

Engaging Teenagers through Art: A Trans-disciplinary Approach

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<http://www.greenhill.org/page/Greenhill-Art-History>

Explore an art appreciation course designed to engage a diverse student population in civil discourse focused on art. This thematic, trans-disciplinary approach uses students' interests as a bridge to understanding art.

This presentation describes the development and implementation of a non-traditional, introductory art awareness course for high school students. I am in the fourth year of teaching the course to juniors and seniors at Greenhill School in Addison, Texas. I am also a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Dallas in Aesthetics, and my dissertation is about teen programming in art museums.

When I began teaching high school art history five years ago, I inherited a traditional course: a chronologically ordered romp through great masterpieces of western art. I was a didactic, AP style course, very similar to the way I first studied art history in the seventies. I enjoyed teaching it. The students enjoyed the class. But something was bothering me. There were only twelve students in the class. All girls. All white. All Judeo-Christian. Each had a family history involving art. This did not represent the diversity of the high school where I teach.

I wondered why most students weren't signing up for art history. I walked the hallways asking the students why. All of the answers boiled down to one idea: "Art doesn't have anything to do with me." Some believed only artists could be interested in art history, and they weren't artists.

Others did not see their own personal identity or interests reflected in the curriculum. Most students believed they didn't care about art.

I took this as a challenge to help the students realize the power of art in their own lives. I think of art like music or food: There's something out there for everyone to enjoy. If I asked my students to turn to someone nearby and talk about a favorite food, or a song you loved, they would have no trouble. Introductory art appreciation and art history courses should help students feel the same way about art.

While I was searching for a way to engage teenagers in the world of art, a second powerful event happened. A Muslim student gave a moving speech to the entire student body. She addressed the awkward silence about her religion. No one had ever spoken to her about her hijab; yet everyone looked at it. She said that even though our school has a very diverse population, we were missing opportunities use our diversity to inspire discussion. She sat in class with students of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, abilities, cultures, economic status, and genders ... and they never talk about it. Everyone seemed so afraid to offend that no one is willing to lean into the discomfort. When she overheard comments that misrepresented Islamic beliefs, she realized that the people saying them had no idea she found them offensive because she kept quiet about it. She encouraged the faculty and students to dive into authentic discussions about our own identities and worldviews.

These two events served as my call for action: Could I make an art come alive for our diverse student body by tapping into each individual student's passions and identity? The energy and curiosity was there waiting inside each student; all I had to do was channel it into art.

This presentation will describe a holistic, multi-cultural approach to teaching art awareness, or an introduction to art history. It challenges the tacit ideologies supporting traditional introductory art history classes. The course is not a chronological presentation of masterpieces and movements. Instead, this course is organized thematically around the concept of controversy and conflict. Adolescence is a time for self-discovery and establishing independence; controversies and conflicts are concepts that teenagers naturally understand. By exploring art that reflects powerful conflicts in history, or art that itself becomes the controversy, students are given the opportunity to personally engage with art. They can also enhance their critical thinking skills, challenge their perceptions, and participate in a civil dialogue. This course is designed for older adolescents. For some, it will be their only classroom exposure to art. Others will continue a formal study of art history at the university level.

Three Key Goals

Three key goals support this course. The first key is to **get personal** in order to facilitate a connection between a student's own life and art. The activities and ideas that twenty-first century students find the most engaging and valuable, the activities they choose to pursue during their leisure time, the ideas that so often go unacknowledged in an academic classroom – these are the hook these students need to engage with art. When a teacher taps into a student's authentic interests and passions, students are motivated to learn. The teacher must know each student to the extent the student allows, and foster student-directed learning. Incorporate participation and feedback in class activities. Provide a variety of resources for each assignment, allowing students to choose options that best fit their learning style and interests. Incorporate career opportunities in the visual arts in each unit, as well as examples of how “non-artistic” careers utilize artistic awareness. On the screen behind me are other research topics from the past four years.

Get Real! The second key is to bring students face to face with real people, real artwork, and real problems. When a field trip or class visitor isn't possible, involve the students in creative problem solving. Teach students how to conduct research in person, by phone, and online. Facilitate collaborative, project-based activities; don't be afraid to cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. Write thank-you notes. Educating the whole teen prepares them not only for the world of art, but also for the world of work. One student wanted to know how a Holocaust survivor found pencils and paper to create his art, and how he kept the art through the war. She found a translator, requested an interview through his publisher, and was able to interview the artist in Israel by telephone.

