My ancient art courses initially piqued my interest in *The Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tadmor, in the desert* (1753), a travelogue compiled by British antiquarian Robert Wood, who “rediscovered” Palmyra (modern Tadmor), a former Roman province in Syria. Researching its illustrations in my 18th-century European art course allowed me to tap into the cultural values at play in Enlightenment Britain to access the messages in Wood’s illustrations. Ultimately, this paper was my case study for how we might piece together art historical evidence and archaeological data to understand how Early Modern travelers engaged with ancient Middle Eastern ruins and influenced their complicated afterlives.

I focused mostly on the etching of a monumental tower tomb, which helped me understand Wood’s approach to the site at large. Because Palmyra’s archaeological landscape has since changed dramatically as a result of French conservation and the Islamic State’s destruction of its monuments, my most challenging question was which of the site’s specific tombs was being represented. To address this, I pulled together every source I was able to find that described or represented Palmyra’s funerary monuments. Archaeological reports weren’t easily accessible, but I found success in scouring bibliographies (especially in Agnes Henning’s “The Tower Tombs of Palmyra”) to identify these sources, requesting them through ILL, and communicating with art library staff to access and consult images from books in the collection.

From this data, I realized that Wood’s tower was a composite of multiple from the site. This, I argued, offered a seemingly representative sample of a type of monument that, in effect, reduced its unique local style to core features of classical architecture. I was only able to make this conjecture by bringing in scholarship on the historical context of Wood’s expedition. In the process, I realized that previous work had not properly contextualized Wood’s travels as an extension of the Grand Tour, a contemporary movement that popularized visits to classical ruins, primarily in Italy. In a chapter from Jason Kelly’s book *The Society of Dilettanti*, I learned that Wood’s crew embarked on their travels to Syria from Italy, where they had been staying on extended trips. Wood’s obvious association with the Italian Grand Tour validated my use of Sigrid De Jong’s “Staging Ruins: Paestum and Theatricality,” which gave me a sense of the vacant, well-kempt, and canonical images of ruins that Grand Tourists anticipated on their travels. These expectations, then, must have extended to sites of the Ottoman Empire with ruins of former Roman cities.

These sources gave me a jumping off point for considering how Wood dealt with the uncanonical nature of Palmyra’s ruins, as the Roman-style architecture simplified in his illustrations was actually layered with multicultural motifs. The contemporary site also contained local dwellings and Islamic and Turkish vestiges, which I learned from Mulder’s “Imagining
Localities of Antiquity in Islamic Society.” The styles and omissions evident in Wood’s etchings, therefore, aligned with my conviction that the values of Grand Tourists in Italy extended beyond the Western Mediterranean’s borders.

To better understand the decisions made for these illustrations, I turned to contemporary drawings of ruins found in Italy, which mainly took the form of dramatic views and architectural fantasies and didn't match the styles of Wood’s plates. Moser’s article “Making Expert Knowledge Known” made me realize that, while Wood’s tower tomb diverged from contemporary ruin etchings, it aligned with the conventions of small finds illustrations (like potsherds), which, at the time, were starting to be portrayed like scientific data. I found Moser’s piece most valuable for mediating the connections between Wood’s illustrations and contemporary stylistic trends, which helped me understand how Wood’s tour of Syria was geared towards cataloging the site in a way that aligned with the Enlightenment’s growing interest in Encyclopedic categorizing. These stylistic decisions also, I realized, helped Wood seamlessly depict Palmyra as just a “Roman” site under the guise of scientific objectivity.

My primary takeaway from this process was the importance of multidisciplinary research in solving complex art historical problems, as sources from Archaeology and Anthropology made my analysis more well-rounded. I also discovered that museum databases provide amazing access to unpublished comparanda — objects in the British Museum’s catalog demonstrated the influence of Wood’s plates on contemporary material culture. Though complicated and time-intensive for a seven-week term, my method of adding context to archaeological illustrations from a particular time and culture is one that is replicable and scalable. I am hoping to explore lingering research questions in the future through a larger project on Wood’s publication.