

Department of Art History
Fall 2025

ARTH 4848: Art History Senior Seminar
The Taj Mahal: Epistemological Frameworks

M 12:30pm-3:20pm

Dr. Lisa N. Owen

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Office hour: M 3:30pm-4:30pm

Course description: Art History Senior Seminar explores research methodologies and practices of scholarship relevant to art historical study. The course is organized and delivered as a seminar consisting of assigned readings, class discussion, and substantial oral and written work. It is taught on a rotating basis by art history faculty.

Course content & objectives: Senior Seminar this fall explores epistemological frameworks that continue to shape our understandings of the Taj Mahal. The Taj, India's most famous monument, is often characterized as a symbol of love, a model of architectural perfection, a material replica of Islamic paradise, a global icon, and the measure of all that is cliché in a tourist site. In India's contemporary political climate, the Taj is also viewed by some as a monument to be reidentified and/or erased. In order to better understand these various responses to the Taj, we will examine the monument throughout its history, focusing on select primary and secondary sources available to us. These include translations of contemporary written accounts, views expressed by current political leaders, essays in exhibition catalogs, and the scholarship of art historians who have studied the buildings and gardens that constitute this vast tomb complex. By asking ourselves "how do we know what we know?" we can begin to identify and question the processes, limitations, and hierarchies of knowledge construction regarding the Taj and its place in global visual culture.

Goals of the course include:

- (1) to foster critical thinking
- (2) to further develop research and writing skills
- (3) to enhance presentation skills and the articulation of ideas in the classroom

There is no assigned textbook for this course. Students will have access to the exhibition catalog *Romance of the Taj Mahal* and weekly readings will be available on Canvas.

Course structure: This seminar meets once a week for two hours and fifty minutes. The course is structured on the reading, discussion, and presentation of select publications. Each week we will focus on a specific theme and/or scholarly framework that governs the study of the Taj Mahal. These readings, some of which are translations from primary sources from the period, will introduce students to the dynastic history of the Mughals and the artistic tradition of tomb building in northern India. We will also examine various reactions, preconceptions, and representations of the monument that have shaped its 'life' throughout history. Students will be assigned readings in common throughout the course but will also have the opportunity to pursue individual research for a final paper and class presentation.

Designed and organized as a seminar, students are expected to have thoroughly read, and digested, the assigned readings every week. Moreover, it is the student-based presentations and discussions of these readings that make up the course. I encourage students to come and see me during office hour if they are having difficulty with the material or if they feel they are not expressing themselves adequately in class.

Course requirements and grading criteria:

Object ID.....	5%
Written response essays (3 at 5% each).....	15%
Visual response presentation.....	10%
Initial draft of research paper.....	15%
Presentation of research paper.....	15%
Final paper.....	30%
Attendance/Participation.....	10%

Object ID: Early in the semester, students will submit a document that identifies the artwork that will serve as their main object of focus for the research paper. The artwork must be selected from the exhibition catalog *Romance of the Taj Mahal*. Guidelines for this assignment will be distributed and discussed on the first day of class.

Written response essays: Students are asked to submit a 500-750 word essay three times during the semester. While it is expected that students read and engage in discussion over the readings every week, a written response is required for only three. Students will choose which three weekly themes they will submit an essay on via a sign-up sheet available on the first day of class. In the reading schedule below, I have provided a prompt that will hopefully assist in connecting the materials together and allow students to address the larger issues raised (rather than summarizing multiple scholars and/or minute details). The week you are submitting a written response, you must upload it on Canvas by **noon on the Monday** that we are addressing that specific topic. In other words, these responses must be prepared and submitted before the relevant class meeting. I will grade them on both content and the quality of writing. Please see the grading criteria for written work included in this syllabus.

Visual response presentation: Once during the semester, students will independently make a visual presentation to the class and thereby serve as a discussion leader for that session. The presentation should be approximately 30 minutes in length, include visuals, and address all assigned readings as well as the issues provided in the prompt. A discussion with class members will follow each presentation (typically 2-3 students will be scheduled to present each week). Students will choose which week they will present via a sign-up sheet available on the first day of class. Please upload visuals on Canvas by **noon on the Monday** you are presenting. ARTstor/JSTOR has a decent collection of images in their database and/or you can use images from the readings and/or found online.

