4.601 Introduction to Art History

Professor Kristel Smentek
Office hours: W 3:30-5:00 pm and Th 3:45-4:45 pm Eastern time; sign up online: http://architecture.mit.edu/oh or by appointment
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Lectures: T/Th 2:00-3:30 pm Eastern time
* class meetings will be held synchronously via Zoom; links are posted on the class canvas site

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, or cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do.
—David Freedberg, The Power of Images, 1989

People also pay extraordinary amounts of money for works of art, build museums for them, steal them, and frequently attempt to censor or destroy them. This course investigates the power of art in historical perspective. It focuses on Euro-American traditions of art, the global contexts in which they emerged, the social and cultural practices that defined them, and the analytic tools available to help us interpret the diverse meanings and functions of art works in the past and at present.

Engaging selected works—from paintings to prints to other kinds of crafted objects—and artistic practices from the fourteenth to the twentieth-first century, we will examine changing conceptions of the artist, the work of art, and the discipline of art history. Our brief is to explore the multiple roles images and objects have played over time, how they functioned in various social, economic and cultural contexts, and whose interests they served or sought to disrupt. Throughout we will attend to questions of race and representation, gender, patronage and politics, the meanings of materials, as well as the impact of new technologies and of historical interactions between Europe, America, and the wider world. How did devotional practices, science, colonialism, and global trade shape Euro-American conceptions of art and artists? How do institutions such as the art market, the art museum, and the temporary exhibition define what is and isn’t art? And what does the contemporary reception of art tell us about its—and our—place in our 21st-century world?

COURSE STRUCTURE:

No prior knowledge of art history is required, and there are no prerequisites for this course.

READING MATERIALS

• All required readings are posted on the canvas site for this course as are links to recommended supplementary resources.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING POLICY:

READINGS + VIDEOS
Required readings and videos are assigned for each lecture and are listed on your syllabus. It is your responsibility to complete your required readings and viewing before class meetings and to be prepared to discuss the critical perspectives they present.

EXPERIMENTS
As noted in the syllabus, you will occasionally be asked to perform short experiments before our class meetings. These are low-stakes exercises, but they will be an important component of our class learning and our class discussion. Please complete these experiments before the class meetings for which they are assigned.

PARTICIPATION (20%)
Regular attendance at lectures is required and engagement in class discussion is expected. In calculating your participation grade, your preparedness for discussion, and the quality of your contributions will be taken into account, as will your punctuality and your attendance. Unexcused absences may result in a reduction of your course grade.

**For students who cannot be present during lecture because of a significant time difference (7+ hours), recordings of lectures will be provided, and we will make arrangements to meet with you for a weekly discussion via Zoom at a mutually convenient time.

POSITION PAPERS (45%)
The course requirements include 3 double-spaced writing assignments varying in length from c. 4-6 pages depending on the topic (15% each). Topics and instructions will be announced in class. PLEASE NOTE: Exceptions to the deadlines listed below will only be made in special circumstances and after consultation with the professor. If you are having trouble please talk to us before your assignment is due.

Paper 1 assigned: 9/15
Paper 1 due: 10/01
Paper 2 assigned: 10/15
Paper 2 due: 11/05
Paper 3 assigned: 11/17
Paper 3 due: 12/03

READING/VIEWING RESPONSES + QUESTIONS FOR GUESTS (35%)
In addition to your position papers, you are required to post a response (250 words min.) to assigned readings and videos for class meetings where marked in the syllabus. In your well-written and considered responses, please summarize the author’s (or authors’) arguments, consider the evidence mobilized by the author to support his or her claims, and pose at least one question about the reading and/or video. Your responses are due no later than 10am on the day of the relevant class meeting.

We are fortunate to have 3 guest speakers this semester. By 5pm the evening before they will meet with us, please post 2 questions related to their assigned readings and videos on our class canvas site.

Satisfactory class participation and completion of all assignments is required in order to pass the course.
POLICY ON ACADEMIC HONESTY:
Please read the following carefully and be advised that the policy is real.

Plagiarism—the use of another’s intellectual work without acknowledgement—is a serious offense. Students who plagiarize or hand in work completed by another will receive an automatic grade of “F” for the course. You will also be referred to the appropriate Institute committees. If you have any questions about plagiarism or how to cite your sources properly, please consult the section “Avoiding Plagiarism” on the writing and communication center website https://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/ or your instructor and TAs. We are here to help you.

ZOOM ETIQUETTE
1. Connect to class at least 5 minutes earlier than the start time in order confirm your connection/equipment is ready to go.
2. If your bandwidth allows, please keep your video on. In these remote circumstances, this will facilitate trust and connection in our class discussion.
3. Mute your microphone if you are not speaking.
4. Use the chat to type any questions or comments that may come up during the lecture portion of the class. During class discussions, you may also use the “Raise Hand” feature.
5. Connectivity Issues? If the professor or guest lecturer drops out of the Zoom meeting, please wait for further instruction from the TAs. If you disconnect from the Zoom call and cannot re-connect, please email your TA for possible workarounds.

A NOTE ON OUR EXCEPTIONAL SEMESTER
We are undertaking this class in a period of great uncertainty, and how global events – from the pandemic to the many social crises here and abroad – will unfold is unpredictable. If you find yourself in a difficult situation because of illness, changed family circumstances, or other factors, please do not hesitate to reach out to your professor and TAs so that we can do what we can to help. We are here for you.

Schedule of Classes, Required Readings, and Assignments

Week 1—Introduction

Sept. 1 – Introduction: What is Art?