The third key: **model civil discourse**. Art encapsulates ideas, providing teachers a way to develop critical thinking skills and inspire civil dialogue about ideas that matter. Socratic Seminars, flipped classrooms, and Socratic help engage every student. Build complex stories by pushing through dominant myths and clichés to reexamine the ideology and context that surround a work of art. Expose students to a variety of perspectives and model appropriate ways to address difficult topics and address unexpected challenges. Provide vocabulary and concepts to allow students to speak articulately at the time they need it. What color is your Jesus? Students from an African-American history course met with art history students to conduct a research blitz in local Christian churches to explore race and ethnicity in visual images of Jesus.

Individual Research Project

Following the spirit of Google's 20% project, where employees are given 20% of their time to follow their own passion, students are given the equivalent of one day out of every five to work

on a project connecting art to their individual identity and/or personal interests. Students begin by describing things in their lives that they enjoy, without concerning themselves about a connection to art. While the ultimate responsibility rests on the teacher to connect student interests with the world of art, I have found that this becomes a problem-based challenge that naturally engages other students. (Research topics from past years are being shown on the screen behind me as I speak.) Once topics are identified, the student and teacher have a new and personal connection. Weekly checks keep students on task and allow an opportunity for valuable interaction between students. After identifying their topics, students interview local artists, art educators, and museum staff members for ideas. Managing this project is easier when for teachers using an online software tool, like *Noodletools*. My students present two formal projects based on their ongoing research, one research paper and one formal presentation. One is due at mid-marking and the other at the end of the semester, and they choose which project to submit for each deadline. Project Topics are listed at the end of this paper.

Four Curricular Units

This semester-long course is organized around four major units of study, each with a central theme. The lessons in the unit change from year to year, depending on the students' interests, local arts activities, and current events. Lessons are shaped by the three key goals mentioned previously, and are highly interactive. Each unit culminates with a Socratic Seminar; students are given a grade for their written preparation and their oral participation. To prepare for the seminar, students are given a list of articles and videos. Each student chooses 3-4 sources from this list. For each source, they must write an annotation and a reflection as well as propose discussion questions based on the source. Oral participation is based on the strategies of civil discourse. Examples are provided on my website: <http://www.greenhill.org/page/Greenhill-Art-History>

Unit 1: Who Cares? This unit explores the value of art in society. It also serves to broaden students understanding of visual arts and architecture as they choose a personal research topic. Lessons expose students to a variety of reasons that people engage with art, including aesthetic, economic, socio-cultural and therapeutic.

- Art Unites Dallas: Rick Lowe and Vickery Meadow
- *The Quality Instinct* by Maxwell Anderson: Evaluating Art
- What's happening in the Dallas arts scene this month?
- Patrons and Patronage: SMU/Meadows, Philadelphia/Barnes, Boston/Gardner
- Forgery: [Wolfgang Beltracchi](#) (CBS news)
- Digital art and copyright: A legal perspective

Unit 2: Who Says? Art has a unique power to encapsulate ideas. This unit explores diverse perspectives on a range of topics, including politics, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, history, and sexual orientation. Readings and topics are chosen to help students understand and challenge their current perspectives and expose them to new ones. The skills of civil discourse are emphasized.

- Hitler, Degenerate Art, and the Monuments Men
- Hide/Seek: Censorship at the Smithsonian
- Charlie Hebdo: Individual rights vs. the common good of society
- Pornography or Art? A legal perspective
- Propaganda
- The Commercialization of Native American Images

Unit 3: Whose Culture? This unit examines issues concerning tangible and intangible cultural heritage, cultural patrimony, law, and museums. This year, class research led to a two-hour online conversation with the US Army's Civil Affairs Officer Lieutenant Colonel Andrew DeJesse in Kabul.

- Bamiyan Buddhas
- Mosul Museum
- Museum Repatriation
- Modern Monuments Men
- Fred Wilson: The Power of Curation
- UNESCO and ICOM: Global Heritage

Unit 4: Whose Space? This unit explores issues concerning visual images in public space. Diverse viewpoints make defining "public" a challenge. Conflict between individual rights and the common good continue in this unit; these are particularly poignant for adolescents. This unit culminates in a graffiti tour of Deep Ellum.

- Graffiti: Vandalism or art?
- Tattoos: A Global Legal Perspective
- Public Monuments in North Korea
- Memorializing the Holocaust: Monuments, Memory, and Meaning
- After the disaster: Building Community through Art
- The Power of Visual Imagery: Branding Greenhill

Suggestions for further study

If educators are interested in studying another thematic approach to art history, I recommend reading the work of Robert Conduru at Rio de Janeiro State University.