Initial draft and final research paper: Students will engage in independent research on the artwork selected in the Object ID assignment. Any methodological or theoretical approach is welcome. The **first draft** of the paper (minimum 8 pages/approx. 2,000 words) is due by **midnight on October 20th**. Please upload a pdf on Canvas. Students will receive substantial feedback on both the content and the mechanics of writing during individual meetings the following week(s). The **final paper** (minimum 15 pages/approx. 3,750 words) must incorporate prior editorial suggestions and demonstrate substantial development from the initial draft. The **final paper** is due by **midnight** on the scheduled final exam period for this class: **Monday, Dec 8th**. Please upload a pdf on Canvas. Guidelines for the initial draft and final research paper will be discussed in class at the appropriate time in the semester.

Presentation of research paper: During the last class day of seminar and during our scheduled final period (Monday, Dec 8th 1:30-3:30pm), students will present their final research papers in a 10-minute talk with visuals.

Attendance/Participation policy: As this course meets only once a week, students are expected to attend *every* class. Attendance will be taken each week and students are allotted only 1 absence without penalty. Any absences thereafter will result in a lowering of the student's participation/attendance grade by 10 points for each additional absence. Please note: class participation is a part of the attendance grade. I do not give 'Bs' for breathing. Please be an active participant while attending class.

Late work: Late work is ***not accepted unless there is a documented (and university sanctioned) emergency***. In this case, the student must notify me about the emergency prior to the scheduled deadline and/or class. If I agree to accept late work, it will be marked down 10 points per *day* (including weekends) that it is late.

Posting of grades: Grades will be posted on Canvas. If you would like to discuss a grade with me, we can meet during office hour or you can schedule an appointment.

Academic integrity policy, AI, and violation penalties: This course follows the UNT policy on Academic Integrity. According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, sabotage, and unauthorized use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions from admonition to expulsion from the University. First violations of academic integrity policies in this course result in a zero on the assignment. Second violations in the same course result in failing the class. All academic integrity violations are reported to the university and further penalties may incur.

All work submitted for a grade in this class must be written in your own words and original to this term. You may not reuse work previously submitted to any other class. You may not copy or transcribe anyone else's material, including but not limited to websites, museum publications, books, or articles. You may not use AI to assist in the content of your written work. Submissions that appear to rely on AI will receive a failing grade and/or other sanctions in alignment with the university's academic integrity policy.

Grading criteria for written work:

A = Such a grade indicates that the student was able to execute written work with rigor and clarity of thought. An 'A' grade means that there were little to no errors in grammar/spelling and that the introduction and conclusion were clear as was the development of the body of text. An 'A' grade also indicates that the student demonstrated knowledge and reflection on all the assigned readings and provided exceptional responses to the question(s) and/or issues stated in the prompt.

B = Such a grade indicates that the student was able to execute written work with diligence and forethought, though some main issues identified in the prompt were not addressed fully by the student. This grade also indicates that a greater in-depth engagement with the assigned readings is needed. A grade of 'B' also usually indicates that there were limited structural, spelling, or grammatical problems.

C = This is similar to the 'B' description, but the number of problems is more extensive. These may include significant grammatical or structural problems, too many generalities, and/or not fully

addressing the main question(s) and/or issues stated in the prompt. 'C' essays often contain too many quoted passages from the required reading(s) resulting in a lack of reflection and/or in-depth analysis.

D = A grade of 'D' indicates that the student did a poor job in following the prompt and/or did not demonstrate an engagement with the materials to satisfactorily complete the assignment. Further, grammatical/structural problems make a 'D' essay quite difficult to follow. There are usually far too many generalities, a lack of analysis, and/or lack of reflection on the materials.

F = This either indicates that the assignment was not done or what was done was simply unacceptable for any number of reasons. This includes any indication of plagiarism and/or use of AI, which may entail further academic penalty.

ADA accommodation statement: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid delay in implementation. Note that students must communicate with faculty throughout this process.

