

RETHINKING THE REGION:

New Approaches to 9-12 U.S. Curriculum on the Middle East and North Africa

UNIT:

ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY

This unit offers students an opportunity to engage in their own historical reading of the arts and technology through images, music, and texts that represent some of the varied forms of cultural production and innovation that have emerged from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during different historical periods. The lessons focus on artistic and scientific pursuits that highlight the social and political engagement of MENA peoples and illustrate the circulation of ideas about innovation and social change.

Importantly, this unit seeks to address a critical gap in the ways that MENA peoples have been portrayed in contemporary US World History textbooks. An analysis of high school textbooks revealed that historical narratives commonly obscure the active role and contributions of peoples in the region to the advancement of social, political, cultural, and scientific change, within and beyond the region. Furthermore, the role of MENA peoples as producers of culture and innovation is largely absent in these texts. Indeed, the portrayal of key events often conceals the vibrant political and social discussion underway in the MENA region during certain periods. As such, US World History textbooks do not adequately reflect the contestation, struggles, and rational debates of the region's peoples, nor the production, interaction, engagement, and circulation of ideas that constitute a shared past.

The lessons in this unit invite students to reconsider the sources that historians have traditionally used to construct the past and the ways in which arts and technologies reveal alternative narratives about the social, political and economic conditions of a period and the movement of ideas across time and space. By examining samples of visual arts, popular music, and scientific innovations, students will reflect on historical narratives, including how the history of science and ideas has been narrated. Why might the contributions of particular groups or world regions be underrepresented in these accounts? How might these accounts be revised to better reflect the rootedness of ideas in the interactions among a number of societies? What does an analysis of the circulation of ideas through the arts and technology reveal about cultural representation? What does it reveal about our shared past?

The lessons in this unit draw on multiple disciplines. Where appropriate and possible, teachers may wish to collaborate with teachers of music, art, and science for cross-disciplinary thematic instruction.