, artists' book, bookbinding, accordion fold

Materials

White cardstock (cut to 5"x7" and 7 ¼" x 8 ½"), envelopes (5" x 7"), chipboard, like from a cereal box (cut to 5 ¼" x 7 ¼"), glue sticks, white glue, scissors, rulers, collage materials (newspapers, magazines, maps, decorative and construction papers), old photographs (copies or originals optional), various coloring materials (markers, crayons, pastels, watercolors, etc.)

Artworks in Focus

- Alakananda Nag (India, b. 1977) *May 3, 1945*
- Amritah Sen (India, b. 1973) *Following the Box*

About the Exhibition

Following the Box is an art exhibition that began when artists/curators Alan Teller and Jerri Zbiral found a box of old black and white photographs at a yard sale in Chicago. They were curious to learn who took them, where they were taken, and why. This curiosity led them on a journey to West Bengal in India, where they discovered that the photos were taken by an American soldier who was stationed at a nearby airbase towards the end of World War II.

Jerri and Alan were fascinated by how beautiful and respectful the images were of the people being depicted. The pictures provided a window into another place and time that they knew very little about. In their research and travels, they located several of the locations where the photos were taken and connected with locals who vividly remembered the lasting impact that colonization, war, and the Bengal Famine of 1943 had on their families.

Following their research and personal interactions, Alan and Jerri shared the photos with ten Bengali artists and asked them to create works of art in response to the pictures. Each artist created something different and expressed a unique point of view. Some imagined the perspective of the American photographer while others thought about their own family's place in history. The resulting exhibition includes work in different mediums, such as video, collage, drawing, and **installation** (an artistic medium that creates site specific environments). The goal of the exhibition is to explore different ways of understanding and to create a space where diverse perspectives on history are shared and welcomed.

Talking About Art

Take a look at the image of Alakananda Nag's installation *May 3, 1945*. Imagine walking into the space and looking at all the objects inside. What details do you notice? How do you feel when you are there? How does the artist arrange the objects to make it feel like you are in a **dark room** (a space with special red light used for developing non-digital photographs)?

For this artwork, Nag imagines what events may have occurred on the same date that one of the original photographs from the box was taken. She chose to select one possibility, that of someone being born on that day. She put an ad out in the local Bengali newspaper asking people to write to her if they were born on May 3, 1945. One person, named Subrata Banerjee, responded and the artist contacted him to learn about his life. Her piece presents objects, such as photos, letters, books, and certificates, which **document** Mr. Banerjee's life. Some of the objects were actually his while others were chosen by the artist to add to the narrative. Nag created the installation in the form of a dark room to convey the feeling of observing someone's life and piecing together a story. The artist also compares the moment of a person being born with the moment a photograph comes to life in the dark room.

Think about a particular time period in history or in the present day. Can you think of different things that happened in other parts of the world during the same day or time frame? What about things that could have happened (i.e. someone being born, new invention created, family migrating to new country, etc.)?

Now take a close look at Amritah Sen's piece *Following the Box*. Does it remind you of any familiar object? How would you describe the mood of the people in the photos? How are the people in the paired images similar and how are they different? How do the photos contrast with the drawings in the book? What story do you think the artist is trying to tell?

This artwork, which is a handmade **artists' book** (an art form that uses the structure of a book), uses the original photos from the box alongside personal photos of the artist's family during the same time period in Bengal, India. Her take on a family album combines personal history, history of her community, and political history. She creates a visual narrative of a particular time and explores the different perspectives and events that occurred.

Think about how events in political history impact communities and families. What do you think happens during times of war versus times of peace? Do you know of an historical event that impacted your own family in some way? What impact do events happening in the world today have on communities and families?

Creating Art

Think about a time period you are studying in class. What events occurred during that time in different parts of the world? If you are studying more recent history, consider what was happening with your family at the time. Choose two events from different places (countries and/or cultures) and one personal family event. You will make three **collages** on the 5" x 7" cardstock paper, one for each of the events. You can use newspapers, magazines, copies of old photographs, maps, decorative papers, and drawing materials. Your image can include text and should be a visual representation of the event/time period.

You will now create a handmade artists' book. It will use an **accordion fold**, which gets its name from the musical instrument that has a similar construction. The book will have two covers (front and back) and the pages of the book will be made of envelopes. You will insert the collages you made into the envelopes.

To make your book, you will need to follow these steps (see diagram for visual):

1. Cut a piece of cardstock to 7 ¼ x 8 ½ inches and fold in an accordion (back and forth like a zig-zag) with each fold measuring ¾ inches. Your accordion should have a total of 10 folds. You have now created the book's spine.
2. Use your glue stick to put glue on the inside of the first fold in your spine. Take your front cover and attach it. The spine should overlap the left side of your front cover. Repeat on the other side with back cover. Be sure to have your covers decorated beforehand.
3. Next, put glue on the 4th fold and attach an envelope. The envelope flap should be facing out. Put glue on the 5th fold and press together. Repeat with the other envelopes, gluing them between the folds.

