

American Civilization and Language Through Art History

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In intensive English programs, American culture courses often focus on conventional views of everyday life and popular culture. This may lead to a limited understanding of American culture and history, neglecting the vast legacy of artistic, intellectual, and literary endeavor in the United States. At the same time, some students seek a more profound or intellectual interpretation of American civilization. With this in mind, American art can serve as a vehicle for teaching and learning language, culture, history, and critical analysis. Accordingly, students can develop an awareness of the United States as a richly varied and sophisticated civilization – a perception not always apparent among international populations.

This presentation examined methods for teaching American art history and similar content-based subjects in intensive English programs and other ESL contexts. Referring to an array of sources (exhibitions at the San Diego Museum of Art, art history texts, exhibition catalogues, and Internet materials), the workshop explored how art history can be used to address a variety of pedagogical issues, such as cultural information, academic discussion, critical thinking and analysis, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and vocabulary development.

The presentation centered on selected works of art ranging from the colonial period to the present, along with corresponding classroom activities. Most of the works discussed were from two exhibitions at the San Diego Museum of Art: *American Beauty: Painting and Sculpture from the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1770-1920*, and *American Art: Selections from the Collection*.

Strategies for encouraging academic discussion about art and art history were examined; at the same time, the importance of maintaining a balanced and rational approach in the classroom was emphasized (i.e., avoiding defensiveness and jingoism about the United States as

well as avoiding hypercritical approaches to American society and culture). The presenter also provided recommendations for resources such as museum education programs, docent tours, guest speakers, textbooks and other reference works, exhibition catalogues, television documentaries, and electronic sources.

Additional topics included the following: the value of visual culture as a reinforcing medium in the study of language, art history, or history; the relationship between art history and social history as a basis for understanding American society; the significance of content knowledge for ESL instructors, particularly in the humanities and social sciences; the benefits and challenges of content-based instruction; and the perceptions and misperceptions of American culture which exist among students in Intensive English Programs and other ESL settings.

The session handout included two student worksheets for content-based courses in American art history (one high-advanced, the other intermediate to advanced) and an additional worksheet designed specifically as a discussion vehicle for the instructors attending the workshop (see Appendices).

Workshop participants represented a variety of ESL contexts, including public schools, an art institute, and IEPs. Their contributions to the discussion were vibrant and enlightening. For example, one participant expressed her appreciation for the challenging level of Worksheet #1, explaining that it would be entirely appropriate for the high-advanced students in her program. This inspired an engaging interchange about the variety of populations in ESL settings, particularly the diversity of academic and linguistic levels in IEPs. Among the issues expressed was the notion that certain students greatly appreciate course activities and materials which are academically and linguistically demanding. With this in mind, a participant remarked that students with near-native proficiency may still benefit from academic preparation programs,

despite the fact that their language level is already high, in order to function successfully at institutions of higher learning in the United States.

Another aspect of the discussion centered on the question of mandatory content-based courses. One participant described the potential value of requiring such courses. Those studying language in a foreign country, she explained, often benefit immensely from also studying that country's cultural history.

The importance of multicultural awareness was also expressed, with references to the range of communities in the U.S. whose artworks – after decades of neglect – have begun to receive greater attention in recent years. To exemplify the contributions of women in the visual arts, for example, the presenter alluded to a review he wrote of an exhibition about American women impressionists. Native American art was also highlighted; in particular, some participants discussed the problematic misconception that Native American art ceased to develop following European settlement.

Throughout the session, participants offered insightful responses to the content of the works being viewed, sometimes drawing upon their own study of art history or their previous exposure to the particular paintings and sculptures. Others shared ideas for incorporating art history into a range of ESL contexts (various programs and proficiency levels).

In essence, the workshop and discussion demonstrated how art history can function as an effective vehicle for language learning and academic preparation. Content-based courses such as American art history, moreover, may satisfy ESL students who seek an academic or sophisticated impression of society in the United States. As a result, such courses may encourage students to adopt a broader, more intellectual appreciation of American civilization.

## Appendix A

## Excerpts from Session Handout: Student Worksheets

These worksheets were designed for a content-based course in American art history at a proprietary language school. Using projected images and individual reproductions of the works, workshop participants discussed the questions in groups, anticipating how students might react to the questions.

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## Worksheet #1

This handout was created as a challenging academic exercise for a high-advanced student population. The activity requires students to analyze paintings by two 18<sup>th</sup> century American artists and, for purposes of transnational comparison, an additional painting by a 19<sup>th</sup> century French artist.

