

تدمر

Return to Palmyra

Discussion Topics for University and High School Instructors

This guide is available in English and Arabic. Arabic translation by Dr. Helen Malko

The Getty Research Institute's [Return to Palmyra](#) online experience narrates the history of the Syrian city of Palmyra (Tadmur, in Arabic) from antiquity to the present through focused essays on this historic urban center and more than 100 images documenting its reception and influence in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This exploration of the history, artworks, and stories of Palmyra provides instructors at the university and high school level with rich material to engage students in the study of this famed caravan city. In addition to the exhibition, the resources [here](#) provide opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching.

- University classrooms: Arabic and English language courses, art history, Middle Eastern studies, history, political science, archaeology, digital humanities, religion, urban studies, gender studies, museum studies, and intersections of these areas
- High school classrooms: art history and social studies classes



Educational Uses

- Explore the long history of this World Heritage Site from antiquity to the present
- Expand the purview of ancient art and architecture beyond a Greco-Roman focus
- Analyze the continuities and changes in perceptions of Palmyra from the beginning of the 18th century to the end of the 19th century
- Utilize the link at the top of each page to toggle between Arabic and English as a language-learning tool
- Learn about the role the local Palmyrene community has played in maintaining the site and keeping its memory alive



Opening page of *Return to Palmyra* (English): *Valley of the Tombs from Necropolis, Palmyra, Syria*, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, 2005. C-print. 54 × 42 in. (137.2 × 106.7 cm). © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg. Getty Research Institute, 2017.R.21.

Highlights

- An [interview](#) with Waleed Khaled al-As'ad, director emeritus of antiquities and museums at Palmyra. Born and raised in Palmyra, he describes the interdependency between a historic site and its local community.
- An [essay](#) about the history of Palmyra from the ancient to the present by Joan Aruz. Aruz is curator emerita at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and former head of its Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art.
- The [exhibit](#) “The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra” presents rare 18th-century etchings and 19th-century photographs, considered to be the first made of the city. The exhibit contains explanatory texts on Palmyra’s ancient and early modern history and includes a downloadable [Exhibition Checklist](#).
- For further study, a [bibliography](#), related [online resources](#), and informative [videos](#) are found in the “Additional Resources & Information” section [here](#).



Opening page of *Return to Palmyra* (Arabic): *Valley of the Tombs from Necropolis, Palmyra, Syria*, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, 2005. C-print. 54 × 42 in. (137.2 × 106.7 cm). © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg. Getty Research Institute, 2017.R.21.

University Classroom Materials

Discussion Questions

1. Compare the 18th-century etchings of Palmyra to the 19th-century photographs of the same ruins ([here](#), under the “City Plan & Monuments” section of the exhibition):
 - A. What similarities and differences do you observe?
 - B. How have the monuments changed over the period in which they were documented?
 - C. How do the different processes—printmaking and photography—impact the ways the site is viewed?
 - D. Compare these images of Palmyra to those found on Google Earth and consider the same questions.
 - E. How do artistic records help us to understand a place that today only exists in fragments, in oral history and memory, and in the imagination?
 - F. In the exhibition, photographs are used as a form of archaeological recovery. What do these historic photographs show us, and how do they help us to reconstruct ancient Palmyra?
 - G. Research current ways ancient Palmyra is being reconstructed. Examples may be found at the following links:
 - i. <https://newpalmyra.org/>
 - ii. <https://archeologie.culture.fr/palmyre/en> (also in Arabic)
 - iii. [https://pointcloud.ucsd.edu/Palmyra Temple of Bel.html](https://pointcloud.ucsd.edu/Palmyra_Temple_of_Bel.html)

2. Read the biographies and view the works of Louis-François Cassas and Louis Vignes in “The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra” (from [here](#), after the intro, scroll down to “Creating Palmyra’s Legacy”). Based on this reading, and considering the colonial time period in which these men were working, explore the following:
- A. How would you analyze their roles as, respectively, a draftsman and a photographer?
 - B. How do Cassas and Vignes present images of Palmyra to a primarily Western audience? What elements of the site do they represent or even dramatize? Are there certain angles or lighting they employ to emphasize specific aspects of the architecture and the landscape?



