

Activity Idea

Coffee Culture Through History

Recommended for Adults

Coffee culture has developed in parallel with world history ever since the brewing and later expansion of the coffee industry starting in the mid-15th century. That means that engagement with this culture and its many incarnations around the world is also an inroad into local customs, economic and cultural trends, and of course, food habits. The following resources are meant to give you a start on your explorations into world history through the lens of the coffee bean, with questions to encourage you to connect more deeply with what you see and read.

Check out this article from the *Public Domain Review*, "The Lost World of the London Coffeehouse" which takes you inside London's coffee culture of the 16th-17th centuries.

<https://tinyurl.com/londoncoffeehouses>

If you were sitting in one of London's many coffeehouses back then, what would you see? Would you be talking to a stranger? Reading a pamphlet?

Now, take a look at this episode of *Core Kyoto* on "Kyoto's Cafe Culture" from Japan's NHK-World channel <https://tinyurl.com/kyotocoffeeculture>.

How has coffee culture changed over several hundred years and half a world of distance? Do you think service or quality of coffee is more important?

Did you know that espresso, which is such a huge part of our coffee culture today, is only just over a hundred years old? This article from the *Smithsonian Magazine*, "The Long History of the Espresso Machine," delves into how espresso machines were developed in Italy.

<https://tinyurl.com/historyofespresso>

Do you think that the stylish design of the machines changed the way people felt in coffee shops? How does a quick shot of espresso differ from the mood established in some of Kyoto's coffee shops?

It is said that the cultivation of coffee began in Ethiopia. And even today, it makes up roughly 67% of Ethiopia's export revenue? Watch the documentary *Black Gold* via Kanopy to understand coffee culture from the perspective of the growers. <https://tinyurl.com/blackgolddoc>

Does seeing coffee as a commodity change your appreciation for it? For more on specialty coffee as an industry see this overview from *The Encyclopedia of Emerging Industries*:

<https://tinyurl.com/coffeeindustry>



If you'd like to continue to pursue a wider view of coffee-growing cultures, and to settle down with a book or two (and a cup of coffee?), try this "documentary novel" from the 1930s following coffee's journey around the world, *Coffee: The Epic of a Commodity* by H.E. Jacob on Hoopla <https://tinyurl.com/coffeeepic>

Learn more about where coffee is produced today in the well-reviewed offering, *Where the Wild Coffee Grows* by Jeff Koehler, a lively natural history informed by the author's historical research and visits to growing sites. Find it on Overdrive <https://tinyurl.com/wildcoffeegrows>

Getting back "in the cup," here is a short video from the YouTube channel Great Big Story on "5 Deliciously Unique Coffees Around the World," which follows the making and drinking coffee in five diverse locales. <https://youtu.be/pVh6yN36M0A>

How do you think the daily routine of the people in the video affect the way they enjoy their coffee? What can you conclude about the social aspects of coffee?

Speaking of social aspects, the ambiance of public coffee-drinking around the world would not be complete without people conversing across the table, between them coffee, and around them music. Famed tango composer Ástor Piazzolla knew this when he included "Café, 1930" as a movement his composition, *Histoire du Tango*, which covers four stages of tango development. Listen to "Café, 1930" on Freegal <https://tinyurl.com/cafe1930>

Imagine how a coffee shop playing this tune would look. Is it like any you've been to before? Maybe on this journey?

Spark an Idea!

Hopefully you have enjoyed delving into the history of coffee through places and ages. There is certainly much more to watch, read, and listen to on the topic, but if you would like to get creative, here are some prompts to get you going:

- Write a poem or piece of flash fiction about meeting someone at a café. Who do you meet, a friend or enemy? What time of day is it? What year? What's happening in the world? Most importantly, is the coffee good?
- Go to your favorite museum website, or one that has lots of art like wikiart.org. Peruse the paintings and choose the ones you would hang in your café. Share the collection with friends and see if the mood you're trying to create comes across.
- Do you come from a place with an interesting coffee culture? Or do you have a self-made coffee style or routine that you love? Let us know on Twitter or Instagram @LACountyLibrary or #LACountyLibrary!