Student Support Services: UNT provides resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus that can support your academic success and mental well-being:

- Dean of Students: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/>
- Student Health and Wellness Center: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/index.html>
- Counseling and Testing Services: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/>
- UNT Care Team: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/programs-and-services/care-team/>
- Eagle Engagement Center: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/eagle-engagement-center/index.html>

Survivor Advocacy: UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. Federal laws (Title IX and the Violence Against Women Act) and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex and therefore prohibit sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. UNT's Survivor Advocates can assist a student who has been impacted by violence by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change where appropriate, and connecting students to other resources available both on and off campus. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648. Additionally, alleged sexual misconduct can be non-confidentially reported to Equal Opportunity & Title IX at oeotix@unt.edu, <https://titleixeo.unt.edu/index.html>, or 940-565-2759.

Emergency notification and procedures: UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). Please make sure your information is current with this system.

Course disclaimer: Content in the arts can sometimes include works, situations, actions, and language that can be personally challenging or offensive to some students on the grounds, for example, of sexual explicitness, violence, or blasphemy. As the College of Visual Arts and Design is devoted to the principle of freedom of expression, artistic and otherwise, it is not the college's practice to censor these works or ideas on any of these grounds. Students who might feel unduly distressed or made uncomfortable by such expressions should withdraw at the start of the term and seek another course.

Please note: The professor reserves the right to alter this syllabus and schedule if necessary.

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Schedule

Aug 18: Introducing the Taj

How do we know what we know?

A discussion of the themes of the seminar, topics for independent research (Object ID assignment), and introduction to the Mughals

***Aug 25: Contextualizing the Taj**

Readings: 1) Ebba Koch, "The Taj Mahal: Architecture, Symbolism, and Urban Significance." *Muqarnas* 23 (2005): 128-149; and **2)** Michael Brand, "Orthodoxy, Innovation, and Revival: Considerations of the Past in Imperial Mughal Tomb Architecture." *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 323-334.

Written Essays: — Presenters (2):

Prompt: Signature style or revivalist mode? How do we assess and understand architectural style(s), motivations of the patron(s), and functions of architecture?

Sept 01: No class—Labor Day holiday

Reading: 1) Yael Rice, "Introduction," in *The Brush of Insight: Artists and Agency at the Mughal Court*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023, 1-17.

***Sept 08: Ruling the Taj**

Readings: 1) Susan Stronge, "Painting for Shah Jahan," in *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book, 1560-1660*. London, V & A, 2002, 142-73; **2)** Ebba Koch, "Visual Strategies of Imperial Self-Representation: The Windsor *Pādshāhnāma* Revisited," *The Art Bulletin* 99/3 (2017): 93-124; and **3)** Susan Stronge, "The Reign of Shah Jahan: The Garden of Paradise," in *The Great Mughals: Art, Architecture and Opulence*, V & A, 2024, 193-231.

Written Essays:— Presenters (3):

Prompt: In what ways can paintings and/or other artworks inform us about the reign and character of Shah Jahan?

Object ID assignment due by midnight; consult instructions on Canvas

***Sept 15: Translating the Taj**

Readings: 1) “References to the Taj Mahal by Seventeenth-Century European Travelers,” 291-301 and “European References to the Character of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan,” 301-312, in W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai, trans. *Taj Mahal the Illumined Tomb: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Mughal and European Documentary Sources*. Cambridge and Seattle: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Harvard University and the University of Washington Press, 1989; 2) “Death of Mumtaz Mahal,” in W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai, trans. *Taj Mahal the Illumined Tomb*, 11-39; and 3) Rajeew Kinra, “King of Delhi, King of the World: Chandar Bhan’s Perspective on Shah Jahan, the Mughal Court, and the Realm,” in *Writing Self, Writing Empire*, University of California Press, 2015, 95-158.

Written Essays:— Presenters (3):

Prompt: How do we address issues of translation, bias, veracity, and/or cultural constructions in our handling of primary source materials?

