



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2007 Volume III: Maps and Mapmaking

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## Introduction

by Mary E. Miller, Sterling Professor of History of Art and Dean of Yale College

What is a map? How is it that we visualize our world in a two-dimensional form? How is it that we understand the social meanings of maps so clearly that we can call for a "road map for peace" or talk about a mental "map"?

Humankind has invented maps time and again, from ancient China to Babylonia to ancient Mexico. Conquerors created maps as their tools, from the European "scramble" for Africa to the westward charting of Americans during the 19th century. Maps that are unique works of beauty have been painted to adorn the walls of kings and popes; maps have been printed by the million to stuff into the glove compartments of our cars. The past ten years have seen an explosion of new kinds of mapping, from Mapquest to Googleearth to the GPS devices that guide cars and nuclear warheads. Where will maps go next?

The seemingly visual map may nevertheless provoke the written word, from the maps of Tolkien's trilogy to the map of Treasure Island. The drive to complete the idea of the complete map has led humans to explore the ends of the earth, from the North and South Poles to remote islands to the sources of the Nile and Amazon, and, most recently, to send satellites far into space. Yet no map can ever be complete—and in one respect or another, no map can ever be completely accurate.

In this seminar, we looked at some of the earliest efforts to create a two-dimensional rendering of the earth, along with the development of the instruments that would make such renderings possible. At the same time, the social meanings of maps and mapping always stayed in the foreground of our considerations. We spent two sessions outdoors learning the most basic principles of map survey, first by measuring strides while holding a compass; the second by using tape, compass, and level. Seminar participants worked in teams, learning to stride, measure, and orient. This practical knowledge—and a little geometry—gave all members of the seminar some basic understandings and hands-on experience of maps as they have been made before the age of satellites and GPS.

Fellows of the seminar developed units that emphasized geography and history, both in westward expansion of the United States and in units that addressed focused, historical phenomena, from the Underground Railroad and the migration northward of African-Americans in the 20th century. Fellows took advantage of US Census data to explore the mapping of poverty, both in general and with attention to specific urban and rural locations. Others took the map and made it central to literature and writing, making map study both a part of understanding a particular work and using the map as the point of departure for expository writing. Art teachers explored the graphic possibilities of the map; they also used the map as the point of departure for the teaching of perspective drawing and rendering; the map also was taken as the underpinning for art history

survey.

In the end, all units found ways to address the map metaphorically as well. In this, the seminar shared a "mental map" in recognizing relationships between tangible, visual images and notions of order and coherence that pervade our constructions of the world.

Mary E. Miller

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