Temple of Bel, Louis Vignes, 1864. Albumen print. 8.8 × 11.4 in. (22.5 × 29 cm). Getty Research Institute, 2015.R.15.

3. Note that some of these images have human figures while others present “empty” landscapes:
 - A. What does each suggest about Palmyra as a site and the people who live there?
 - B. How can we understand Palmyra as a living World Heritage Site that has been continually inhabited from the prehistoric to the present? You might compare the etchings and photographs of Palmyra with the photographs in Waleed Khaled al-As’ad’s interview ([here](#)) about growing up in the Syrian city.
4. Choose an image or a piece of artwork presented in the exhibition (see the Exhibition Checklist [here](#)) and address the following:
 - A. What culture produced this work? What knowledge do we need to properly contextualize the work in order to understand the purposes it serves and the ideas it represents?
 - B. What can this work tell us about the culture that made it and the culture that it documents or represents?



Imaginary view of Tetrapylon, anonymous artist after Louis-François Cassas, ca. 1799.
Proof-plate etching. 17.9 × 25.7 in. (45.5 × 65.5 cm). Getty Research Institute, 840011.

5. This exhibition may be taught in conjunction with the introduction to Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978). (Read the introduction [here](#).)
 - A. Considering Said's introduction to *Orientalism*, discuss the agency with which both Cassas and Vignes present the images of ancient Palmyra. By looking at ancient Palmyra with Said's work in mind, do these artists portray the city, its culture, and its people through a Western lens?
 - B. Who is the primary audience for Cassas and Vignes? Are these artists presenting the visual imagery of ancient Palmyra from an Orientalist point of view? If so, how?
 - C. What solutions would you propose to mitigate the impact of Orientalism in representing ancient Palmyra in 18th- and 19th-century artworks? How would you propose to decolonize the mediated images of Cassas and Vignes? Do you think the exhibition provides sources that help accomplish this? Explain.

- D. Are there instances where Orientalism has been woven into museum practice? Can you think of specific museum collections or exhibitions that reflect this?
 - E. Discuss ways in which museums can decolonize their collections and exhibitions. What are the benefits of reviewing problematic collecting and presentation practices in museums?
 - F. In what ways are seemingly neutral images actually mediated by cultural bias?
6. This exhibit may be taught in conjunction with Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" (1818) ([here](#)) to discuss ideas of ruins, memory, and nostalgia with regard to Romanticism:
- A. How do the etchings and photographs in the exhibition capture a similar or different sensibility from that of Shelley's poem? Explore [here](#).
 - B. Consider the intersections of Romanticism and archaeology when Shelley wrote his poem. How are they similar? How are they different? Consider ways in which the field of archaeology has evolved since the early 19th century.

7. Read the Getty Iris blog post “Ancient Portrait Bust from Palmyra Joins the Collection of the Getty Villa” ([here](#)). Consider the 3rd-century CE funerary portrait of Hadrat Katthina, daughter of Sha’ad, from Palmyra (see also several views available [here](#)).



Funerary relief of Hadrat Katthina, daughter of Sha’ad, from Palmyra, unknown maker, 200–220 CE. Limestone and pigment. 20 × 18 × 8 in. (50.8 × 45.7 × 20.3 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019.12.

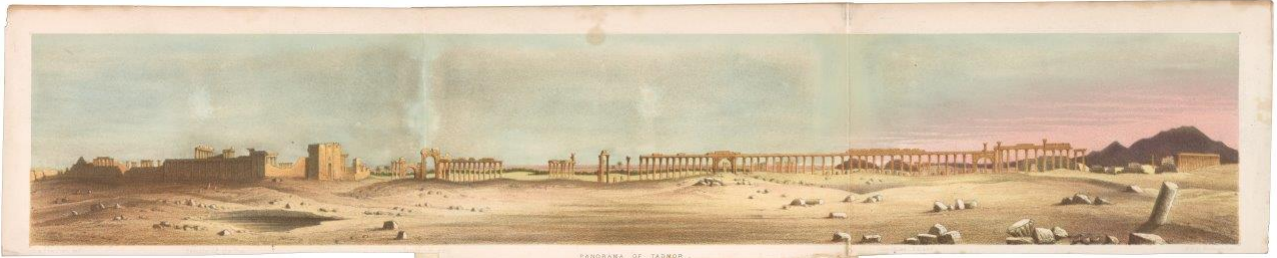
- A. What functions does this portrait fulfill, and what social, cultural, and economic messages can we infer about Palmyrene women through this depiction and the subject’s various accoutrements?