You can now insert the collages into the envelopes and add any additional decoration or text to your book. Consider the message you want to share about the history depicted in your book. Choose colors and textures that will visually show the mood and how you personally feel about it.

Grade Level Modification

Lower Elementary – Create a simple accordion book without the addition of envelopes. Make it a family album where students can draw pictures of their family members and write short descriptions.

Upper Elementary – Have students research their family history and create an album using real photographs (or copies) as part of the collages that go in the envelopes.

Middle and High School Option – Do this as a class project, where each student will create a collage in reference to a historical event in a different part of the world or a different aspect of a historical moment in one place (such as economic, political, cultural, etc.). Each collage will be placed into an envelope. Make the book larger to accommodate everyone's contribution.

Reflection

- Did you discover any connections between world history and your family history?
- How did you use images to create a narrative of historical events?
- What did you discover about the impact of historical events on communities/families? Was any of it surprising to you?

Curriculum Connections

California History-Social Science Content Standards

6.5 - Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of India.

10.4 - Students analyze patterns of global change in the era of New Imperialism in at least two of the following regions or countries: Africa, Southeast Asia, China, India, Latin America, and the Philippines.

10.4.3 - Explain imperialism from the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized and the varied immediate and long-term responses by the people under colonial rule.

10.4.4. - Describe the independence struggles of the colonized regions of the world, including the roles of leaders, such as Sun Yat-sen in China, and the roles of ideology and religion.

10.8 - Students analyze the causes and consequences of World War II.

11.7 - Students analyze America's participation in World War II.

National Core Arts Standards

VA: Cr1.1.6a - Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas

VA: Cr1.2.8a - Collaboratively shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present day life using a contemporary practice of art and design.

VA: Cr1.2.11a - Choose from a range of materials and methods of traditional and contemporary artistic practices to plan works of art and design.

VA: Cr2.1.7a - Demonstrate awareness of ethical responsibility to oneself and others when posting and sharing images and other materials through the Internet, social media, and other communication formats.

Resources

Following the Box documentary film

30 minutes

<https://vimeo.com/173842796/986e75e7ed>

Following the Box website

<http://www.followingthebox.com/>



Alakananda Nag (India, b. 1977)
May 3, 1945

Multimedia installation

Inkjet prints on archival paper, various artifacts, and audio





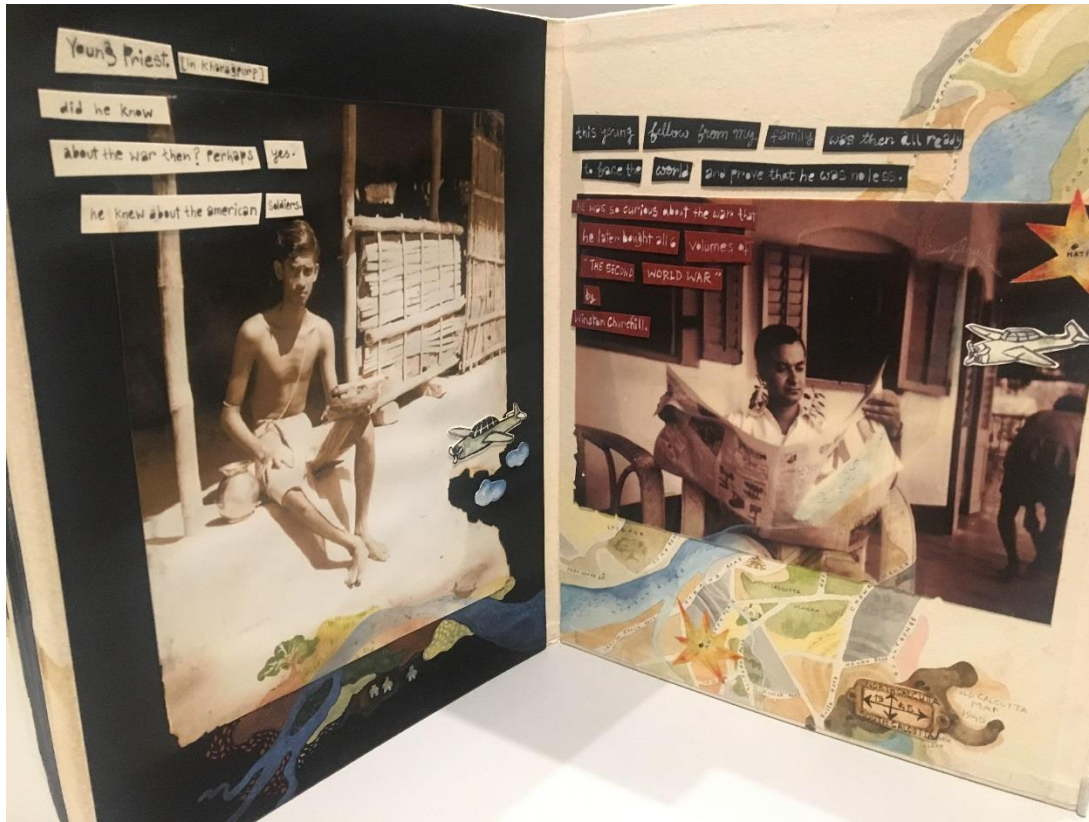
Amritah Sen (India, b. 1973)

