



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2014 Volume I: Understanding History and Society through Images, 1776-1914

Introduction

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The problem we set ourselves in this seminar was to examine the ways in which visual images can play a central role in teaching and understanding history. We live in a society dominated by the visual. Students of all ages have a multitude of imagery at their fingertips; internet sources have democratized access to fine art and documentary materials as never before. We are only beginning to deal with the problem of an excess of visual material, and one of the main challenges in the classroom is developing a sense of critical engagement with images and with works of art. As a professor of the History of Art, I learned a great deal from discussing this issue with a group of teachers whose students range from second to twelfth grades.

Fellows, then, set out to explore at methods for understanding culture and society through art. The seminar proceeded historically, and was focused on the 'long' nineteenth century, from the American Revolution to World War I, 1776-1914. A major focus lay in the development of verbal skills in the description and critical analysis of images - not through the use of art history jargon, but through close looking, visual and contextual analysis. We worked together to discover and refine ways in which the analysis of works of art can enable students, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, to understand history and make a more direct connection with the experience of historical individuals. Moving beyond the use of works of art as historical documents, we discussed the ways in which engagement with an image, as with a story or novel, can encourage empathy and access to the experience of people with different cultural, ethnic or economic backgrounds.

As important for the seminar as the development of critical skills for analysis digitally transmitted images was a return to direct, unmediated encounters with the historical object. The case studies were all drawn from Yale's rich collections, but each member of the seminar gave serious thought to the availability of historical materials in museums, collections or historic sites near their schools. It was exciting to see the ways in which local resources could be incorporated creatively into teaching, and many of the curriculum units make excellent use of visits to and the study of local museums, historic sites, landscapes and architecture as ways of bringing history alive. The works studied at Yale can also be included in classroom teaching as all the paintings and many of the works on paper owned by the Yale University Museums are now available free of charge in good quality digital images from the museum Web sites. The curriculum units presented here are largely illustrated with materials from Yale collections and could be adapted for use anywhere with access to the same corpus of images, with the addition of local materials where possible (see <http://britishart.yale.edu/collections/search> and <http://ecatalogue.art.yale.edu/search.htm>).

At the beginning of the seminar, Fellows were asked to consider the following questions when confronting an image, and to consider whether or how the same questions could be addressed in the classroom:

- What do you see?
- What do you think were the artist's intentions?
- Who was the image intended to appeal to/who were the audience or patrons?
- What does this image tell us about society at the time?
- Are there parallels with concerns in our contemporary world?
- How does the artist represent differences of gender/class/race?

Almost every meeting of the seminar included a session of 40 minutes discussing a small number of works – three or four paintings at most – hanging on the walls of the galleries. This intense exposure to works of art proved stimulating and every member of the group offered considered and often inspiring responses to the work of art. In many cases, the Fellows drew on their own expertise, in history, literature or studio art practice, to illuminate the work we were examining. Particularly important was the range of different experience the Fellows brought to our discussions. We had representatives from Richmond, Virginia, from Tulsa, Oklahoma, from Delaware, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and from the Bay Area in northern California.

Each of these regions has experienced U.S. history differently, and there was an emphasis in seminar discussions on the ways in which teaching could draw on local history, local buildings and collections, and on the oral histories that students may have encountered in their own families and communities.

Audrelia Dugi, from Monument Valley High School, shared the experiences of her students, who are almost all members of the Diné Nation (whom Audrelia also names with the familiar term Navajo), negotiating the long history of Native American peoples. She emphasized the persistence and power of Navajo traditions, and created a curriculum unit in which her own students, most of whom she describes as being of Navajo origin, engage with the material traces of earlier people, the Anasazi, who occupied the Monument Valley area centuries before the arrival of the Navajo in the nineteenth century. Cultural traces of the Anasazi in the local landscape include inscribed rock carvings whose sign systems, observed in site visits, form the basis for creative projects in the classroom.

Rodney Robinson's curriculum unit utilizes the rich material survival of nineteenth-century buildings in Richmond, Virginia, to engage with the history of slavery and its legacies in the community. Visiting sites within a few blocks of his school, Rodney is able to confront the physical remains of the system that condemned African Americans to a state of "social death". There could be few more vivid uses of the historical fabric of a townscape.

Meg Deweese and Merry Ostheimer both crafted curriculum units around objects of local and national significance held in museums near their schools, which encourage group visits. Meg's course unit, designed for 8th graders, illuminates the complex and controversial histories of Westward expansion, using the peerless collection of paintings, sculpture and works on paper in the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa. Students are encouraged, however, not merely to absorb the dominant nineteenth-century ideologies explicit in the paintings, which celebrate the achievements of the European-American expansion westwards; rather, they are encouraged to think about the period from multiple points of view, including that of displaced Native American people. Merry's course unit, for 2nd graders, uses the resources of the Delaware Art Museum to focus on archetypes of masculinity – pirates in the wonderfully colorful and vivid illustrations of Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth – and femininity – in the images of mothers and children produced by Pennsylvania-born Mary Cassatt. Classes will be based on the museum's spectacular collection of original artworks and a museum visit will be the centerpiece of the course unit.

Although we moved chronologically through the nineteenth century, beginning with American works from the

Revolutionary period, the seminar also encouraged Fellows to engage with recent art-historical thinking, and to consider how these ideas could percolate into classroom teaching practice with students at various stages. We opened the seminar with a lively discussion of John Berger's provocative book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) with screening of part of one of the original TV programs on which the book was based. Berger, we agreed, still has the power to make us re-examine our assumptions and look at the work of art in a more vivid, sometimes political, fashion. Throughout the seminar, our thinking was structured around three main themes, which represent three major schools of thought in recent art-historical writing:

- A. Gender and Society (informed by feminist scholarship in art history)
- B. Class and Society (informed by the 'social history of art')
- C. Race and Society (informed by recent thinking in African American studies and post-colonial theory).