8. Watch the video “Faces of Ancient Palmyra” in the “Additional Resources & Information” section ([here](#)), and read the Getty Iris blog post “Funerary Portraiture Helps Scholars Reconstruct the Social History of Ancient Palmyra” ([here](#)).
- A. Considering the female representation of ancient Palmyrene funerary portraits, compare and contrast the clothing, stylistic variations, and overall composition of the funerary bust of the so-called Beauty of Palmyra (featured in the video and [here](#)) and the funerary relief of Hadirat Katthina (see above and several views available [here](#)).



Funerary bust of the so-called Beauty of Palmyra, Palmyrene, anonymous maker, 190–210 CE. Limestone. 21.6 × 16.1 in. (55 × 41 cm). Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, 2795. Photo: Ole Haupt.

9. Read about Queen Zenobia in the “Rediscovery” section (from [here](#), scroll down to “Queen Zenobia’s Legacy”), and read the Getty Iris blog post “Zenobia, Visionary Queen of Ancient Palmyra” ([here](#)).
- A. Consider the two European paintings of Queen Zenobia (at i. and ii. below). Discuss how they emphasize a fictionalized image of the queen that is gendered, romanticized, and misappropriated.
- i. ***Queen Zenobia Addressing Her Soldiers***, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, 1725/1730. Oil on canvas, 102 15/16 × 144 in. (261.4 × 365.8 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1961.9.42, Samuel H. Kress Collection. Image Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington (see [here](#)).
- ii. ***Zenobia's Last Look on Palmyra***, Herbert G. Schmalz, 1888. Oil on canvas, 72.2 × 60.4 in. (183.4 × 153.6 cm). Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australian Government Grant 1890, 0.86 (see [here](#)).
10. Watch the video “Lady Strangford's Travel Account of Crossing the Syrian Desert” in the “Additional Resources & Information” section ([here](#)). Consider the three color lithographs by Nicholas Hanhart after Emily Anne Beaufort Smythe, Viscountess Strangford, in the “Rediscovery” section: *Monumental Arch*; *Sheik Miguel, of the Anazeh Tribe*; and *Panorama of Palmyra* (from [here](#), scroll down to “19th-Century Travel,” or find the lithographs in the Exhibition Checklist [here](#)).



Panorama of Palmyra, Nicholas Hanhart after Emily Anne Beaufort Smythe, Viscountess Strangford. Color lithograph. 4.3 × 20.4 in. (11 × 52 cm). From Emily Anne Beaufort Smythe, Viscountess Strangford, *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines* (London, 1862), facing frontispiece. Getty Research Institute, 3026-718.

- A. How do these lithographs compare with the photos by Vignes taken just a few years after the lithographs were published?
 - B. Consider that Lady Strangford included the detailed lithograph *Sheik Miguel, of the Anazeh Tribe* in her travel account, *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines* (1862). What can we gather about her role as an active participant in Palmyra versus Vignes's role as reflected in his photographs?
 - C. Given the obstacles faced by women travelers and photographers as explained in the video, and knowing the biography of Lady Strangford, how would you consider her body of work? Should it be compared to that of Vignes, or can it be considered as an independent body of work? Which approach would you take, and why?
11. Examine the American Colony photograph of a group of women and children refurbishing a mud home in Palmyra in Joan Aruz's essay (from [here](#), click on the orange drop-down "Sections" menu, then click on "Legacy: Palmyra in the Local Imagination" and scroll down to figure 11).
- A. Compare and contrast the women depicted in funerary portraits (see above) with the women and children in this photograph. Discuss how the American

Colony photograph brings an often underrepresented section of society—women of different socioeconomic status—to the foreground.

