



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume II: Art as Evidence: The Interpretation of Objects

Introduction

Following an initial theoretical orientation session, each meeting of the seminar on “Art as Evidence” took place in front of a single work of art in the Yale University Art Gallery or Center for British Art. The class would analyze a painting closely and systematically for at least an hour, and usually longer. Beginning with a detailed description of the image and its formal elements in order to extract as much factual information as possible from the work itself, free of subjective judgments or external information, we then would proceed to a more analytical, deductive interpretation. Each session concluded with a summary reading of the work and identification of the questions it defined about the time and place in which it was made and, in some cases, about its maker.

All Fellows participated actively in the Socratic dialogue initiated by the seminar leader. They quickly became comfortable with the process and adept at maintaining clear distinctions between description, deduction and speculation, as well as multiple interpretive sub-stages. To gain closer first-hand experience with the steps of the methodology, each Fellow also selected and worked on a particular work of art, usually but not necessarily in the Yale collections, preparing several four-page papers and eventually presenting a twenty-minute oral report. Each project was linked to the Curriculum Unit that was simultaneously in the process of preparation, some more closely than others.

Fellows produced Curriculum Units on a broad range of topics. Although the art analyzed in class meetings was all American or English, the emphasis of the seminar was on a methodology which Fellows could adapt for their own broader teaching needs. For many, it opened up the possibility for adding an art component to their teaching about a particular culture, domestic or foreign, and its language (primarily French this year). Another dimension explored was the transdisciplinary possibilities of art and science through their methodological commonalities. Fellows teaching in elementary schools took a broader approach, finding ways to use object analysis to stimulate art appreciation and student interest in history through images. One specialist teacher addressed the challenge of engaging visually impaired and blind students.

In addition to dealing with art, science and culture as large goals, Fellows in developing their lesson plans found a wide range of opportunities to use object analysis to improve student writing, reasoning, artistic creativity, speaking ability, map making, research, acting, charting and diagramming, photography, group discussion and mutual criticism, debate, poetry, field study, lab experimentation, foreign language vocabulary, etc.

The final Curriculum Units demonstrate a wide range of possibilities for the use of works of art, in particular through close analysis, both for enhancing teacher preparation and skills and for enlarging and deepening students’ ability to interpret visual evidence and their understanding of their own and other cultures, of

science, and of art itself.

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