



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume II: Art, Artifacts, and Material Culture

Lessonplans

Curriculum Unit 80.02.01

by

These lessonplans are intended for teaching in a conventional high-school classroom, complete with a blackboard, projection screen or white wallspace, and a bulletin board or other area appropriate for the fixing of papers by means of thumbtacks, magnets, or tape. All three of these facilities are necessary. They are necessary because the design of these lessonplans is cumulative and sequential, proceeding by stages with much movement back and forth between stages, and, most importantly, with the constant necessity of returning again to stages previously developed. It is therefore not enough to incorporate earlier stages into later ones. The earlier stages must be preserved in one form or another, so that they can be returned to when it is appropriate to do so. For example, the first stage, or Level One, of the methodology which informs these plans, requires the listing of a great many observed facts. While in typical classroom practice the habitual place to list these facts is the blackboard, for the purposes of this methodology, no medium could be more inappropriate. A blackboard must be erased to free it for later stages. To erase a stage is to lose it; even if students have taken exhaustive notes, the common display of the information the class has created together becomes dust. An important measure of vitality is lost in that transformation from communal effort to more notes, as yet un contemplated (and perhaps never to be). Two much more important media for listing Level One facts are the overhead projector and simple sheets of newsprint. Both of these media allow the presentation of grease pencil lists for later reference, and if the design of the classroom permits, newsprint sheets taped to the wall or pinned to bulletin boards allow the spectacular display of all of each level as developed, stage-by-stage, simultaneously. In the first, *"Epes Sargent": A Sacrifice to Change*, lessonplan in this unit, such as display is particularly appropriate, because it will introduce students to the notion of a *method* for seeing well in a way that they will be able to see laid out before them. Indeed, intellectual movement between levels becomes a matter in actual classroom practice of moving from place to place in the classroom, from one collection of sheets of hanging newsprint to another. The kinetics of such a medium are analogous to the dynamics of methodology, and can only reinforce the feel students will have for the design of what they are studying.

I.

Epes Sargent (1759-1761)

A Sacrifice to Change

Level One:

Begin with the projection of a good slide of this portrait onto a full-sized projection screen or onto a white classroom wall, making certain that the image is larger than lifesize and elevated somewhat above the eyelevel of the classroom, but not above index-finger reach for the purpose of *pointing* at the facts: the discrete parts, “things,” objects, and items, which all together pointed inquiries by the teacher precluding the later noticing of important facts in the light of contemplation by the students themselves. Any extensive list is bound to be an adequate starting place, with the promise that it will be necessary to return to this stage whenever it is in order to list another bit of evidence for the generalizations we have to make.

Level Two:

After some sorting and organization of listed facts, begin with general statements that explore the relationships among them. This picture is a portrait, oil on stretched canvas, of a man, bewigged, blue-eyed, middle-aged, full-faced, leaning securely against an antique column base. The column base is predominantly a dark, blue-grey, tinged with green. The subject’s arm rests with its elbow and upper forearm across the top of the base, his hand appearing after an immaculate white cuff, his hand resting gently against the upper, unbuttoned lapel of his coat, precisely at the center of the painting. His thumb is in the region of his heart. His other hand rests in his coat pocket. His coat is unornamented but lavishly cut, with large buttoned cuffs and scalloped pockets. The gold and vermillien border of an underjacket appears beneath his coat at the lower front, beneath his portly belly, across which the fabric of his coat pulls tight.

Above the thin upper edge of a white cellar or neckerchief, his head is large and solid upon his large, solid trunk. He has a full, jowly neck and closely shaven, ruddy cheeks, the effect of the strong shadow along the side of his face being in part some masking of his corpulence. He has a slightly wry, smiling, firm, fine-lipped mouth and a firm, strong chin, molded by what becomes a chiselling undershadow setting his face in relief. His nose is straight and firmly molded by the same strong contrasts of light and shadow. The face is reposeful as the body is relaxed and leaning, but despite the 3/4 angle view of the face, the eyes, bright and dark blue, are fixed firmly on the viewer, the *painter* here.

At this point a detail of the eyes is appropriate. Such slides are particularly dramatic in terms of the rhythm of this lesson, and therefore should be introduced toward the midpoint or later part of a class session, when emphasis is needed to sustain attention. The dark blue eyes are highlit with light blue, and the pupils are each touched with a lively fleck of white.

The forehead is very high and bread, curved outward above each eye, slightly shadowed inward at the center.

The right side of the head is brightly lit, the left shadowed to mold the large head, but not so as to obscure any aspect of features.

The background is dark, unknown, a touch of wilderness in the full-foliaged elm-like tree and the bare one behind it, the horizon receding into a distant, red sunset, tinged with blue-black, balancing the antique column

diagonally to the fore.