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## “History of American Art for ESL Students”: Relationships Among Paintings

## Questions for Composition or Class Discussion

Examine Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778) and *The Raft of the "Medusa"* (1818-19) by French artist Théodore Géricault.

Respond to the following questions using independent research, your own background information, and your own critical thinking skills. Demonstrate your point of view in a clear, convincing manner.

Note: Although your responses may be logical and appropriate in the context of these questions, additional research may be necessary in order to analyze the paintings in greater detail or to fully understand the historical context of the works.

1. What historical events are depicted in these paintings? In what ways do you believe the artists may have altered the actual events for their symbolic or allegorical value, or for aesthetic or dramatic reasons?
2. How does West's *The Death of General Wolfe* depict a classical theme? Janson (1995) informs us that West "endowed the death of a modern military hero with the rhetorical

pathos of 'noble and serious human actions' as defined by academic theory, and with the trappings of a real event. He created an image that expresses a phenomenon basic to modern times: the shift of emotional allegiance from religion to nationalism."

Explain Janson's statement. Why would this theme – that is, "the shift of emotional allegiance from religion to nationalism" – inspire artists of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries? Can this theme also be applied to recent or current events in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

3. Look at the Native American figure in West's painting. How would you describe or explain his pose and expression? It is believed that West, upon viewing the famous classical statue, the *Apollo Belvedere*, compared it to a Mohawk warrior. Could this be related to the classical themes in *The Death of Wolfe*?
4. Where are you, the viewer, positioned in relation to these paintings? Are you an outside observer, viewing the action as if it is being presented before you on the stage of a theater? Or are you brought into the action, as if you are a part of it? How does this positioning affect your interpretation of the action and your overall response to the painting?
5. It has been said that the Native American in *The Death of Wolfe* and the African American sailor in *Watson and the Shark* perform similar aesthetic functions. Can you explain this assessment? What do you believe is the function of these figures in the context of these two paintings?
6. Both *Watson and the Shark* and *The Raft of the Medusa* depict life-threatening situations at sea. Describe the action in these paintings, remembering that each painting portrays a different type of danger. In other words, *Watson and the Shark* portrays acute terror and the urgent need for immediate salvation, whereas *The Raft of the "Medusa"* depicts prolonged suffering. In *Watson and the Shark*, the threat to life (in the form of the shark) is much more imminent, and the possibility of rescue is also much more immediate. Contrast this quality with *The Raft of the "Medusa"* where, although there is no instant threat such as the teeth of a violent sea creature, the possibility of rescue (in the form of the ship on the horizon) is much more distant than in the Copley painting. Analyze this phenomenon thoroughly.
7. How do these three works convey the themes of human cooperation and fellowship? Is it significant that these themes are highlighted in life-threatening situations?
8. In *Watson and the Shark* and *The Raft of the "Medusa"*, the visual composition of the action can be said to follow a triangular structure. What is the significance of the triangle in this context? Why do Watson and the shark appear at the base of the triangle? Is the positioning of the harpoon significant? More precisely, think of the importance of a weapon, held more or less in a vertical position, by a sailor who is on the verge of killing a sea monster. Could this have any religious or spiritual significance? How does the triangular structure of this painting relate to the triangular structure of the action in *The Raft of the "Medusa"*?

9. Nudity performs a variety of functions in the visual arts; it may be described as highlighting the dignity, grace, and beauty of the human body, as well as its erotic appeal. It may also signify a range of other qualities such as innocence or vulnerability. What role does nudity or partial nudity play in these paintings? How does nudity enhance the themes of danger and salvation?
  10. West and Copley were painters from North America who, during the colonial period, lived and worked in England. They have been variously categorized as American painters and as English painters. Which categorization do you believe is more appropriate? What additional information would you need in order to respond to this question effectively?
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### Worksheet #2

Suitable for intermediate to advanced student populations, this worksheet was created as an introductory activity for the content-based art history course. Students view a series of works from the 19<sup>th</sup> century through 2005; these reproductions function as a springboard for academic discussion and analysis. The activity progresses from basic questions to those which require more complex thinking. Incidentally, the questions are not based upon a limited set of works; almost any works of art can be used to accompany this worksheet.

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### "History of American Art for ESL Students": Introductory Discussion and Analysis

Working with your teammates, discuss one or more of the works of art in the reproductions. Try to use a broad range of words, terms, and expressions. If possible, support your point of view in a clear and convincing manner.