These themes emerged gradually and were interwoven with each other as we moved chronologically through the materials and through the readings assigned to the Fellows. The Fellows were encouraged to pursue research interests and develop curriculum unit proposals based on the works of art discussed during the seminars. Many of the topics emerged organically from conversations that began in front of a particular painting.

The nineteenth century is notable for the diversity of its visual productions; the period is characterized by work in many genres and media, of hugely differing sizes and costs to the purchaser. We began by looking at figures in the landscape in British art c.1770, in the work of Arthur Devis and Thomas Gainsborough, to form a notion of the world before the three revolutions – the industrial revolution, the American Revolution, and the French revolution – that shaped the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

Questions of race and representation are central issues in today's media environment, and an understanding of the history of these tropes and conventions is an important preparation for adult life. Children and teenagers are adept users of image technologies, and the history of photography offers immediate parallels with the kinds of image manipulation familiar to all today through digital software.

The American Revolutionary period provided the material for Alexandra Edwards's curriculum unit for middle school students, which juxtaposes historical artifacts from the period – paintings, prints, furniture, household wares and political cartoons – with recent fiction that dramatizes the experience of the Revolution from points of view different from those enshrined in standard histories. *Chains* and *Forge*, two novels by Laurie H. Anderson, for example, see the famous events of the period through the eyes of African American characters, principally the escaped slave, Curzon. Addressing the same period, Kristie Reid, whose students are also to read *Forge*, draws particular attention to gender and the role of women and Native Americans in the Revolutionary conflict. Based on exceptionally thorough and well-focused historical research, the course unit uses visual representations of the Revolution by John Trumbull and other artists, while offering students the critical vocabulary with which to critique these works. At issue is the evidential value of the "fictional" representation in understanding the past.

The combination of powerful racial politics and the visual politics of the camera underpinned our discussions of the Civil War, instantiated through the work of photographers such as Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan, as well as painters and engravers including Winslow Homer. Tara Ann Carter's enterprising curriculum unit challenges conventions of racial representation, using today's technology (notably Twitter feeds, banned in some classrooms, but welcomed in hers, under controlled conditions) to confront stereotypical forms of image such as nineteenth-century minstrelsy. By looking closely at a group of paintings representing African American men and women from around the time of the Civil War, her course unit

motivates high school students to make an active engagement with the image.

The Industrial Revolution, perhaps the greatest transformative series of events in modern history, is a complex phenomenon not easily grasped by children who have never known a non-mechanized, non-computerized world. Miles Greene's curriculum unit notes that the Industrial Revolution "acted as a major transitional force that resulted in the advent of cities, factories, urbanization, and new structuring around labor, class and power," and uses visual representations made in Britain and America, as well as textual primary sources, to dramatise these tremendous changes in social life, ecology and economic structures.

Questions of race, gender and the identity of the artist are uppermost in Kimberly Towne's innovative foregrounding of the African American female sculptor Edmonia Lewis. The curriculum unit explores the physical processes of making sculpture - including casting molten metal - and runs this against Victorian notions of "ladylike" behavior. Edmonia Lewis emerges as a pioneer across boundaries of gender and race, an inspiration, and the basis for creative experimentation in the classroom.

Jennifer Vermillion and Alveda Zahn made the exploration of works of art the basis for curriculum units that engaged with the great ethical issues of today, through consideration of historical examines. Alveda's curriculum unit opens with an acknowledgement of the terrible toll that gun violence and gang warfare claims in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood, where her school is situated. She uses strategies of close visual analysis of images of traumatic moments in the nation's past - the Battle of Bunker Hill, the slave market, and the Civil War for example - to focus students' attention on the dangers and repercussions of violence in society, and to provide language with which to process and reflect upon it. Jennifer Vermillion looks at traditions of civil disobedience as a "deliberate decision by an individual, who is representative of a group, to refuse to obey a law that conflicts with their conscience or a higher law." She adopts finely-honed strategies to provoke lively classroom discussion around such images as Paul Revere's engraving *The Bloody Massacre in King-Street, March 5, 1770* John Rogers sculpture *The Slave Auction, 1859*.

One of the most stimulating elements of the seminar was the discussion of teaching strategies: how to communicate in the classroom the ideas that were under discussion? I was consistently fascinated and impressed by the imagination displayed by all members of the seminar in formulating strategies for classroom teaching that could engage the students vividly. Particularly notable were ideas like: talking statues and costumed tableau vivant arrangements (proposed by Carol Boynton) and Fish Bowl discussions ("in which a small group of students engage in a discussion of the Essential Question while the remainder of the class observes and takes notes. Once the discussion is going well, discussion circle members may leave the circle and become observers and observers may come into the discussion") suggested as a follow-up to a Museum visit by Meg DeWeese. New modes of engaging with the visual image include a "silent gallery" of contemplation of works of art, proposed by Miles Greene, followed by writing "90 word descriptions" based on the museum label.

Altogether the seminar left me as leader convinced that the use of digital technologies in the classroom, and the careful incorporation of trips to visit local resources such as monuments, museums and historic districts, can greatly enhance the teaching of history in schools. While the proliferation of images in the contemporary world offers a challenge, threatening to create an environment of insistent contemporaneity that resists thoughtfulness or historical consciousness, the same digital ecology can provide a fertile space for developing an understanding of history through images. The use of art to teach history can operate simultaneously in the world of Google, Facebook and Twitter, and in the halls of museums, where historical objects, their aura intact in an age of mechanical reproduction, can still fascinate and inform young people from kindergarten to

college.

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