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## The Visual Arts in the Civilization Classroom

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### Abstract

Although the visual arts have long been a feature of civilization courses, instructors do not always exploit their full potential. This paper presents a checklist to help teachers identify the relevant aspects of the arts for study. Its goal is to facilitate comprehensive treatment of works of art by focusing on three areas: the aesthetic dimension, the social context, and the artist's own experience. The checklist is followed by a series of activities which encourage students to integrate the various aspects of the arts while practicing their language skills.

In recent years civilization teachers have increasingly realized that their courses should aim at a comprehensive view of the foreign culture. Beginning with the environmental and economic factors that condition a people's lifestyle, the civilization course might ideally go on to treat the evolution of the political and social institutions as well as the values and dominant ideas of each age as they have found expression in art and literature. Given the curricular limitations on such an ambitious enterprise, periodic reassessment of our methods and content is a must.

I wish to reexamine here an integral part of civilization courses—the visual arts, including painting, graphics, sculpture, architecture, and interior design. To use the distinctions of the visual anthropologist Sol Worth, the range I will be treating is not limited to “high culture” as found in museums but also includes the popular arts, along with what he calls “the visual mode in our personal or professional presentation of self” (as seen, for example, in interior decoration).<sup>1</sup>

I have selected the visual arts not just for the aesthetic pleasure they provide but because they can serve as focal points around which all the other components of a civilization course converge. A well-chosen example of art is uniquely suited to illustrate the economic,

political, and ideological forces at work in a culture; moreover, the work of art has both the personal stamp of the artist who fashioned it, and the collective or social dimension shaped by the audience for whom it was created.

Since most civilization teachers have their primary training in literature and language studies, their first impulse, when seeking out illustrative material for their courses, is to turn to written texts, whether literary or historical documents. However, the visual arts often have as much, or more, to offer. Like literature, the visual arts communicate values, but they generally permeate a culture, even a literate one, more deeply. How many more people will visit Notre Dame cathedral than will ever read Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*? Contact with architecture and the popular arts is unavoidable, even if a person never sets foot into a museum or reads a book. In addition, the personal involvement of historical figures like Spain's Philip II in the design of the Escorial is no isolated exception: events and personages of great historical significance are time and again related directly to the visual arts. From the students' point of view, a work of art is frequently more immediately accessible than a literary work, especially the excerpts so often used in civilization courses. The visual arts also can engage the attention more firmly, while making a vivid impression on the imagination. I am not arguing that the visual arts should replace literary texts in our courses. However, because civilization teachers may feel more comfortable dealing with literature, there is a tendency to overlook the advantages of the visual arts. Thus, a review of their potential and of appropriate teaching strategies is timely.

The first part of the paper will draw on the work of art educators, critics, and social historians of art to present a checklist I have found useful in my civilization classes.<sup>2</sup> The second section consists of a series of strategies aimed at involving students actively in the comprehensive study of the arts. They can supplement more traditional modes of class presentation while giving students the opportunity to practice their language skills.

### **The Checklist**

Thomas Munro, an art educator who has constructed a number of questionnaires for students of the arts, justifies them as instruments for "learning how to perceive a complex form . . . which is itself a complex and difficult process, involving attention to a great number of details and their interpretations."<sup>3</sup> This particular questionnaire examines the form and content of a work of art—its stylistic features and its subject—from a number of points of view. The categories are not rigid, and some overlapping is inevitable as the same object is viewed from a variety of perspectives. Such a checklist may seem simplistic to some and overly ambitious to others. Although it could serve in the classroom as the basis for a thorough study of works of art, it is probably most useful as a reminder to the instructor of many dimensions which might be considered when dealing with art. It indicates the general lines of questioning analysis might take but must be adapted to each work. I certainly do not wish to suggest that civilization textbooks or teachers have ignored any or all of the categories mentioned. However, frequently in our enthusiasm for one aspect of the arts we are tempted to lose sight of other elements of the work which are relevant to our goals.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Work as Representative of a Movement, School, or General Style**

Visual perception *per se*, as it becomes aesthetic experience, is the subject of this section of the analysis. The focus is on the visual pleasure of the beholder and the achievement of the artist.

- (1) To what extent is the style of the work typical of a movement or school of art? Look at how the materials, color, line, space, composition, etc., are used.
- (2) How does the artist sustain visual interest by the use of contrast, repetition, variation, accentuation, etc.?
- (3) What do you like most/least visually about the work?
- (4) To what extent is the subject typical of the movement? If it is a traditional subject that has been treated by previous artists or movements, how does the artist renew it?

