



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2012 Volume I: Understanding History and Society through Visual Art, 1776 to 1914

Introduction

The Fellows set out to explore methods for understanding culture and society through art, and specifically to engage with the challenges and rewards of teaching from original objects in museum collections. A major focus lay in the development of skills in the description and critical analysis of images – not through the use of art history jargon, but through 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. More generally, the aim of looking at works of art and developing critical thinking is to encourage students to be more discerning in their approach to the plethora of images that surround us today.

The seminar proceeded historically, and was focused on the "long" nineteenth century, from the American Revolution to World War I, 1776-1914. These areas are rich in holdings in the two Yale art museums, the Yale Center for British Art and the Yale University Art Gallery. While one emphasis for the Fellows, all of whom teach in New Haven public schools, was on how to utilize the collections in site visits with classes, all 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, so the Fellows' curriculum units could be adopted for use anywhere with access to the same corpus of images (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?

Every meeting began with 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. We also discussed how one might address a painting with groups of students of different ages – and here I as seminar leader learned a huge amount from the expertise of the Fellows. We agreed that technical terminology – "impasto," "chiaroscuro," "perspective," etc – could be off-putting, and that such ideas could well be explained using more straightforward language – "thick layer of paint, contrast of dark and light, representation of space." While the analysis and description of works of art can be a significant means of developing language and analytical skills, and inferential thinking and reasoning, it can also be portal to unlocking a student's creativity. Mary Elmore's curriculum unit ("The Stories Art Work Tells"), designed for third-grade classes, offers an example of how new skills can be acquired while also positioning works of art as "wonderful tools to evoke a child's curiosity and creative spirit."

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. Work from this early period can be vividly harnessed for teaching students at as early a stage as the third grade: Caterina Salamone harnesses

Philippe Mercier's rococo series of the *Five Senses* (1745, Yale Center for British Art) to encourage students to explore the full extent of their own sensorium and to write creatively as if exploring the scene one sense at a time. Patricia Sorrentino employs a close viewing of Joseph Wright's *The Blacksmith's Shop* (1771, Yale Center for British Art) as a case study for encouraging inductive thinking and literacy skills in under-credited and overage students who fall below their reading/writing grade levels. By describing features of the painting and explaining "how you know," important skills can be developed.

The Fellows also examined art of a more explicitly ideological nature, noting how artists such as John Trumbull forged a new art for a new nation, the United States, but also observing that in the work of John Singleton Copley and in the decorative arts of the period – silverware, ceramics, furniture – British colonial models still remained the target for American emulation. Leszek Ward uses Trumbull's *The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775* (1786, Yale University Art Gallery) as the starting point for an innovative study of the relationship between poetry and battle-painting intended to encourage students in grades 9-12 to think across boundaries of discipline and medium, between history, literature and art. The violence of the Revolutionary War, as depicted in Trumbull's series of history paintings of battle scenes, forms a basis for John Tarka's course unit that focuses on the theme of conflict. His carefully-prepared discussion plans, intended to foster language skills of students returning to education who have little or no preparation in history or art, make an excellent case for the immediate contemporaneity of these issues.

Striking, even violent, changes were underway in the economy of Great Britain, and the issue of class formation, the making of the new English working class, dominated our discussions of the Industrial Revolution, based on images such as JMW Turner's *Leeds* (in the Yale Center for British Art) and Phillippe Jacques de Louthembourg's *Coalbrookdale by Night*, 1801 (digital image from the Science Museum, London). Landscape paintings form a backbone of Yale's collection of British and American Art, including masterworks such as JMW Turner's *Staffa: Fingal's Cave* and Albert Bierstadt's *Yosemite Valley*. We spent considerable time discussing how students might be encouraged to enter the landscape, perhaps by writing imaginary dialogue texts for the figures depicted; perhaps by art projects in which they respond to the landscape around them, or by describing a journey through the landscape depicted in a work of art. For students of all ages (including Yale undergraduates) the challenge of accurate and imaginative descriptive writing is a considerable one, and the task of looking closely at a painting and describing what you see – apparently a simple task, but deceptively so – is an essential educational exercise.

Portraiture is a key genre in British and in American art of the nineteenth century. It is easy to allow discussion of the biography of the sitter to overwhelm debate about the visual construction of the image – and about the choices the sitter made in self-fashioning. Jennifer Lee's curriculum unit assembles a diverse collection of portraits that speak to issues of women's identity and women artists, beginning with Joshua Reynolds's seductive portrayal of *Mrs. Abington* (1772, Yale Center for British Art) and ending in the contemporary moment with a powerful representation of a contemporary African American painter, *Untitled* by Kerry James Marshall (2009, Yale University Art Gallery). Jennifer Ports enshrines portraiture at the heart of her unit, "Teaching Colonial American Society through Visual Art," but also moves beyond the image to look at material culture, the decorative arts and architecture, as a way of bringing alive a period that seems remote from the contemporary experience of many students.

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 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. Kristin Wetmore's curriculum unit for AP art history tellingly juxtaposes an O'Sullivan photograph of the Civil War with a Trumbull painting of the Revolutionary War, drawing into lively comparison the two conflicts and the two visual media. Nancy Bonilla, who teaches fifth- and sixth-graders learning English, turns to representations of African American and Hispanic American figures in the first century of the history of the United States and to Jamaica, a colony of the British Empire at this period.

Representations of family life and labour in Victorian Britain and America of the same period (c.1830-1900) provided a basis for lively discussions of issues of gender. Referring to texts by John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, we looked at conventions of masculinity and femininity in nineteenth-century art, the 'separate spheres' of men and women as conventionally depicted at that time. Much thought was given to how, in a classroom setting, attention could be drawn to the constructed nature of gendered identities, both in the past and today. Elizabeth Johnson's unit was prepared with the special intention of reaching young men – in grades 9-12. Her unit on historical and contemporary constructions of masculinity discusses the issues of how to "be a man," both in nineteenth-century Britain and America, and in today's globalized world.

Overall, the Fellows demonstrated that while looking closely at art can be a constructive and creative exercise in and of itself, looking at history through art adds a further dimension of immediacy, excitement and pedagogical value.

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