12. Consider the photograph *Valley of the Tombs from Necropolis, Palmyra, Syria*, by Ursula Schulz-Dornburg on the opening page of the exhibition ([here](#)) and the lithograph *Panorama of Palmyra*, from Viscountess Strangford (see above).

A. Although these two works were created nearly 150 years apart and were executed in different media, what do they have in common? Discuss atmospheric perspective and use of scale: How are these visual elements conveyed? What aspects of Palmyra are both artists emphasizing?

13. Consider the role of British political officer, administrator, and archaeologist Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), who visited Palmyra in May 1900 and whose archive is housed at Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom. In 2017, the Gertrude Bell Archive was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in recognition of its global significance. Explore the archive’s website at <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/>.

Bell traveled extensively throughout the Middle East and developed a passion for the Arab people, their language, and their culture. She eventually became honorary director of antiquities in Iraq, where she was instrumental in founding the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. In 1900, Bell traveled to Palmyra and documented her visit in a series of letters and photographs.

Letters

On 20 May 1900, Bell and her colleagues arrive. In a letter of the same date to an unknown recipient (see [here](#)), she describes arriving at Palmyra after having “marched 27 hours.”

Bell writes that the group explored Palmyra and the Valley of the Tombs on 21 May ([here](#)) and 22 May ([here](#)). On 23 May, they rode out ([here](#)).

She also made diary entries, and while most of these mirror the letters, the 22 May entry ([here](#)) describes additional observations in the tower tombs.

Photographs

There are 50 photographs of Palmyra taken by Bell in the Gertrude Bell Archive. Find [here](#) by entering “Palmyra” under “Search all photos.”

- A. How does Bell describe Palmyra in her letters? Does she reflect the same sentiment in her photographs?
- B. What does a photograph tell us about the photographer and the photographer’s possible intent in taking an image? Discuss whether Bell’s photographs represent an Orientalist point of view.
- C. In comparing Bell’s photographs to those of Vignes, consider how gender could play a role in what each frames.
- D. You may wish to screen the documentary film *Letters from Baghdad* (2016) to gain a contextual understanding of Bell’s role within early 20th-century British imperial policy in the Middle East. Go [here](#) to see the trailer and options to rent or purchase, or look for the film at your local library.



Detail of lintel with three kneeling camels, Palmyrene, anonymous maker, ca. 200 CE.
Museum of Palmyra, N°: A24/1226. Photo courtesy Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar.

14. In the essay by Joan Aruz, read the section “The Caravan Trade and Palmyra’s Eastern Contacts” (from [here](#), click on the orange drop-down “Sections” menu, then click on the title). Consider Palmyra’s place along the Silk Road and discuss how, in addition to material goods, ideas regarding religion, language, or artistic styles may have traveled over land and sea to shape its culture.

15. Many archaeological sites have been altered by earlier 19th-century Western excavators who focused on saving references to European antiquity at the expense of displacing the original inhabitants of the region. Debate how, or if, the destroyed site of Palmyra could be rebuilt or re-“imagined.” Could this be done in ways that take into account how people lived and still live there?

16. Consider the work of contemporary Syrian artist Hrair Sarkissian, in particular his series *Final Flight*, which narrates a story about the near-extinct northern bald ibis and the bird’s migratory connection to Palmyra ([here](#)).
 - A. As an artist who has been displaced from his own home, what emotions does Sarkissian convey through his art? How does he use the play of light and shadow to evoke a sense of melancholy? How does he present views of architecture and city scenes to create a sense of emptiness?