Most of these questions emphasize the stylistic properties of the art work. In ideal circumstances, students would examine the work in terms of its formal components without reference to preconceived models like "expressionism" or the "neo-classical movement." After first trying to verbalize the effect the work has on them, they would analyze how its various parts are interrelated in the total design. For example, with guidance from the instructor, students might give an analysis of Louis David's use of line, color, and space in his *Oath of the Horatii*, arriving at an appreciation of its overall effect. However, especially when students (or the instructor) have only limited experience with concepts of art criticism, it is easier and more efficient to examine the style of a work like David's painting by using the sort of general description of French neo-classicism which might be found in the civilization textbook or in any manual of art history. Situating the work in the context of a larger movement can also help students come to grips with the unique, personal quality of the work since a masterpiece's significance often lies in how it goes beyond, or even contradicts, the conventions accepted by more run-of-the-mill artists.

### **The Work in the Artist's Career**

The artist's career can serve as a bridge between the social and aesthetic poles of analysis. On the one hand, it allows an examination of how artists in general were considered during the period in question. In addition to this social dimension, the unique experience of the individual artist can be studied, allowing the class to see his or her personal vision of the profession and to situate the work, not just in terms of a broad stylistic movement but in terms of the particular artist's life as well.

- (1) How did the position of artists compare to other professional categories of the period (prestige, income, level of skills, etc.)?
- (2) How did the artist conceive of his or her role as an artist (seer, craftsman, intellectual, entertainer, etc.)?
- (3) Did the artist work alone or in cooperation with other artists?
- (4) How did the artist earn a living? Did the artist need a patron? What rewards were received?
- (5) How is the work typical of the artist? During what point in the artist's career was the work produced? Relate the work's style and subject to the artist's earlier and later production.
- (6) What factors in the artist's life made this subject and style attractive? Does the artist's own point of view come through? How?

Even when a work is anonymous, studying the position of artists in the society of the period in relation to other occupations gives students insight into the changing role of artists over the centuries. In fact, the artist's role can serve as a touchstone for how a society views a whole range of occupational specialties from the craftsman at one extreme to the intellectual at the other. The emergence of specialization and division of labor in society has been linked to the beginning of the visual arts. Arnold Hauser points out in *Social History of Art* that the technical expertise of the Paleolithic cave painters in Spain and France indicates that they were no amateurs but were the first group to differentiate themselves from the other hunters who made up their tribe.<sup>5</sup> In later years, especially before the modern concept of the artist began to develop in the Renaissance, the artist was assimilated to craftsmen of various sorts. Thus, when treating medieval artists, one could point out that they were often organized into guilds similar to those of other tradesmen. It is also useful to compare the status of visual artists with practitioners of other arts. For example, the higher prestige accorded in ancient Greece to poets shows that sculptors and painters suffered from the disdain which the Greeks had for those who worked with their hands. Income and degree of independence are other good indicators of the conditions of artistic creation. Jean Duke of Berry's exceptional gift of a fine townhouse in Bourges of the sort usually possessed by noblemen to one of the Limbourg brothers who painted the miniatures of his *Très Riches Heures* shows both the advance in the status of artists and the importance of the link to their patrons at the end of the Middle Ages.

Finally, the work can be situated in the career of the individual artist. This might involve the extent to which previous works lead up to this one, or if it is a point of departure for later ones. The artist's private life can also be brought to bear to show how this personal vision stamps the work.

### The Social Dynamics of the Work

Until fairly recently, it was taken for granted that the arts had social functions. The work of art did something: church architecture provided gathering places for worshipers; portrait painting preserved an image for posterity; a work like Goya's *Executions of May Third* made a rhetorical statement. However, in the last hundred or so years, these public uses have often taken a backseat to the self-expression of the artist or to the private appreciation of the connoisseur. Influenced by this trend, we often overlook art's social dimension. As teachers, we can give new life to works of art from the past by restoring their social context. As Hans Hess says, "The work of artists can only be understood by following or repeating the creation of their imagination which, like ours, is rooted in social life."<sup>6</sup>

- (1) What can the viewer learn from the work about the level of economic and technological development of the artist's society? Examine the materials and craftsmanship to see what economic resources and technological expertise society placed at the disposition of the artist.
- (2) As a piece of art, the work is decorative. What additional uses did it have in the lives of its viewers? Was it functional, like furniture and architecture? A status symbol? Did it preserve the memory of some important event or person?
- (3) Do its decorative aspects make it less functional?
- (4) Was the work produced with some specific public in mind? What clues does the work give about the identity of its audience? Can this audience be identified as a social class, institution (e.g., the Church), or some other segment of society?
- (5) Why was the subject important enough to be portrayed in art? What does the work tell us about the interests, preoccupations, and values of its sponsors? How do its style and subject appeal to them?
- (6) Have other artists used this theme or subject for different purposes?
- (7) Would a member of this original audience likely feel that the work reinforced or criticized accepted social values? Does the work communicate the personal viewpoint of the artist or society?
- (8) Was the work first received well? Did various segments of the public have different reactions?
- (9) How have later periods reacted to this work? Has it ever fallen into disfavor or neglect? What feeling does the work produce in viewers today?

