Art and the Life of the City
Edward Epstein

Preface

In various instances, social forces and geography join to create a cultural nexus. In such moments, political, economic, and social movements have brought creative minds together to birth new ideas in visual art, music, and literature. This seminar focused on a few such “art scenes,” both in the United States and abroad, as examples. It then asked participating fellows to use the same interdisciplinary approach to explore a creative flowering of their own choosing.

We began by looking at the original “Bohemia”—Paris in the mid-19th Century, which was home to such figures as Manet, Zola, and Baudelaire. Our exploration of this era centered around Jerrold Seigel’s text Bohemian Paris and his thesis that Bohemia was a product of identity struggles experienced by members of an emerging bourgeoisie. Next we moved to Harlem in the mid-twentieth century, which was the backdrop for the development of avant-garde jazz (Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, etc) as well as innovations in painting by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. Our exploration of this locale culminated in a field trip to Harlem in which we visited the Schomburg archive and the elite “Strivers Row” section of the neighborhood. Finally, we looked the East Village in New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which saw a flowering of many kinds of creative expression: a range of “-isms” in visual art; punk, new wave, and rap music; and a variety of other forms, including video and performance art.

Following the method of the seminar, fellows took a number of directions in the development of their curriculum units. Some chose a particular individual as a lens through which to examine a time and place. Carole Chernecky’s “Paul Robeson, African-American Artist, and the McCarthy Era” examined that great performer’s rise and fall through times of racism and political repression, while Pam Toller’s “The Life, Times and Work of Dox Thrash” both focused on a printmaker’s struggles during a similar time period. Both of these units looked at African Americans who are associated with Philadelphia.

Other units explored a larger movement and the individual artists it nurtured. “The Harlem Renaissance,” by Richard Holmes, examined the social forces that shaped Harlem in the early 20th century and colored work of painters like Aaron Douglas and musicians like Duke Ellington. Debra Migden’s “Celebrated Impressions from the Painters of Paris” looked at the visual textures and social changes of late 19th century France that sparked the imaginations of impressionists Monet, Pissarro, Mary Cassatt, and others. Through reading, writing, and explorations of costume, dance, food, and drink, Deborah Samuel’s “American Expatriates in the 1920s: Why Paris?” illustrated literary artists’ rejection of hypocritical mores in the United States and embrace of a more free-spirited lifestyle in Paris.
Certain units used art to make connections between creativity in an earlier period and students’ experience today. Samuel Reed’s “Strange Fruit—Metaphors, Music and Place—Jazz and Hip Hop as Reflections of the Times” compared swing era music to hip hop, focusing on the metaphors used to bring to life the political and social struggles of both time periods. Leslie Carlis’s “Dance, Readings, Acting, Music, and Art (D.R.A.M.A.): A Study of African American Performing and Visual Arts in the 1940s – 1950s” used the art of an earlier period to spur contemporary artistic expressions by the students, particularly in the performing arts. And Audrey Jackson’s “Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White and the Taller de Grafica Popular of Mexico” explored politically-charged broadsides and fine art prints from Mexico in the 1930s and 40s, created within the context of world war and revolution. It then asked students to use printmaking to send messages about social and political problems relevant to their own lives.

Overall, the content and direction of this seminar motivated fellows to discover connections between art and other disciplines. Participants found creative and inspiring ways to introduce art into their curricula, and to situate art within the larger universe of knowledge.

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