- B. How might the work of Sarkissian, who grew up in the region, take a different approach from that of a visitor like Cassas, who spent one month at the site sketching the ruins and creating reconstructed views of the ancient city, or a photographer like Vignes, who only spent a few days documenting the ancient monuments with a camera?
- C. How does Sarkissian, as a local artist, bring attention to the consequences of war in the region? Consider Sarkissian's depiction of Palmyra as a World Heritage Site in relation to how Cassas represented the landscape or how Vignes chose to frame it in his viewfinder. Does the historic period (18th, 19th, and 21st centuries) in which each of these artists investigated Palmyra have a bearing on the outcomes of their work?



Detail of funerary bust with inscription "Maqî son of M'anî," Palmyrene, anonymous maker, ca. 200 CE. Limestone. The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa, 88.AA.50.

17. In *Return to Palmyra*, Waleed Khaled al-As'ad discusses his feelings about seeing funerary heads that were taken from the ancient tombs in Palmyra and are now owned by and on exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Lyon, France, where he currently lives. (Read the interview [here](#).) The museum in Lyon is one example of many museums worldwide that, in seeking to build their "encyclopedic collections," have acquired sculptural fragments from Palmyra. For example, see the bas-relief with Bel and Baalshamin ([here](#)) and the funerary relief of Malikou ([here](#)).

- A. Consider the historical significance of these two objects to their home communities in Syria and the broader Middle East, as well as their new communities in France. What importance do these objects hold for each?

- B. Take into account the provenance of these objects. Under what conditions were these objects acquired by the museum? Were these objects looted or forcibly taken during a period of war, global conflict, or colonization?
 - C. Examine the role of the museum in the preservation, conservation, and display of these objects since their acquisition. Do museums have an ethical responsibility to preserve world heritage?
 - D. Consider how these two objects are displayed in the museum.
 - E. Explore the history of the universal survey museum, or universal museum. (Related resources are under “Relevant literature” at the end of these discussion questions.) What are the function and objectives of this type of museum? What are its ideological objectives? How does it define “universal heritage”? Who benefits from the category of “universal heritage”?
 - F. Consider the economic value of these two objects.
18. Discuss the question of repatriation of art objects, an issue very much in the news today and one that many museums are facing.
- A. What are the pros and cons of returning art objects to their countries of origin? Contemplate whether European institutions have always “protected” foreign art objects (during World War II, for example). Consider to whom looted art often gets sold.
 - B. National boundaries tend to be politically determined lines that define a certain geographic region, whereas cultures transcend national boundaries. When an object is repatriated from a museum, does the art locate itself to its

original culture, or does it take on a new cultural or sociopolitical agency? Can cultural context be reconstituted to an object that is repatriated?

- C. Considering the idea of repatriation, how do we define ownership of an object? Does the museum function as an owner or as a mere repository for material culture?
- D. According to the report “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics” (2018) by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, today commonly known as the Sarr-Savoy Report (see [here](#)), what is the difference between restitution and repatriation? Would restitution be a possible solution to the endless debate over repatriation of material culture?
- E. Given the fraught history of universal survey museums and particularly their development within Western colonialism, how can contemporary museum practice address issues regarding the negativity that surrounds these museums? For example, how can museums include the voices of the Syrian diaspora in France to better understand the cultural specificities?
- F. Imagine you are a museum curator. How you would approach the idea of repatriation? Can you strike a balance on the debate over repatriation? Are there any modes of display you would consider? What sorts of dialogue would you have with the community (including educators, curators and the museum community, and members of the culture or country from which the objects originated, as well as members of the local diaspora)?
- G. Are there any examples of museums that are already engaging in such practices? Identify some examples of local, national, or perhaps international

museums, and discuss how they are approaching these sensitive and complex issues. Have they been successful?

Relevant literature on this subject includes the following:

Azoulay, Ariella. "Understanding the Migrant Caravan in the Context of Imperial Plunder and Dispossession." *Hyperallergic*, 29 November 2018.

Azoulay, Ariella. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso, 2019.

Çelik, Zeynep. *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016.

Cuno, James. *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Curtis, Neil G. W. "Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 117–27.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09647770600402102>.

"Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums." Published December 2002. Text available here: https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/news/news-item/news/1999_2013/hm11_1_93/?lng=.

