



Introduction

by Tim Barringer, Paul Mellon Professor in the History of Art

The seminar began with a question: How can we use works of art to explore difficult histories and better understand present-day issues in historical perspective? We often associate looking at works of art as a pleasure, one typically enjoyed by elite audiences. But if we look closely and carefully at paintings, drawings, prints and photographs—and even works such as maps and magazines not usually considered to be ‘art’—we can all find powerful traces of the beliefs and practices of earlier generations. Looked at this way, museums become as important as libraries and websites for understanding the past.

Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865 addressed a key question of our times: how have race and ethnicity been understood throughout the history of North America, and how can works of art help us understand and critique this history? Each Fellow brought a different perspective to this, as well as distinctive training, expertise and knowledge rooted in local communities. We began with a round-table discussion in which all the Fellows reflected on the demographic and political contexts within which they were working, revealing a patchwork of differing experiences sewn together by deep concern for a generation of students who had experienced the Covid-19 pandemic and the profound racial reckoning immediately occasioned by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, but reflecting decades, indeed centuries, of inequality.

The seminar made distinctive use of original historical materials available on Yale’s campus, in New Haven and elsewhere in Connecticut, to explore these troubling questions. We spent the second half of every session in either the Yale University Art Gallery or the Yale Center for British Art, confronting and discussing works on the basis of readings and classroom discussion in the first half of the session. The intention was not to limit the relevance of curriculum units to those teaching within reach of Yale – quite the opposite. All the images of works in Yale’s collections are available on line for use by anyone, anywhere, free of charge. Rather, the idea of the seminar was to model the importance of working with real historical items, a practice suggesting the possibilities for teachers across the country to use local museum collections and historic sites for teaching. We focused on how to look closely and critically at images, objects and buildings in order to enhance students’ historical and social understanding, their ability to relate past to present and to take the visual and material deposits of history as seriously as the written word. In a world where images on screens are dominant, skills of visual analysis and critique are ever more crucial.

Museums are by no means neutral institutions, however, as Amanda Pigott McMahon demonstrates in her curriculum unit *Curator as Detective: Looking for Missing Stories in Museums*. A series of ingeniously designed projects and classroom exercises encourage students to uncover the history of museum collections and to challenge the ideologically freighted presentation of the past. Questions of restitution, not just of human remains, but of culturally sensitive or looted items, are a hotly contested topic in contemporary museology

and Amanda's curriculum unit allows high school students to participate in that critical thinking.

We began by looking at the history of the British Empire, beginning with early efforts at colonization and encounters with Indigenous Americans in the sixteenth century. Here we turned to works of art created by Indigenous people as well as representations of Indigenous life made by explorers and settler-colonists. In her curriculum unit offering imaginative new approaches to *The Crucible* for high-school students, Tara Cristin McKee turned to early American material culture, to colonial domestic objects and to early printed ephemera such as witchcraft pamphlets. These objects vividly enshrine the lived experience of people in seventeenth-century America, reflecting the hardships of life and the profoundly-held beliefs of the settlers. The denunciation of witches ("a girl gang like no other" in Tara's witty phrase) found obvious parallels with the horrific bullying rhetoric so common in social media today. The distance between the 1690s and 2020s can seem to melt away. JD DeReu's curriculum unit similarly mobilizes the visual as part of a powerful strategy to engage students with the life, and the words, of an enslaved woman of the British Empire, Mary Prince. By supporting and enhancing *The History of Mary Prince* with a range of visual imagery, JD's aim is that students will "see the enslaved people as individuals worthy of empathy, develop a respect for their struggle, and recognize the contribution they made to the trans-Atlantic world." His curriculum unit is effective in its inclusion of the recent history of Confederate monuments in Richmond and the work of graffiti artists as a commentary on racial politics in our time. These contemporary events speak directly to the questions raised by Mary Prince's writings of two centuries ago.

Indigenous experience in North America is the key to a powerful curriculum unit developed by Jennifer Tsosie, a member of the Diné Nation who turned to photographs of the Navajo Long Walk of 1868. Confronting these moving, beautiful but often tragic images serves as a way to allow today's Navajo children to engage with, and empathize with, the experience of their forefathers. As Jennifer explains, "Navajo children on the Navajo reservation live in two cultures; traditional Navajo and westernized U.S. culture. They have to navigate, function, and incorporate the two worlds." Art and material culture, craft traditions and inherited symbols and designs, can enhance the sense of traditions continuing and thriving in modernity.