High school educators might consider using this course as a pre-requisite for an AP Art History course. The College Board provides a list of textbooks that meet the requirements for AP Art History (College Board 2013). One textbook on the list breaks away from chronological presentation, while still maintaining a place on the College Board's list. *Exploring Art: A Global, Thematic Approach* (Lazzari and Schlesier 2008) is organized around philosophical and cultural themes, with a focus on examining the role of art and architecture in society. It begins with an examination of the meaning of art in cultures focused on primary needs, and increasingly broadens the focus with the framework provided by religious, political and personal perspectives. This text covers much of the same material as more widely accepted, chronologically organized textbooks. I am interested in finding an AP reader or educator who is familiar with this textbook to see how it impacts a student's performance on the AP test.

A bibliography of related books and articles is presented at the end of this paper. These readings were influential in developing this course. I would be interested in learning about others from you. My email is danielsb@greenhill.org

Research Project Topics 2010 - 2015

- What do self-portraits of multiracial artists reveal about their complex identity?
- How have visual representations of the myth of Ramayana changed over the centuries?
- What can be learned from studying artwork created by Holocaust survivors?
- How is art being used to communicate with autistic individuals?
- How do artists create visual representations of time?
- How has the work of artists living with AIDS changed over the decades?
- How are moving sculptures engineered?
- What does the visual imagery in advertising campaigns about eating disorders reveal about the country of origin?
- What does graffiti by Middle Eastern female Muslims reflect about their role in society?
- What factors determine the economic value of a work of art?
- How can photography convey the symbiosis between people and horses?
- How does Arab calligraphy blend aesthetics with a message?
- How did 20th century Soviet and Chinese state propaganda posters depict race?
- How does the design of athletic stadiums reflect of team culture?
- How does nationality impact the artwork of contemporary female Muslim artists?
- Why is there so little contemporary art from Ghana?
- What editorial policies shaped various publications' choices about publishing imagery from the Charlie Hebdo incident?
- How accurately do album covers reflect the spirit and meaning of songs on the album?
- How have visual portrayals of gender in American video games changed over the decades?
- What laws should govern the commercial use of Native American images?
- What influence have twentieth-century politics had on fashion?
- How does nationality impact the artwork of contemporary female Muslim graffiti artists?
- How have visual portrayals of gender in American video games changed over the decades?
- What common themes emerge from analyzing artwork about natural disasters around the world?
- How does the design of sports championship awards demonstrate the values and vision of the sport?
- How does an artist's substance abuse affect his/her artwork?
- What does tattooing reveal about cultural identity in various countries?
- How does the art of Jewish Holocaust victims reflect the unspeakable emotional impact of their experiences?
- How does the design of a soccer stadium reflect a team's unique national and local heritage?
- How is contemporary fashion challenging gender stereotypes?
- How is the mental illness of an artist revealed in his/her work?
- How can subtle visual changes in reality create irony?
- Do the visual depictions of characters in film noir support or alter the verbal ones?
- Which elements in automotive design create timeless aesthetic beauty?
- How is an artist's homosexuality evidenced in works of art?
- How does the architecture of an opera house demonstrate the unique culture of its urban environment?
- What are the aesthetic issues related to modern prosthetics?

How can art inspire social change in poverty-stricken communities?

How do memorial sites around the world balance the tension of various perspectives?

What do changes in professional sports logos reveal about the team's goals and priorities?

How do memorial sites around the world balance the tension between respect and reality?

Can environmental artists inspire real change?

How are artists using Barbie dolls to convey a feminist message?

What does the artwork on classic album covers reveal about the music?

How are contemporary artists working to break down racial stereotypes?

What visual imagery is used in child abuse campaigns in contemporary nations?

How have contemporary feminist artists protested against the objectification of women in works of art?

Which cultural issues were reflected in graffiti on the Berlin Wall? Which were not?

Does the visual image support or alter the verbal message of music videos?

How does the graffiti in Jerusalem reflect the tension among three major religions?

What impact does creating art have on soldiers?

How does being Jewish inform a photographer's work?

How are conservators using chemistry in painting restoration?

How are the laws of physics revealed in sculpture?

How does artists' work reflect various perspectives during the Arab Spring Uprisings?

What's the math behind optical illusions?

What are the policies regarding digital alteration of images in major American publications?

How does the architecture supported by Hitler represent his political views?

What versions of utopia were created by artists in the early 20th Century?

How do American presidential campaign posters characterize the candidates?

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