Duncan, Carol, and Alan Wallach. "The Universal Survey Museum." *Art History* 3, no. 4 (December 1980): 448–69.

German, Senta. "Repatriating Artworks." Khan Academy. Accessed 10 June 2021.
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/special-topics-art-history/arches-at-risk-cultural-heritage-education-series/whose-art/a/repatriating-artworks>.

Hicks, Dan. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

Lyons, Claire. "Thinking about Antiquities: Museums and Internationalism." *International Journal of Cultural Property* 21, no. 3 (2014): 1–15.

Marlowe, Elizabeth. "Seizure of Looted Antiquities Illuminates What Museums Want Hidden." Khan Academy. (Originally published in *Hyperallergic*, 6 September 2018.)
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/roman/x7e914f5b:roman-art-archaeology-and-museums/a/seizure-of-looted-antiquities-illuminates-what-museums-want-hidden>.

Procter, Alice. *The Whole Story: The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums and Why We Need to Talk About It*. London: Octopus Books, 2020.

[Sarr-Savoy Report]. Sarr, Felwine, and Bénédicte Savoy. "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics." Report, November 2018.
http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

Winter, Irene J. "Review: Who Owns Antiquity?" *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (December 2009): 522–26.



Temple of Bel, Lepagelet and Pierre-Gabriel Berthault after Louis-François Cassas. Etching. Plate mark: 11.8 × 18.5 in. (30 × 47 cm). From *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phœnicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte* (Paris, ca. 1799), vol. 1, pl. 35. Getty Research Institute, 840011.

High School Classroom Materials

Activities

1. From the online exhibition, choose a work of architecture such as the Temple of Bel, in the “City Plan & Monuments” section (from [here](#), hover and click on “Temple of Bel”), or a work of sculpture such as the so-called Beauty of Palmyra, in the “Ancient” section (from [here](#), scroll down to the work, under “Funerary Sculpture”). Dissect the hybrid of styles. Which features owe to Greco-Roman influence, and what aspects show an influence from Middle Eastern sources?
2. Choose an art activity such as painting, drawing, collaging, photography, or meme-making, and create your own project inspired by Palmyra and the exhibition.
3. Make a photographic documentation of your own neighborhood as a kind of 21st-century survey.



Temple of Bel, Louis Vignes, 1864. Albumen print. 8.8 × 11.4 in. (22.5 × 29 cm). Getty Research Institute, 2015.R.15.



City plan of Palmyra, Louis Perrier after Louis-François Cassas. Etching. Plate mark: 26.3 × 18.5 in. (66.5 × 47 cm). From *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phœnicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte* (Paris, ca. 1799), vol. 1, pl. 26. Getty Research Institute, 840011.

Discussion Questions

1. Explore the “City Plan & Monuments” section ([here](#)). Then read the following explanations of art-making techniques: the Metropolitan Museum of Art on printmaking, specifically etching ([here](#)); and Urth Magazine’s online article “Origins of Travel Photography” ([here](#)). How do techniques of reproduction—etching and photography—influence the appearance of a work describing or documenting Palmyra?
2. How does the style of the Louis-François Cassas etchings (which are a type of printmaking) fit into Neoclassicism? (From [here](#), after the intro, scroll down to the etchings, under “Creating Palmyra’s Legacy.”) There is a good resource for learning about Neoclassicism [here](#). Explore the “Neoclassical Tradition” section of the exhibition (from [here](#), scroll down). How might portfolios of the Cassas etchings have influenced art in Europe in the 18th century?
3. Use the historical and not-so-historical information surrounding Queen Zenobia to discuss the idea of feminine rulers in the ancient world (from [here](#) in the “Rediscovery” section, scroll down to “Queen Zenobia’s Legacy”). Given the diversity of racial representation in ancient Palmyra, how would you consider her portrayal regarding race and ethnicity as a figure from ancient Syria? As you review the artworks in this section, think about what the artists are seeking to convey in their representations of this beloved queen.

Please send comments to Frances Terpak and Moira Day at Palmyra@Getty.edu.

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URL: https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/palmyra/index.html