Life in the Middle Ages

Introduction

Glencairn Museum seeks to connect students with the common hopes, fears, needs, and beliefs of humans throughout history. The Middle Ages, spanning over a thousand years from 500 BCE to 1500 CE, can be viewed from many perspectives, and its way of life through a variety of constructs.

At its heart, however, medieval society was comprised of three groups of people—Those Who Worked, Those Who Prayed, and Those Who Fought. Each group provided a unique and necessary service to the other two within their community and within medieval society as a whole, while endeavoring to connect with God through their traditional beliefs and rituals.

Activities to Try

◊ Working as a whole class or in small groups, use a T-chart to brainstorm the way we meet our basic needs for food, shelter, clothing and transportation today compared to how people who lived in the Middle Ages hundreds of years ago might have made sure they had these things. What similarities and differences do you notice?

◊ Research The Rule of St. Benedict, try to live out a whole 24-hour “day” in just 24 minutes, according to the schedule of a Benedictine monk or nun.

◊ Designed as a scientific inquiry, test out the effectiveness of grinding, crushing and mixing natural substances like soil, spices and plant matter, with liquids like water and oil, to create paint and pigments. Paint a picture of a beautiful design, an animal or creature, or a scene from your favorite story.

Questions for Discussion

◊ Of the three groups of people in the Middle Ages—which would you choose to be in? Why?

◊ Can you name one role from the Middle Ages that would fit into each group?

Glencairn’s Medieval Artifacts

Glencairn Museum is home to a rich variety of medieval artifacts and artwork. To read up on a few of our items, follow the links below to issues of our monthly newsletters that highlight some of the medieval objects in our collections.

Glencairn’s Royalty: Images of Kings and Queens in the Medieval Collection

Protective Images from Glencairn’s Medieval Sculpture Collection

Glencairn’s Two-Foot Tall Medieval Hymnal

Medieval Sculptors at Glencairn Museum

Virgin and Child Manuscript

Old Testament King, stained-glass panel from the Church of Saint-Gervais-et-Saint-Protais, Soissons, France, c. 1210-15

One of the three large illuminated letters that show the height of artistic detail in this manuscript, the “U” on folio 59v begins the section of hymns.
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By reflecting on the experience of those who lived in the Middle Ages, we hope that you and your students develop a deeper understanding of and empathy for past cultures, and can use this experience to appreciate the diversity of human life—both past and present.

**Those Who Worked**

Many people in the Middle Ages did daily work of some kind to contribute to and support their community. Brainstorm as many different jobs as you can think of that might have existed in the Middle Ages. If you’re not sure, you can always do some research!

Questions for Discussion

◊ What modern day job is similar to a medieval job that you listed? How are the two jobs different?

◊ Without this group—Those Who Worked—what might life have been like for others who lived during the Middle Ages?

**Activities to Try**

◊ Two examples of professions from the Middle Ages are a stonemason and a scribe. Choose another occupation of those who worked in the Middle Ages, and write about “A Day in Their Life”.

◊ Just like today, people in the Middle Ages enjoyed hobbies and games after their long days of work. Research a game or pastime from the Middle Ages. You could even make it, so that you can play it with your class or family!

◊ Pick a job from the Middle Ages that you would most have liked to do. Try writing a job application for your choice, or acting out a mock interview with a friend to try and get your job!

**Those Who Prayed**

Those who prayed fulfilled an incredibly important role in medieval society. This group included monks, nuns, priests and bishops—here are a few ways to build on your knowledge of this group.

Questions for Discussion

◊ Why would the job of a monk or nun have been considered just as important as that of a knight or peasant? Brainstorm some ideas, or read about it here.

◊ How does this worldview compare to yours? Do you rely on any person or group to positively influence your everyday life? Your spiritual life?

**Activities to Try**

◊ Stained glass windows found in medieval churches and cathedrals often depicted stories to inspire people to live good lives. Design your own stained glass window showing something or someone that inspires you.

◊ Medieval monks and nuns often said their prayers many hundreds of times. To track and count these, they may have used prayer beads. Using beads you have, or making some out of recyclable materials like paper, design and make your own string of prayer beads.

**Those Who Fought**

Those who fought were not only the warriors of the medieval world, but also the nobility and royalty that owned land and wealth.

Questions for Discussion

◊ Knights were not just all armor and fighting—there was a very symbolic element to becoming a knight. What was this part of knighthood? Why do you think it was important?

◊ A knight’s purpose was to protect and defend. What are the differences and similarities between a medieval knight, and a modern day knight?

**Activities to Try**

◊ Knights were expected to uphold the chivalric code. Research this code, and then write your own code in a group or by yourself.

◊ Medieval castles used walls and towers for defense. How else did kings and lords defend their castles? Can you make a model castle to show these defenses? Use craft or recyclable materials to make your castle!