Art History and the Curriculum of a Catholic University

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Pope John Paul II set educational goals for the Christian community and university in both Ex Corde Ecclesiae and As the Third Millennium Draws Near, which reaffirm realistic objectives for all departments. In both directives, the pope advocates engendering an awareness of and respect for diverse cultures within our world as well as our neighborhood — acknowledging our responsibility for individual actions and sharing responsibility for those who do not have the ability to care for themselves or others. He advises that the curriculum should teach respect for Judeo-Christian traditions and texts, including the history and tenets of the Roman Catholic Church by means of organized study; and that it should motivate the university community to continually renew its intellectual and spiritual life through lifelong study and reflection.

Just as the individual is a complex organism who ideally takes pleasure in discovering facets of God's creation, the university is a structure that draws to it disciplines that find their sustenance in exploring the realities of past and present. It is a place where instructors and students investigate a subject and/or object through a multifaceted lens, which draws to it a variety of subject areas in a nonhierarchical fashion.

John Paul II points to an ideal model for a multidisciplinary approach: "While each discipline is taught systematically and according to its own methods, interdisciplinary studies, assisted by a careful and thorough study of philosophy and theology, enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality and develop a continuing desire for intellectual progress."[1] Art history, a discipline barely a century old, takes views of reality from a variety of disciplines and trains them on visual objects. The objects — sculpture, painting, architecture — reflect their times like delicate seismographs. Art records barely distinguishable tremors within society's structures, admitting faint traces or dominant tracks of all that is happening within a time period. The object can be both a negation of events as well as a transparent record.

John Paul II's goals in both writings provide a structure for the Department of Art History's evolving curriculum. As a discipline, art history introduces its students to a variety of avenues from which to view an object, paralleling the preceding directives. This introduction, however, is an attempt to inaugurate a nascent intellectual curiosity that is a prelude to a continually enriching, lifetime journey of exploration.

The University of St. Thomas' current art history curriculum acknowledges its interdisciplinary bases as the foundation of its academic existence. The discipline advocates an integrative-studies approach in order to thoroughly comprehend the art object's creation and ongoing life. Typical syllabi from the basic survey courses and upper-level courses, for example, ask students to examine a work of art by noting "the

influences of patronage, sociological, cultural and historical events; gender and class issues; influences of media and technique; influences from religion; and influences of the artist's personal and artistic history."

During the summer of 1995 the Department of Art History received funding from the university's Curriculum Review Task Force to enrich instructors' awareness of the basic content of courses taught within the Humanities Division at the University of St. Thomas and to broaden the department's view of non-Western cultural concepts. Department Chair Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell planned that as the faculty "explored the integration of ideas or approaches in other disciplines into the two introductory courses" the basic survey course would become more interdisciplinary in approach.2 The department invited three disciplines — English, philosophy and theology — within the Humanities Division to present academic goals, writing assignments, syllabi and bibliographies from their core courses. Supplied with the syllabi from the recently revised basic art history curriculum, representatives from these departments discussed questions of teaching methodology and course content in their own and the Art History Department's basic survey courses. Agreeing that further integrative content would enrich its core courses, the department purchased readings and texts used by the three disciplines and set goals to incorporate additional content from the humanities. This would help its courses fit more logically into the totality of the university's curriculum. The further addition of humanities content within art history courses would help students appreciate the integration of all disciplines within an ideal university setting.

Teaching students to decipher visual language necessitates an understanding of an object's complex environment and a sensitivity to individuals who lived under strictures different from our own. This methodology emphasizes that the place of religion within the life of a community or society is not secondary but paramount to the creation and sustenance of a work of art, usually influencing an object's economic, sociological and cultural milieu. This is exemplified in four chronologically diverse works of art, viewed through a variety of disciplines and typically studied in art history's basic core course: the Brancacci Chapel frescoes painted by Masaccio for the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence (c.1427); the Fourteen Stations of the Cross by Barnett Newman (1964); the Dominican Chapel at Vence, France, designed by Henri Matisse (1947-1953); and the meditative panels painted for the interdenominational chapel on the campus of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas (1964-1967).