There are two types of inquiries which can be made at this stage: the indexical, pointed question, such as “What is this?”; and the larger, relational question, such as “Do you see...?” or “What balances this?” Any frequency of questions of the latter type signals a move from the factual domain which constitutes Level One to a consideration of these factors in relation to each other, the main activity of Level Two, and formal analysis. Alfred North Whitehead wrote in *Adventures of Ideas* that “All facts are relationships of factors.”⁴ This observation suggests the essential reciprocity of these two levels.

In terms of formal analysis, there are two planes to this painting. The first is the rectangular background, and the second, in relief, is the triangular image of the man and the prep column base. The body leans forming one leg of a triangle; the other is formed by the elbow and the forearm of the arm upon which he rests, leading to the top of the antique column base. The line of this leg is preserved by the stepped molding of the column base, emphasizing and stabilizing the overall triangle. This triangle forms the frontal plane of the painting despite the place of the front side of the column before it, because the column is dark like a dark foreground, bringing the light, white-cuffed hand and the light, white-collared and white-wigged head to prominence in the frontal plane. The frontality of the canvas is sustained across the baroque diagonal of color that comprises the brightly lit portion of the portrait, from lower left front to upper right rear, creating a sense of spacial depth having little to do with linear perspective, everything to do with light and dark, the molding of shapes, and the creation of two superimposed planes: the triangle and the full frontal canvas against the rectangular background space. This is an almost architectural, engineered stability, constructed to suggest at once the repose of confident prosperity and successfulness, and the decline of age and transience into the permanent factuality of being past.

The exposed hand is massive, meaty, the knuckles broad and thick, the fingers thick, powerful, rugged, worn, in marked contrast with the smoother, tranquil, unwrinkled surfaces of the face. Detail slides of the hand and faces appropriate here. The differences between them verge upon differences in style.

The baroque diagonal, which Copley probably learned from John Smibert, could also receive special attention here. There is a sense of perspective depth created by receding horizontals, the longest being the horizontal front edge of the column-base pedestal, then the shorter near-horizontal of the arm and hand, then the horizontal of the shoulder, tilting away slightly rightward toward the recessional depths of the red-hued background of the painting, and balanced by the short, intense, frontal horizontal of the blue eyes. Everything moves, yet everything balances.

Level Three:

The level of intention is best approached by a recognition of the fact that Copley as a painter could do virtually anything he chose to do; the question, then, is why did he make the choices he did? This portrait had to be a descriptive, attractive *likeness*, acceptable to his subject and probably to his subject’s friends and family, who may have even been called in to approve it in its final stage. Yet the painting obviously attempts more than a simple likeness. The portrait as metaphor is more than a likeness, a representation of an appearance of a man as satisfying to himself in how he is seen. As more than a likeness the portrait as a metaphor isolates the image of a man in both time and space, transcending both as long as its frame is respected.

Epes Sargent is posing, and to pose for Copley must have bordered on an existential experience, given his routines in hours per sitting and numbers of sittings required for each portrait. Imaging Copley concentrating, studying, laboriously reworking, eradicating his progress if necessary, beginning again, with a dutifulness later

at once the awe and scorn of his fellows in the American school in England. So intense a study, in which routines became almost ritual, ceremonious, and observation becomes a form of celebration of what the visual can render of a man, his appearance the embodiment of his life, must have been felt by both painter and sitter to be of an importance signally above and beyond the range of everyday matter-of-fact. Within such a frame, what would under everyday circumstances be trivial details and matters of nominal importance, must become the stuff of metaphor, vitally significant with meaning. All of the choices the painter makes invite such reading. To engage oneself with this portrait is thus to feel an immediate presence, a sense of importance inviting one to *hear* the voice of Copley and to feel the personality and significance of this man. Epes Sargent stands isolate and large, splendid with classical simplicity and wholeness, his form shaped rationally, clearly molded by an unambiguous light. He rests on an antique column, the baroque diagonal of the painting carrying like an heraldic band across an escutcheon back and upward across his powerful torso, shoulder and arm, past his alert, serene, forthright, slightly wry face, back into the background plane of the red horizon and uncertainly quickening or drying blue sky, a living tree and a dead tree metaphoric of time. This is a classicising portrait, representing Epes Sargent as significant of the classical past, embodied in the full, serene, rational balances of his body and face, and symbolized by the antique column base upon which he leans and upon which the overall composition so much depends. This is a statement, then, about an exemplary mode of achievement and individuality, now being lost to time, but felt as permanent in the domain of classical ideals. What he means, endures, celebrated by this portrait, significant across the frame of the painting even to our own day.