1. How would you describe the work you are looking at?
2. Does the image convey a particular mood or atmosphere?
3. Does the artist appear to be making a particular social, political, or ideological statement?
4. Can you identify a narrative quality in the work? Is the image telling a story or narrating a sequence of events?
5. Of the reproductions you have seen, is there a particular work that appeals to you more than the others? If so, why? Would you wish to study the work or the artist in greater depth? By the same token, is there a work which you dislike more than the others? If so, why?
6. What additional information would you need to have in order to understand the works more thoroughly?

## Appendix B

## Excerpt from Session Handout: Worksheet for Instructors

Designed for the instructors attending the workshop, this handout served as an impetus for group discussion about perceptions of American culture, the value of content-based courses, and classroom activities using aspects of American art history.

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## Topics for Discussion (Teachers)

Working with the members of your group, discuss any or all of the following questions:

1. Have your students expressed misconceptions about American culture or history? Discuss the misconceptions that you might have encountered among IEP students, other ESL students, or other international populations.
2. Do you believe that content-based classes (or content-based units in standard language classes) with topics such as American art history, American history, American literature, American music, etc., useful in addressing such misconceptions?
3. If IEPs or other ESL programs include such courses, should students be required to enroll in them? Can you think of any compelling reasons why such classes should be required? Or would it be more successful to offer such courses as optional electives?
4. Can elements of American art history be incorporated into the classes that you have taught or that you currently teach?
5. Brainstorm: Think of a possible classroom activity using aspects of American art history. Feel free to use the works we have looked at during the presentation.

## Appendix C

## Selected References for Teachers

This list includes a sample of art history texts and Internet sources, most of which were listed on the session handout. These may be useful for ESL professionals who wish to incorporate art history into their curricula. Needless to say, many other sources also exist, particularly Web sites for museums and other institutions with a focus on the visual arts (galleries, libraries, universities, etc.).

Selected print sources:

1. *The American Art Book*. (2001). London: Phaidon Pres, Inc.
2. Baigell, M. (1984). *A concise history of American painting and sculpture*. New York: Harper and Row.
3. Beal, G.W.J. (2002). *American beauty: paintings from the Detroit Institute of Arts 1770-1920*. London: Scala Publishers Ltd. (exhibition catalogue)
4. Fort, I.S, with Abram, T. (1996). *American paintings in Southern California collections: from Gilbert Stuart to Georgia O'Keefe*. Los Angeles, California. Museum Associates. (exhibition catalogue)
5. Janson, H. W. (1957). *The picture history of painting, from cave painting to modern times*. New York, H.N. Abrams.
6. Janson, H.W., with Janson, D.J. (1995). *History of art* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) New York: Abrams; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Revised and expanded by Anthony F. Janson.
7. Pohl, F. K. (2002). *Framing America: a social history of American art*. New York: Thames & Hudson.
8. Hughes, R.(1997, Spring). What America's greatest art reveals about our national character. *TIME Special Issue*.
9. Mendelowitz, D.M. (1970). *A history of American art* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

## Selected Internet sources:

Absolutearts.com (n.d.) Retrieved June 13, 2005, from <http://www.absolutearts.com/artnews>

American Beauty: Painting and sculpture from the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1770-1920 (n.d.). Retrieved March 4, 2005, from TheGalleryChannel:  
<http://www.thegallerychannel.com/exhib.shtml>

American Beauty: Painting and sculpture from the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1770-1920 (n.d.) Resource Library Magazine: America's Representational Art Publication. Retrieved March 4, 2005 from <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/4aa/4aa375.htm>

American Art: Selections from the Collection (n.d.). Retrieved March 4, 2005 from San Diego Museum of Art Web site: <http://www.sdmart.org/exhibition-american-collections.html>

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[http://www.sdmart.org/pr\\_americanbeauty.html](http://www.sdmart.org/pr_americanbeauty.html)

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TheGalleryChannel (n.d.) Retrieved June 13, 2005, from <http://www.thegallerychannel.com/>

The Gates: Central Park, New York City, 1979-2005 (2005) in Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Retrieved June 13, 2005, from <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/tg.html>

Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (n.d.) Retrieved June 13, 2005, from <http://mcasd.org/>

Traditional Fine Arts Organization (2005, 18 May) Retrieved June 13, 2005, from <http://www.tfaoi.com/index.htm>