

Visual Art and Society

Led by Edward M. Epstein

Introduction

Visual art can often seem like an island within the world of primary and secondary education. The subject is useful, perhaps, as a break from ordinary academic subjects; for some students, it may be the only constructive outlet for otherwise untapped talents. Yet its relevance in the universe of knowledge is not well known. I designed the seminar “Visual art and Society” to address the problem of visual art’s apparent remoteness: to show that art is, in fact, intimately tied to a broad range of subjects, including math, science, history, and social science. The goal of the seminar was to prompt each participant to see how his or her discipline may have been influenced by, or had an influence on, painting, sculpture, graphic design, and a variety of other visual media.

The seminar was built around three examples, each linking visual art to a different discipline and covering a different point in history. We began in the United States in the 19th and early 20th century with a look at how race relations affected advertising: the proliferation of stereotyped images of African Americans during the age of Jim Crow segregation. Next we turned our attention to the development of projective geometry during the Italian renaissance. We looked at how painters and sculptors—artists like Piero Della Francesca, for example—opened the door to the eventual discovery of coordinate systems through their practical treatises on drawing objects in perspective. Finally, we moved to the evolution of public monuments in the modern-day city. We examined the way conceptual art—work that dismisses conventional notions of artistic production and blurs the boundary between viewer and artist—paved the way to a new kind of public monument, one exemplified by Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial.

With each example, we noted that the link between visual art and the other disciplines was usually a two-way street. The “fables of the Reconstruction” that C. Vann Woodward so elegantly dissected in his seminal work *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* were on display in the advertising of the day—to the extent that emerging advertising technology may have fed the ideology of segregation. Italian renaissance innovations in building technology created a need for more precise perspectival renderings—leading to a revolution in seeing that affected both art and math. The unraveling of art traditions that began around the time of the First World War, and that went hand in hand with a questioning of war, government, and national mythologies—led to a proliferation of concept-based art forms. It eventually paved the way for a new way of visualizing the past, and to a new type of public monument. Noting these back-and-forth links between the visual, the social, and the scientific, we were able to see that art was indeed woven into the fabric of society. With these examples as inspiration, I asked each fellow to find an area of overlap between visual art and his or her own specialty.

A number chose to focus on the ways that African Americans' art forms are linked with their history and current-day experience. English/social studies teacher Samuel Reed's unit "We Wear the Mask" compares masks from Africa, masks as described in Harlem Renaissance poetry, and the metaphorical, hip-hop inspired masks under which many young African Americans take cover within the urban environment. English teacher Barbara Dowdall's "Langston Hughes, Romare Bearden and Comrades," contrasts the one-dimensional depictions of Blacks in the media today with the more nuanced portrayals in literature and art from the Harlem Renaissance. Reading/writing specialist Kemo Logan's "Linguistic Meanings through Figurative Language" shows how the rich imagery of African American literature, as exemplified by the work of Langston Hughes, has its counterpart in the collages of Romare Bearden and the textiles of Faith Ringgold.

A pair of fellows looked at the Mural Arts Program in Philadelphia and the role of murals in efforts to revitalize communities. Art teacher Maxine Tumaian's unit "Cultural Infusion: the Public Art of Philadelphia's Chinatown" begins with an extensive study of Chinese immigrant history, and shows how the struggles and values of that community are reflected in murals that have changed the feel of center-city Philadelphia. Librarian Kathryn Long's unit "Can We Make Peace by Making a Piece?" emphasizes the role that murals have had in the efforts to quell violence and reconcile conflicting forces in Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

Taking a cue of our study of advertising, other units chose to focus on popular culture. Learning support specialist Marsha Walker's unit "The Influence of Music Television on Behaviors and Social Identities" provides an in-depth analysis of the art of rap videos—asking students to cast a critical eye on this sometimes controversial mingling of the visual and musical. Business, advertising, and communications teacher Jackie Massey's "The Impact of Advertising on Teenagers" has students look at contemporary advertising design, both from an artistic standpoint and a sociological one. And art teacher Sheila White's "What Goes Around Comes Around: Body Painting/Tattooing In Societies Past and Present" uncovers the historical and cultural background behind the increasingly popular art of tattooing.

Two individuals chose to create units that linked their teaching to hands-on artistic practices. Art teacher Pam Toller's "Common Threads: Time and Textile" sets the weaving traditions of the Navajo within the context of their broader world view—focusing on the tribe's unique notions of time and geography. It asks students to put these ideas into practice in studio weaving projects. Math teacher Cara Crosby devised a unique unit that uncovers the mathematics behind computer animation—having students create animation of their own as an end product. When they implement their curricula during the 2006-2007 school year, both Toller and Crosby will have the assistance of a practicing artist from Philadelphia's 40th Street Artist-in-Residence program.

*Edward M. Epstein,
Coordinator, 40th Street Artist-in Residence Program*