Too often we imitate our textbooks, which tend to concentrate each period's art into separate chapters following the presentation of its political, social, and economic life. The arts become the distilled essence of an age rather than an integral part of its development. Except in the rare cases when little else remains of a past civilization—like the menhirs and

dolmens left by megalithic cultures of Neolithic Europe—we forget that the arts can be used as points of departure for our treatment of social life. When dealing with periods about which we are better informed, we sometimes overlook the fact that the material and technological resources available to the artist are good indicators of the level of economic and social life. The great cathedrals of the Middle Ages are not just monuments to religious fervor, but reminders as well of the expansion of trade and renewed vitality of urban life, not to mention the technical skill of the stone masons.

Attention to a work's public is one of the best means of introducing students to its social context. Until about the eighteenth century, most art was produced for rather well-defined audiences, usually some powerful elite. Even if the work was available to other social groups, it expressed the preoccupations, aspirations, or ideals of its sponsors. Questions 2 through 7 stress this link between the work's intended audience and its function, content, and style. Finally, we can extend the relation of artist and public beyond the immediate moment of creation by studying the fortunes of an artist or style over a period of time. While we should introduce students to the canon of works recognized as masterpieces in the tradition they are studying, they should also come to see that what is considered great art often changes from period to period, and that aesthetic taste is influenced by social factors.

### **Activities**

These activities are designed to give students the opportunity to reformulate in their own words the information encountered in lectures, readings, or their personal research. I have found that my civilization classes have been most successful when I have included strengthening language skills among my primary goals. Many of these activities are simulations which, even when kept brief and uncomplicated, can provide a change of pace by promoting interaction among students and by requiring active use of the language.<sup>7</sup>

To promote the use of the target language I incorporate it in all the materials I give students. These include written instructions for each activity geared to the specific artwork we will consider and a brief vocabulary list of terms dealing with art. Such a list becomes especially helpful when students want to report back to the class in the target language on outside research or on preliminary discussions they have done in English.<sup>8</sup> I usually allow students to rehearse their participation by assigning an activity as homework after briefly introducing it. Students come to class with more confidence in their oral ability if they have made a few notes in advance. After completing the activity, often working in small groups, students are sometimes asked to write it up as composition practice, adding to their own ideas any new ones they gained through class interchange. Choosing works closely related to topics treated in the textbook (social, artistic, religious, political) also makes it easier to maintain the use of the target language, and at the same time to minimize the reaction, "I'm no art history student." The goal is to use art to integrate the various components of the course, and thus to reinforce vocabulary from as many areas as possible.

Another advantage of these activities is that they permit the instructor to focus attention on a limited number of artworks examined in considerable depth. While I often use repro-

ductions of art to illustrate points in my class presentation, rapid exposure to a large number of works does little more than catch the initial attention of students. These activities, on the other hand, aim at the quality and intensity of the visual experience and thus counteract any tendency toward visual overload. After all, one of the distinguishing marks of good art is its capacity to sustain prolonged attention by the viewer. Brief exposure to a large quantity of works simply does not do justice to what is most unique in art. As Roseann Runte suggests in her list of practical hints on using slides in the classroom, only a restricted number can be assimilated in any one class session.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Reports or projects based on the checklist*

I make a practice of incorporating substantial elements of this kind of analysis into my own presentations, although I rarely use the checklist to treat a work completely. However, I sometimes do use it as a basis for independent projects or reports. For short reports not requiring library research, students are given a list of questions in the target language adapted specifically to the work we have chosen. When asking them to do a more thorough analysis, it is useful to give them a brief bibliographic guide to available library resources along with a translated version of the checklist. My better students have had little trouble applying the general questions of the checklist to the work they are studying since similar issues have been previously raised in class. Weaker students often have had trouble both with the research aspect of such projects and in formulating pertinent questions. They work best in groups led by stronger students.