The seminar's discussions covered a broad sweep of time and Raymond Marshall's curriculum unit, "Colours of Humanity: American representations of the 'Other'" takes up the challenge of a *longue durée*, examining the representation of Indigenous life, as seen through both art by the colonial powers and by Indigenous peoples in North America and Africa. By presenting a carefully curated corpus of objects and images, the curriculum unit allows students to consider how visual representations serve to define, and sometimes to disrespect, people whose positionality places them as an "other" to the dominant or aggressive power. Melissa Muntz's curriculum unit, addressed to students in US History and Ethnic Studies, likewise juxtaposes the experience of Black and Indigenous people since the founding of the United States. The unit, "Clothing and Identity in Early America: Black Women and AmerIndian Men," makes extensive use of visual documents. It teaches high school students to look closely at images that could easily be swiped aside with a finger on a touch screen, and to find encoded in them traces of historical constructions of both race and gender. It draws attention to clothing as an expression both of shared culture and of individuality. The unit teaches students that images do not simply mirror the appearance of things and people in the past, but rather bear the ideological imprint of the artist and the social point of view of dominant fractions of society.

The seminar looked beyond the landmass of North America. We discussed histories of slavery in the Atlantic, noting Paul Gilroy's formation "the Black Atlantic," a space of violation and forced migration, but one, too, where new diasporic cultural forms were born. Brittany Zezima Dilworth's curriculum unit, fostering the teaching of French to middle school students, looks to the Francophone Caribbean and Africa not as

peripheries to the “center” in France, but as a dynamic global region with a lively visual culture. Describing vibrant works of art such as Laurent Casimir’s *Carnaval Haiti* will allow students to develop their use of adjectives and skills in describing.

Visual materials can provide a stimulating device to encourage students to engage with and interpret literary texts. Thinking through the challenges and rewards of teaching in an “overwhelmingly Black school” in West Philadelphia, TJ Holloway’s richly theorized curriculum unit explicitly recognizes that “in our present moment, image and narrative are sites of struggle.” The unit juxtaposes *Othello* (c.1603) by William Shakespeare with works of art including *The Miracle of the Relic of the True Cross on the Rialto Bridge* by Vittore Carpaccio (c.1496), thinking through representations of civic life and the Black figure within that context, in Renaissance Venice and in modern Philadelphia. The course then pivots to a contemporary Indigenous novel, *There, There* (2018) by Tommy Orange, juxtaposed with paintings by Native American artists. Students will, in response, journal to the question: “Have you ever felt like a target?”.

In a unit focusing on a single masterpiece of African-American drama, August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, 1904, which is in large part a meditation on the legacies of slavery, Renee Patrick Mutunga uses visual materials to evoke and discuss the larger historical context for high school students. Wilson’s play is set in 1904. Some of the iconic materials she juxtaposes with Wilson’s text derive from the era of the slave trade, such as the shocking engraving *Description of a Slave Ship* published by the London’s Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1789. Others such as Kerry James Marshall’s *Voyager* offer contemporary Black artists’ reflections on these traumatic histories. Finally, historic photographs of the Pittsburgh locations that form the setting for Wilson’s play add documentary evidence. The creation of a portfolio of visual comparators opens up possibilities for classroom discussion of the themes embedded in *Gem of the Ocean*.

Adriana Lopez’s curriculum unit vividly illuminates race relations in the United States from the time of Frederick Douglass to the present, using primary texts from Douglass’s own words to Childish Gambino’s 2018 song, “This is America,” which gives the unit its title. The unit, intended for grades 11 and 12, attends to “Images and Histories of Racism and Exploitation.” By mixing media, from prose essays to Blues songs by Billie Holliday, street photography and contemporary music videos, the curriculum unit brings history vividly to life and explains the deeply-rooted nature of current economic, social and political inequalities. Great care has been given to the teaching strategies that will “strengthen student skills through a variety of thought-provoking texts and materials,” with a particular emphasis on SEL (social-emotional learning).

Many of the teachers in the seminar imagined new ways to bring the visual into a classroom where text was the dominant mode. As an art teacher, Tina Berry’s challenge was to incorporate historical and political issues into studio practice. Her tripartite structure examines representations of black lives across United States history, Antebellum to the present, as seen from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Opening with a study of visual representations of plantation slavery, it moves to the Harlem Renaissance, juxtaposed chillingly with the Tulsa Race Massacre whose memory is still a vivid part of the local community’s imaginary, and concluding with the work of current Black artists. Students are prompted to respond by learning about the media used in the artworks studied: wood engraving, mural painting and textile collage. Here the visual arts offer a means of responding to historical and contemporary questions of identity.

On a personal note, let me conclude by adding that two weeks of intensive discussion of *Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865* with a group of committed, expert and profoundly engaged teachers offered many revelations and insights that I will carry into my own classroom. We shared discussion of many of the challenges faced by public school teachers in terms of resources, ideological intervention from school boards

and students still impacted by Covid-19. But above all I was hugely impressed by the resilience, creativity and commitment to professional innovation shared by an extraordinary group of educators.

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