***Sept 22: Wah Taj!**

Guest lecture and conversation with Dr. Janice Leoshko, Associate Professor Emerita, Art History (South Asian Art, UT Austin)

Readings: 1) Yael Rice, “The Global Aspiration of the Mughal Album,” in Stephanie Schrader ed., *Rembrandt and the Inspiration of India*, L.A.: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018, 61-77; 2) Janice Leoshko, “Drawing the Line: On Translation and the Art of William Hodges,” in Lutz Edzard, Jens W. Borgland and Ute Hüsken eds., *Reading Slowly - A Festschrift for Jens E. Braarvig*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017, 309-320; and 3) *Romance of the Taj Mahal* exhibition catalog, section on photography authored by Janice Leoshko, 219-223.

***Sept 29: Fantasizing the Taj**

Readings: 1) Catherine B. Asher, “Fantasizing the Mughals and Popular Perceptions of the Taj Mahal.” *Tasveer Ghar: A Digital Archive of South Asian Popular Visual Culture*; and 2) Karline McLain, *India’s Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009, 141-170.

Written Essays:— Presenters (3):

Prompt: In what ways do constructed biographies of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal affect our perceptions/understandings of the Taj Mahal? How do these characterizations differ, corroborate, and/or build from evidence gleaned from primary source materials?

***Oct 06: Theorizing the Taj**

Reading: Wayne E. Begley, "The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning," *The Art Bulletin* 61/1 (1979): 7-37.

Written Essays:— Presenters (2):

Prompt: Begley provides a significant amount of art historical evidence to support his theory that the mausoleum is a symbolic replica of the Throne of God at the time of the Day of Resurrection and Judgment. For this prompt, assess his handling of the evidence: what did you find most convincing? What parts of his theory needed more evidence or interpretation?

***Oct 13: Expanding the Taj**

Readings: 1) John M. Fritz and George Michell, "Archeology of the Garden," in Elizabeth B. Moynihan ed., *The Moonlight Garden*. Washington D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2000, 79-93; and 2) Amita Sinha and Terence Harkness, "Views of the Taj—Figure in the Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 28 (2009): 1-20.

Written Essays:— Presenters (2):

Prompt: How do the excavations of the Mahtab Bagh (Moonlight Garden) complicate or refute Begley's theory? What is the significance of these archeological discoveries in our understanding of the Taj's layout and symbolism? How is the Mahtab Bagh contributing to today's viewing of the Taj?

Oct 20: Writing the Taj: No class—upload initial draft by midnight

Oct 27: Individual student meetings:

Nov 03: Individual student meetings:

***Nov 10: Experiencing the Taj**

Readings: 1) Tim Edensor, "Walking, Gazing, Photographing and Remembering at the Taj" in *Tourists at the Taj: Performance and Meaning at a Symbolic Site*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 105-148; 2) Sheela Prasad and Kapil Kumar Gavsner, "The New 'Love' Story of the Taj Mahal: Urban Planning in the Age of Heritage Tourism in Agra," *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 5 (2016): 40-48; and 3) Hilal Ahmed, "Secularising the 'Secular': Monumentalisation of the Taj Mahal in Postcolonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 50 (2013): 71-78.

Written Essays:— Presenters (2):

Prompt: Whose Taj is it? Identify and explain the complicated issues of audience and use addressed by these authors.

***Nov 17: Contesting the Taj**

Readings: 1) Shashi Tharoor, “The Siege of the Taj Mahal,” *Project Syndicate*, November 9, 2017; 2) Zoya Hasan, “Post Ayodhya: Normalising the Politics of Hate and Hostility,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 48 (2017): 28-32; 3) “BJP MP Charged with Demolishing Babri Masjid Now Wants Taj Mahal Converted into ‘Tej Mandir’,” *The Wire*, February 5, 2018; and 4) P.N. Oak, *Taj Mahal—The True Story; The Tale of a Temple Vandalized*. Houston: A. Ghosh, 1969, Foreword, Preface and skim pp. 73-110.

Written Essays:— Presenters (3):

Prompt: Whose Taj is it? Identify and explain the repercussions of Hindu right-wing identity politics on the Taj.

Nov 24: No class—Thanksgiving holiday

Dec 01: Student presentations (Last class day)

Dec 08: Student presentations (Final period: 1:30pm-3:30pm); final papers due on Canvas by midnight
