



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2017 Volume I: The Illustrated Page: Medieval Manuscripts to New Media

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## Introduction

by Jessica Brantley, Associate Professor of English

Picture books offer children their first way to engage the written word, but they also offer more experienced readers a rich series of encounters with complex representational systems. The Yale National Initiative seminar “The Illustrated Page: Medieval Manuscripts to New Media” considered how combinations of text and image can be read in a range of media forms, old and new. In the seminar, Fellows explored the ways that these combinations address all audiences as we considered the history of picture books, broadly understood—from the first board books that teach vocabulary to babies, to graphic novels and comics that engage teenagers, to avant-garde productions designed for the most sophisticated connoisseurs of contemporary art. As we moved through a series of case-studies, we asked the following questions: what are the effects of combining words with pictures in each of these examples? How does the combination change the experience of reading? When and how do picture-word combinations tell stories—or, conversely, when and how do they construct static emblems for meditation and reflection?

These questions enlivened discussion of a wide range of multi-media objects, beginning, in the Organizational Session, with Claudia Rankine’s prose-poem *Citizen*. We framed our discussion of *Citizen*, and launched our general conversation about how pictures engage with words, by reading an interview with W. J. T. Mitchell, a leading scholar of this subject. In the Intensive Session, we approached text-image relations through a series of historical case-studies. We explored objects such as the Bayeux Tapestry, a historical narrative told in pictures and captions; the St. Albans Psalter, a medieval manuscript that engages readers in prayer through both texts and illuminations; Renaissance emblem-books, which combine text with images in order to teach memorable moral lessons; William Blake’s self-produced, illustrated *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; Walker Evans and James Agee’s experimental collaboration in the photoessay *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; mid-twentieth century concrete poetry in which language becomes art; children’s picture books that depend on both media to instruct and delight; and, finally, exciting recent graphic novels such as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and John Lewis et al.’s *March* trilogy. We made visits to Beinecke Library to look at illuminated manuscripts and early engravings, and to the Yale Center for British Art to examine a number of William Blake’s works.

The seminar included Fellows from all over the United States teaching very diverse groups of students, from kindergarten to high-school seniors. The curriculum units they developed were accordingly quite various, but all focused on how images and texts can combine to further pedagogical goals. Our subject offered opportunities for very young learners, such as Anna Tom’s kindergarten class studying “Writing as a Form of Art” from Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese calligraphy to the origins of the Latin alphabet. Just as kindergarteners learn to write by drawing, many of the world’s written languages developed from pictorial signs. Fellows also used artworks in various ways to enhance the writing skills of their young students: Irene

Jones, in “Using Navajo Contemporary Art to Teach Descriptive Writing to ELL Students,” developed a unit that would enhance English language learners’ knowledge of their own culture and also their use of adjectives. Shannon Foster-Williams similarly used artwork to enhance writing, but her unit, “From Panel to Pen,” asks students to create graphic narratives from the stories of Greek mythology. In her unit, “In their Own Images,” Yolanda Bezares-Chavez introduces her elementary Spanish students to the artwork of the Mexican muralists, as well as exploring local murals in Richmond, VA. Amandeep Khosa enriches her students’ knowledge of Native American cultures by studying trickster-figures, in “Bringing Indigenous Stories to the Classroom through Art and Comics.”

At the middle level, texts and images offer many opportunities for enhancing students’ creative skills in both media, as well as for developing their analytical skills. In “Image as Text: A Bridge to Critical Literary Analysis,” Brandon Barr introduces his students to modes of analyzing paintings such as *Guernica* or *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in order to show how those modes of analysis can be adapted to literary texts. Lynette Shouse explores the malleability of historical narratives and the importance of critical analysis of sources in her unit, “An American Myth: How Pictures and Texts have Changed the Narrative of the American Revolution.”

In high schools, multi-media objects can open up new avenues of analysis and lead students to profound insights unavailable to words, or pictures, alone. Meghan Senjanin, for example, asks her students to consider literary history all year through the connections between words and pictures, in her unit “Multiple Literacies being Developed in the Literature Classroom: Hieroglyphics to Graphic Novels.” Donna Bonavia makes tattoos the unlikely site of both art historical and self-discovery, comparing contemporary body art to Celtic knotwork in “Bringing Alive the Art of the Past: Modern Tattoos and Illuminated Manuscripts.” And, in an exploration of comic art through analysis of John Lewis’s graphic memoir of the Civil Rights era, Krista Waldron teaches “Minds in the Gutters and Bleeding on the Page: Literacy and Civil Rights through the *March* Comics Trilogy.”

Picture books are often thought to suit very young or inexperienced readers. But while it is true that different media may speak more powerfully to some students than to others, all forms of representational art require and benefit from the same kinds of critical attention. History provides many examples of complex but rewarding interactions between images and texts, and these curriculum units help students to explore how words and pictures continue to shape our cultural experiences today.

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