#### *Furnishing a period room*

Using reproductions, students pretend they are assembling the furniture and accessories for the decor of a period room in a museum. They design the floor plan, select furniture, paintings, and other suitable decorative items. Finally, written visitors' guides are prepared explaining how the room corresponds to the social position of its probable occupants, the activities which might have taken place there, and the stylistic features of its furnishings.

A simpler exercise is to show the students pictures of a piece of furniture, a painting, or ceramicware and ask them to describe the setting in which it was probably found. The emphasis here, as above, is on the function of the object in the everyday life of its user.

#### *Archeologist*

When studying prehistoric cultures or even periods from the recent past, students can pretend they are archeologists who have found certain artifacts (pictures or descriptions of objects furnished by the teacher). In a Latin American course these might be items from pre-Columbian cultures; in a French course, one might include cave paintings, menhirs, and Celtic jewelry. Students give an approximate date for the objects, or at least place them in chronological order. They should go on to describe the use of the artifact, to indicate what level of technological development was necessary for its production, and to state what it suggests about the beliefs, economy, or social system of those who produced it.



### ***Portrait gallery***

After studying the lifestyle of various social classes or groups during a given historical period, I present a series of portraits or paintings with characters illustrating a sampling of representative groups. Students try to situate the rank of each character in the social hierarchy using dress, decor, or accessories found in the work as guides. The next step is for students to impersonate the characters, who describe their lives. This includes age, family, sources of income, problems which must be faced, and values. Finally, the characters react to the image of themselves which the works project. Portraits commissioned by the sitter will generally feature favorable, even idealized, views of their subjects, while characters whose social standing differs markedly from that of the work's audience might find themselves ill at ease with the way they are presented.

### ***Planning a community museum***

Students form the purchasing committee for a new local museum. They are given a number of reproductions to which the instructor has affixed "prices," and are told how much money they have available to make purchases. They might debate such issues as the desirability of a collection with representative great masters as opposed to specializing in one period, theme, or country. This will allow them to study the reception of art works in terms of their own community's taste; they might further deal with the financial aspects of the art world—the role of dealers, auctions, wealthy donors, etc.

### ***Studying function through floor plans***

Our civilization texts often ignore the information that is conveniently summarized in floor plans. While photographs of buildings allow us to follow changes in style, floor plans—especially when a series are compared—show how design changes in response to new functional requirements. A German instructor could compare the octagon-shaped chapel of Charlemagne, a Romanesque monastic church, and finally a baroque one, stressing changes in religious practices and devotional needs. A French instructor might trace the life of the rural aristocracy by studying the floor plans of a Gallo-Roman villa, a medieval chateau, and an eighteenth-century country home. Such floor plans are readily available in introductory histories of art, or in history of architecture textbooks.

### ***Stylistic connotations***

Have students investigate the connotations that various architectural or furniture styles have for Americans. They will come to realize that styles are not neutral but are often associated with religious or political ideas, certain social classes, etc. At the same time, they can see the influence of the foreign culture they are studying on their own visual environment. When possible, it is best to refer to examples in the local community, even if the nearby church does have the pure gothic lines of a more well-known monument like the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Students might survey their own locale for buildings showing the influence of the foreign tradition. Another possibility is to simulate the building committee for a church or other public building charged with selecting the most suitable style of architecture for the proposed structure.

*Great men come alive*

Painting and sculpture are often used to commemorate historical personages or events. Sometimes it is a portrait painted from life, like Hyacinthe Rigaud's famous portrait of Louis XIV. At other times, some past event or historical figure is seen through the eyes of an artist of a later period. In almost all such cases an element of propaganda is present. This can be dramatized by having students impersonate the subject of the painting who gives his reaction to it. For example, the nineteenth-century French King Louis-Philippe might react with displeasure to Honoré Daumier's caricatures of him as an obese charlatan.

*Patron/artist simulations*

Such simulations have perhaps the richest potential of all the activities because they bring into play so many facets of the creative process—the expectations of the artist's public, the material and financial resources at his disposal, and his own temperament and preferences. In its simplest form, this activity recreates the negotiations between an artist and patron. It is best to choose a situation in which a number of options are discussed, perhaps involving the style or exact subject to be chosen, the resources the patron can commit to the project, and the significance of the work. For example, Charlemagne can discuss with his architects the reasons for the decision to imitate the Byzantine church of Saint Vitale at Ravenna for his chapel in Aachen rather than the rectangular Roman basilica model.