Sept. 3 – Learning to Look/Interpreting What We See (+ sharing a work of art we find compelling)


**By 5pm on Sept. 2, please post an image or a link to an image (the higher the resolution the better), along with the title and artist (if identified) of your chosen work of art to the assignments link under Sept. 3 on our class canvas site.

______________________________________________________________________________________________________________
**Week 2—Art and Experience**

**Sept. 8 – The Devotional Image: Art and Belief**

Reading:  

Experiment:  
*Viewing by candlelight.* For this experiment, you will need a completely or nearly completely darkened room and a stationary candle. What parts of the room can you, and can't you see by candlelight? What happens when you move the candle to another location? If you have a picture hanging on the wall, what can and can't you see when it is viewed by candlelight rather than electric light or daylight? Please be prepared to discuss your experiences in class.

**Sept. 10 – Perspective in Perspective + a Conversation with Dr. Kristina Kleutghen, Washington University in Saint Louis**

Reading:  

**Please post 2 questions for Dr. Kleutghen on our canvas discussion site by 5pm on Sept. 9**

**Recommended (not required):**


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**Week 3—Methods + Materials**

**Sept. 15 – Conversation with curator Nathaniel Silver about the exhibition, “Boston’s Apollo: Thomas McKeller and John Singer Sargent”**

Exhibition on view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, until October 12, 2020.

Reading:  

Viewing:  
Helga Davis, *Finding Thomas McKeller*, 2019, 10:49  

**Please post 2 questions for Dr. Silver on our canvas discussion site by 5pm on Sept. 14**

*Position paper 1 assigned.*


Recommended (not required):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7wi8jd7aC4

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**Week 4—Taking the Longer View: Genres of European Art**

[*required reading response: please respond to the reading for Sept. 22 OR Sept. 24 and submit by 10 am on the day for which the reading is assigned]*

Sept. 22 – The Nude


Recommended (not required):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1GI8mNU5Sg

Sept. 24 – The Portrait


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**Week 5—Taking the Longer View: Making + Breaking**

Sept. 29 – Pigments: Blue


Oct. 1 – Iconoclasm and Censorship: A Debate

Reading: - Carol Pogash, “These High School Murals Depict an Ugly History. Should They Go?” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2019

**please click on all links in both articles**

*1st position paper due Oct. 1, 2pm Eastern time*
Week 6 — The Global Seventeenth Century

Oct. 6 – Dutch Art in Global Perspective [*reading response required]


Oct. 8 – Art as Theater in 17th-Century Rome


Week 7— Exhibition: Enter the Art Critic

Due to MIT holiday, there is no lecture on Tuesday, October 13

Oct. 15 – Public Art Exhibitions


*Position paper 2 assigned

Week 8—Art and Empire

Oct. 20 – Ancients and Moderns

Reading:  -Emily Ballew Neff, “At the Wood’s Edge: Benjamin West’s ‘The Death of Wolfe’ and the Middle Ground,” in E. B. Neff et al., American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World (Houston, 2013), 64-103.

Recommended (not required):

Oct. 22 – Orientalisms [*reading response required]


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**Week 9—New Institutions/New Technologies**

**Oct. 27 – The Art Museum** [*reading + viewing response required]*

**Reading:**  

**Viewing:**  
The Carters, *Apes***, 2018, 6:05  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA)

**Oct. 29 – New Technologies: Photography**

**Reading:**  

*Recommended (not required):*  
Photographic processes series, George Eastman House, chapters 1, 2, 3, 6:  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH_FfjHEuvR5U0Ur8rB35fezQ1yZkShMk](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH_FfjHEuvR5U0Ur8rB35fezQ1yZkShMk)

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**Week 10— The Spaces of Modernity**

**Nov. 3 – The Modern Nude** [*reading response required]*

**Reading:**  
- T.J. Clark, “Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of ‘Olympia’ in 1865,” in Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts, ed. Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (London, 1992), 105-120.  

**Nov. 5 – The Artist and the City**

**Reading:**  

*2nd position paper due Nov. 5, 2pm Eastern time*
Week 11—Modernism

**Nov. 10** – Conversation with Conservator of Paintings and Head of Paintings Lab, Kate Smith, and Conservation Scientists, Katherine Eremin and Georgina Rayner, Harvard Art Museums.

Possible Reading/viewing TBD

**If our guests do assign readings or videos, please post 2 questions for them our canvas discussion site by 5pm on Nov. 9.**

Nov. 12 – Modernisms [*reading response required]*

**Reading:** - Saloni Mathur, “A Retake of Sher-Gil’s Self-Portrait as Tahitian,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 515-544.

Week 12—Art and Politics

**Nov. 17—Against Art: Dada and Surrealism**

**Reading:** - Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto (1918),” in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000*, 252-257.

**Experiment:** Surrealism. Follow one of the Surrealist visual techniques discussed by Brotchie, take a picture of your result and upload it to our class canvas site. This is not a high-stakes exercise; it is a chance to experiment with the mind-liberating activities promoted by the Surrealists. Please be prepared to discuss your experiences in class.

*Final position paper assigned*

**Nov. 19 – Indigenous Art | American Art**


Thanksgiving break: Nov. 21-29

Week 13—After the Art Object

**Dec. 1 – From Pop to Performance**

Dec. 3 – Art and Environment


*Final position paper due, Dec. 3, 2pm Eastern time*

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**Week 14—Where We Are Now**

Dec. 8 – The Artworld in (after?) COVID [*viewing response required*]