Much of the man's meaning is in his face. Corpulent with prosperity, flattered by the narrowing shadow which sets it in relief, his face is a strong-willed, composed, "ready" face, the face of a successful man, full and confident with satisfaction and achievement. In that very fruition there is overripeness, a sense that the decline is near. There is also the workmanlike hand, worn and resting almost upon the heart, in a suggestion of the attitude of death. Epes Sargent is represented as a man who has lived well, but also as an exemplar of the art of dying well, not in the modern absurd or revolutionary sense, but in the sense of that readiness for death that can be won by a sense of having lived one's life valuably and well. Copley intends that we understand and value that kind of strength.

Level Four:

There are ready aesthetic analogies to this portrait which suggest something of the values of this age, of Georgian simplicity and unity, of a Puritan work ethic and distrust of ornament, in the Seumain sugar bowl and Hurd teapot in the Garvan collection in the Yale University Art Gallery. In shape and surface, they are like the unornamented planes of Epes Sargent's coat. A much later painting, *Saul and Eli*, now at the Hartford Atheneum, is again one in which a hand commands the center of the composition, the rest of the composition turned around it. This similarity reinforces the notion that Epes Sargent is a didactic painting.

Other, less esoteric, comparisons and contrasts should be drawn here. Copley's almost writhing portrait of Samuel Adams suggests, by virtue of its contrast with the Epes Sargent portrait compositionally, something of the shadow cast by the new order across Copley's sensibilities. Here is a rare nonparticipant insight into what it is to be less than revolutionary during the passions of a revolutionary time.

Analogic may also be invited from the popular domain. The frame of reference of portraiture is the range of human physiogamy, and knows no limits of time or space, from Benjamin Franklin to Gerald Ford, or even to someone's relative or a member of the classroom.

Level Five:

I feel, personally, that Epes Sargent is a likeable, admirable man, pictured here enjoying this moment of portraiture as emblematic of his hard-earned success as a merchant and as a man. His success is hard-won; he is a self-made man. Here are none of the posturings of the aristocrat or dandy; for Epes Sargent, to pose is to repose, his strong, prosperous weight against the stable column base. Yet his hand at the center of the compensation and at the center of its meaning is not completely at ease in inaction; while perhaps suggestive in its position of a *momenta meri*, it ironically also fidgets with the button lapel of his unbottened coat, either opening or closing it, somewhat shielding in that ambiguity the center heart of the man, who is perhaps finally to be known by what his hands have done, rather than by his likeness. This is a hand that is worn and aged by struggle it has known, joined to a face that knows no defeat. There is a colonial bliss in such an apotheosis, in having been consumed and happily so in the success one has made of ones life. I sense something of the young John Singleton Copley's resolve as a painter to make something of himself as well here.

II.

Isaac Smith and Mrs. Isaac Smith (1769)

The Metaphysics of Sex

Level One:

Use two projectors to project both of these portraits side-by-side, Mr. Isaac Smith to the right, or, much better, arrange a fieldtrip for the class to the Garvan Collection at the Yale University Art Gallery, where they are on display. There is the added advantage there of seeing them in their very impressive frames and surrounded by other significant objects from the world of which they were a part, including an actual chair exactly like the one in which Mrs. Isaac Smith sits in her portrait. Students here should bring notebooks with an eye toward creating a list of observed facts comparable to the one created in the preliminaries of studying the Copley portraits of Epes Sargent.

Level Two:

Whenever two objects are side-by-side, the opportunistic way to get started in seeing important facts for what they are and in their important relationships is the method of comparison and contrast. For example, one may compare and contrast the facial angle and the relation of the subject's eyes to the eyes of the painter or spectator. The various things that complete the world of each subject are significant of the identity of the subject, and should be read as symbols and signs comprising much of the meaning of the portrait. For example, the grapes in Mrs. Smith's lap are conventional symbols of feminine fruitfulness. On the other hand, there is a hardness and angular aggressiveness about Mr. Smith which is very masculine. These contrasts extend through much of the detail of the paintings; for example, compare and contrast the chairs upon which they pose. What can be read here is suggestive of the rationale behind conventional proprieties in the role of husband and wife. Here is a marriage of complementarities, of masculine and feminine, hard and soft, business and fecundity, cold and warm, future-oriented and present-oriented, surface and depth. These portraits celebrate this harmony of opposites.

Level Three:

It is immediately accessible that Copley had different relationships with and feelings toward each of these figures. He admired Mr. Smith for his success; perhaps during the duration of his sittings they talked about business and politics. At the moment in which Mr. Smith is represented in his portrait, his mind seems far away, his gaze fixed on some ambition in his mind's eye. In contrast, Mrs. Smith reposes comfortably and interestedly, makes eye contact with the painter, and in all likelihood shared a witty, intimate, supportive conversation with him.

Level Four:

Compare and contrast the sex roles these portraits historically document to the mores of today.