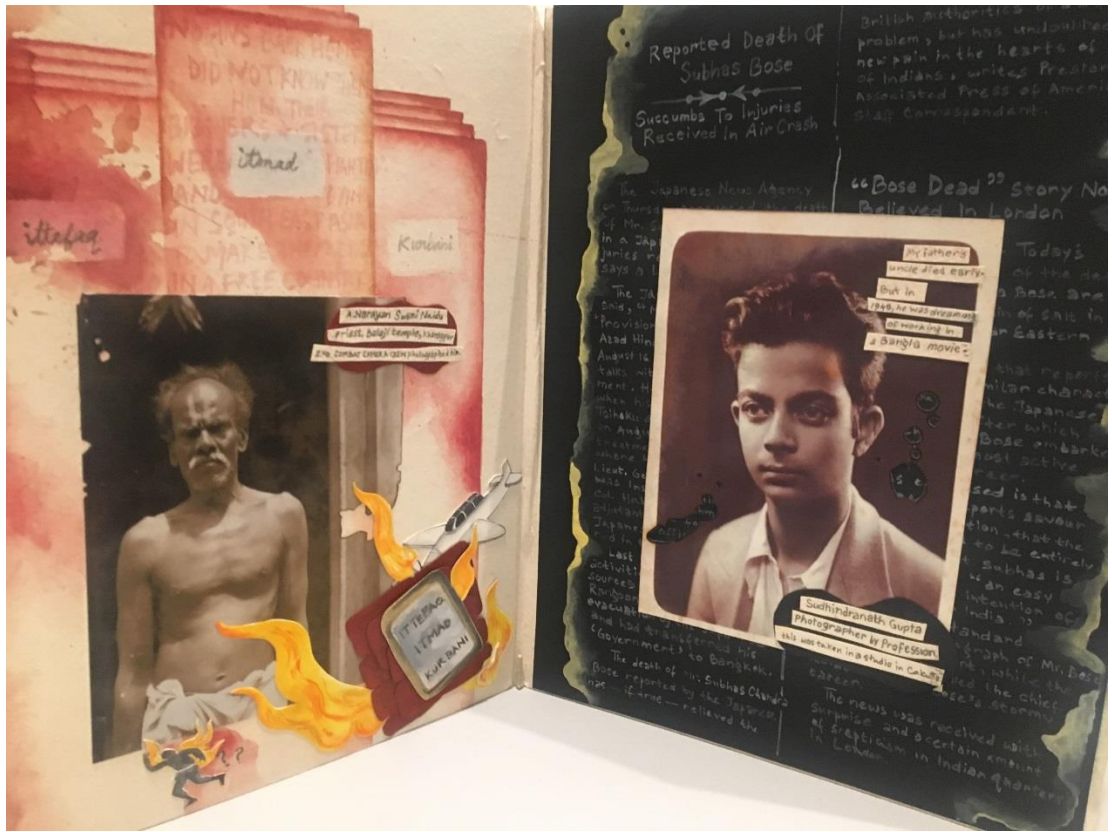
Following the Box

Hand constructed book with handmade paper, ink, watercolor and tea stains

9 x 12 in, extended to 103 in

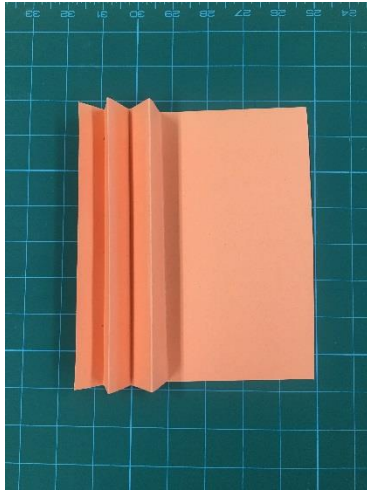
Custom constructed box





Accordion Book Construction Guide

1.



2.



3.