The most popular simulation I have used (and one of the most complicated) involves a debate among the canons of a medieval cathedral chapter over how to rebuild their Romanesque church which has just burned. A progressive canon argues for the new gothic style, while a conservative one expresses fears that such a building will be too costly and doubts the solidity of the gothic vaulting. Financial, technical, civic, and liturgical issues can be raised. The presiding bishop calls in an architect, a sculptor, and a glassmaker to describe their possible contributions. When students are assigned roles in advance and given suggestions as to the basic lines of argument to develop, such a debate allows them to investigate the differences between the two building styles, in terms of all the categories of the checklist, without, however, ever formally using it.

*Museum visit*

One highlight of civilization classes in which the visual arts are emphasized can be a visit to a nearby museum. Instead of relying on the services of the museum's docent staff, each student is responsible for presenting one work to the other members of the group. Usually museums sell reproductions of their works in various forms—postcards, posters, slides, greeting cards; if these cannot be obtained in advance for the students, they might be able to prepare by visiting the museum individually before the group visit, or as a last resort, be given some time alone at the beginning of the field trip to study the work they will present.

We are in a time of experimentation in civilization courses, especially in ones with a historical framework. Perhaps the common element in most new approaches is a view of civilization as an interdisciplinary synthesis. However, our desire to broaden the base of our efforts does not mean that we must abandon such long-time components of our courses as the visual arts. Rather, we must avoid viewing the arts narrowly in terms of the

artist's life or the evolution of style. Our goal must be to integrate them as fully as possible into our courses by treating all their dimensions in a manner that encourages active interchange among students and careful examination of individual works. Using the visual arts to enter the target culture's heritage in the context of its social dynamics offers the soundest assurance that the arts will continue to play an important role in our courses.

## Notes

1. Sol Worth with Jay Ruby, "An American Community's Socialization to Pictures," in Sol Worth, *Studying Visual Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 200–1.
2. Graeme Chalmers, a Canadian art educator, has written a series of pleas to integrate cultural and social studies with art. "Teaching and Studying Art History: Some Anthropological and Social Considerations," *Studies in Art Education*, 20 (1978), 18–25, stresses the rationale for such an approach and provides a very useful bibliography of other writers who share his concerns. See also "A Cultural Foundation for Education in the Arts," *Art Education*, 27 (1974), 21–25, and "The Study of Art in a Cultural Context," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 32 (1973), 249–56, which surveys scholarly literature on art and society in a wide number of disciplines. The most useful social history of art is Arnold Hauser's *A Social History of Art*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951) and *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York: Knopf, 1959); Hans Hess, *Pictures as Arguments* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), and Hanna Deinhard, *Meaning and Expression: Toward a Sociology of Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970) are also helpful. D. W. Gotshalk's *Art and the Social Order* (New York: Dover, 1962) is a philosopher's inquiry into the social nature of art.
3. *The Bulletin of the Western Arts Association*, 18 (1934). Pages 75–76 of this article contain a "Brief Questionnaire for Art Analysis." In *Toward Science in Aesthetics* (New York: The Liberal Press, 1956), pp. 38–43, he discusses the advantages and limitations of questionnaires for both the student and the researcher. His *Form and Style in the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetic Morphology* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970) provides more elaborate checklists for various aspects of art: "the utilitarian schema," p. 293; "the representational schema," pp. 355–56; "the expository schema," p. 384; and "the thematic schema in design," pp. 458–59.
4. Accurate information about the works of art, the artist's life, and social conditions must be the basis of all analysis. Gerd Muehsam's *Guide to Basic Information Sources in the Visual Arts* (Santa Barbara, CA: Jeffrey Norton Publishers, 1978) is a helpful reference bibliography.
5. Hauser, vol. 1, p. 40.
6. Hess, p. 10.
7. For activities designed for beginning and intermediate language classes, see Tom Carr, "The Language Student in the World of Art," in Maurice W. Conner, ed., *A Global Approach to Foreign Language Education* (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company, 1981), pp. 59–66. These games, such as "Invent a Title" (students create their own titles for art works), "Put Yourself into the Picture" (students describe what it would feel like if they were characters in the painting), and "Memory Game" (students try to describe an art work they have just seen) do not involve any knowledge of art history or of the target culture but use the work of art as a springboard for self-expression. The activities I am describing here are perhaps more suitable for advanced students and emphasize the aesthetic and social dimensions of the visual arts.

8. In preparing vocabulary lists instructors might find a dictionary such as the following useful: Mario Pei and Frank Gaynor, *Liberal Arts Dictionary in English, French, German, Spanish* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952).
9. Roseann Runte, "Focusing in on the Slide: Its Practical Applications," *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 33 (1977), 547-51.