Level Five:

Using clippings from magazines of men and women and of the things we find significant in their roles in our day, have students make collages of marriage diptychs in terms of their own values, perceptions, and aspirations.

III.

Samuel Adams (1770-72)

The Poetics of Terrorism

:Level One:

The first fact of this painting is the bright red of Samuel Adams' coat. It is what a class is most likely to respond to when asked what about this portrait strikes them first or first catches their eye. From this striking fact as long a list as possible of other facts should follow. I believe very strongly that this is the proper primary level of study of this painting, and that copies of the American Dictionary of Biography entry for "Samuel Adams" should be withheld until Level Four. There are two likely points of transition from the listing of facts to Level Two, or generalizations about the relationships among the facts listed in the first level. These are either the roll shapes which cascade like a wave across the baroque diagonal of the painting, from the classical columns to the waves of his hair, to the cylinders of his body and arms, to the rolled document he holds like a club in his fist and the rolled document that is the foreground of the painting, and to which he points; or, as an alternative into metaphor, the question of his body structure, or posture, in his pose, as he is represented as arching with such twisting violence that his body seems to disjoin between waist and hips.

Level Two:

The contrasts between this painting and *Epes Sargent*, previously studied, are instructive, and make a unifying vehicle for an analysis of the composition of *Samuel Adams*. Here the classical columns are dim and to the rear, and in contrast formally with the baroque, twisting spiral of the figure of Adams and with the rolled documents, like fallen columns, before him. The angry and passionate red of *Samuel Adams* contrasts with the serene, silvery blue-grey of *Epes Sargent*. The difference in mood between these paintings is highly palpable,

and represents a difference in styles that is significant of a difference in historic moments, between the successfulness of colonial America shadowed by transience, and the volcano of the revolutionary America which casts that shadow.

A detail of Copley's rendering of his subject's face is imperative here. The violence of Adams' protest is such that the vertical line of the nose and mouth and the horizontal line of the eyes are not perpendicular; they are skewed, the angle between the near eye and the starkly lit nose and mouth opening obtusely, explosively.

Level Three:

This is a portrait of a frightening, forceful man, a man who commands with the beatitude of one ready to fight and die for his beliefs; indeed, the target he presents (and the historic moment of confrontation with the crown here immortalized) suggests an avidity to do so. His physical disunities and distortions suggest that Copley saw him as a dangerous, perhaps even as a deranged, man. This is both a fair and an appropriate place to treat of Copley's own predicament politically and of his expatriation. He seems to have been fully aware of the ironies of this commission.

Level Four:

Compare and contrast this image of Samuel Adams to those of modern revolutionaries and terrorists.

Level Five:

Again, a comparison and contrasts between this portrait and *Epes Sargent*, here with a view to which of these two portraits, as representative of styles of being human, the student finds most appealing, seems expedient.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Jules Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, Vol. I, "America," p. 46. 2. Trans. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, "Poetics" 1457 b 6-9, p. 77. 3. Edward Gordon, "On Teaching the Humanities," *English Journal*, Vol. 58, p. 681 (1969) 4. Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Chapter XVI, "Truth."

Bibliography

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Reverie*. Boston: Beacon, 1958.

The Poetics of Space. Boston: Beacon, 1964.

Hermeneutics, or the theory of the meaning of symbols, began as an aspect of the study of how the Bible has meaning, and today explores literary metaphor. There is no such discipline concerned with the philosophy of visual meaning. In the sad absence of a systematic visual hermeneutic, these philosophical ruminations, gratuitously oriented toward the visual, are helpful and evocative approaches toward a theory of visual metonymy—of how images in art have meaning.

Frankenstein, Alfred. *The World of Copley*. New York: Time-Life, 1970.

Lots of color plates. Not necessary if one avails oneself of the willing and helpful people in the Yale University Department of Prints and Slides.

Gordon, Edward J. "On Teaching the Humanities," *English Journal* , Vol. 58, page 681 (1969).

The object of this methodology, the most lucid and useful education has yet produced, is simply to teach students to think. Widely applicable.

Pearce, John. *American Painting, 1516-1913* . New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.

Lots of color slides and a text that is full of Level Four connections.

Prown, Jules. *John Singleton Copley* . Cambridge: Harvard, 1966.

This is the authoritative Copley biography, rich with organized, accessible facts, clear with a vision of the structure of Copley's life, and exemplary in the analysis of signal portraits in his development as a professional.

Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor* . Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1975.

Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language that argue persuasively for the centrality of vitality in any hermeneutic, including, by implication, non-verbal as well as verbal language.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas* . New York: MacMillan, 1933.

An important book for anyone interested in Truth, Beauty, Adventure and Peace. Sometimes the asides prove seminal.

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