Each instructor teaching Art History 152, Renaissance to Modern, introduces the imagery of the Brancacci Chapel. Although no documentation exists, the central program (set of stories that tie imagery together) for the series of fresco paintings by Masolino (1383-1440 or 1447) and Masaccio (1401-1428 or 1429) was dictated by a theologian, supposedly hired by the Brancacci family in the early 15th century. The panels in the chapel ostensibly depict the life of the apostle Peter, the first pope, his relationship to Christ, his awareness of Christ's role after death, and the performance of miracles by Christ through Peter. The stories illustrated by Masolino and Masaccio are theologically in keeping with beliefs of the day, introducing these tenets through symbols and images decorating the chapel.

The religious element to the series, however, is symbiotically related to political and economic events of 15th-century Florence and instructors must trace these events so that students comprehend the full impact of the chapel's imagery. That the Brancacci family, a member of the dominant Guelph party, were allied with the papacy in Rome obviates the focus on the first pope. The Florentines made continual pleas to the papacy for monies to finance their wars against the city-state of Milan. At the same time, the necessity to levy taxes on the city of Florence for the first time in history because of continual warfare with the city-state of Milan, becomes the catalyst for illustrating Matthew 17: 24-27. The story depicts Christ directing Peter, viewed against the lush landscape of the Arno River Valley, to find money for the tax collector in the mouth of a fish in the Sea of Galilee, thereby sanctioning the idea of universal taxation in a recognizable way for Florentine citizens. Thus the religious, economic, aesthetic, philosophical and political ambience of early 15th-century Florence can be reflected in a single commission, transporting students back through centuries to see this series as more than a tableau of figures clothed in colorful robes while dramatically gesturing in front a backdrop of early Renaissance buildings.

Visually, the ideal body shapes, simplicity of human forms and draped clothing refer to the Florentine citizens' romantic interest in the resurrection of ideal Greco-Roman sculpture. That the ideal body is a reflection of the perfection that is heaven represents nascent, contemporary Neoplatonic philosophy; thus, one commission must be viewed from at least six different disciplines.

The intellectually integrative qualities of art history carry into the 20th century and continue to rely (although less often) on religious bases. To fully appreciate the entire series, Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1964, by Barnet Newman (1905-1970) one has to explain the organization and the iconography of the stations within the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Only then will the appreciation of areas of raw canvas, traversed by single zips of black line, have the same intensity and significance as the original recognizable scenes of Christ's Passion and death portrayed in post-Renaissance churches. Contiguous to this historical explanation is the presentation of the philosophical environment of poets, writers and painters living in New York after World War II, which left its quiet tensions on the face of abstract expressionist canvases.

Mark Rothko's quietly layered veils of warm over cool blacks which line the interdenominational chapel at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, are another series of paintings that demand a multidisciplinary explanation for students. Originally meant to serve as a Roman Catholic chapel, it is now affiliated with the Institute of Religion and Human Development at Rice University. Unless one leads beginning art history students through the historic iconography of the church, they cannot logically connect or decipher the psychological ambience, which Rothko creates for the person who comes to meditate. Rothko had intended that the three triptychs and nine single panels serve as a partial Stations of the Cross. Becoming increasingly more obsessed with the project, he changed the theme to the Passion of Christ, fulfilling his life's ambition to create a monument within the tradition of Western religious art. Rothko's restless search for the ideal forms in this commission, exemplified by his

continual revisions on the canvases between 1964 and 1967, is revealed in his comment, "I was always looking for something more."[3]

Rothko's panels, however, portray more than a meditative spirituality with their compacted layers of maroon and black pigment. They reveal the psychological state of the artist's mind as he approaches his own death, the simplifying tendencies of late '60s' aesthetic forms, and the role and influence of the patrons (Dominique and John de Menil).

While viewing contemporary art, students are led to the realization that basic tenets of our faith are still manifested in paper, paint, stone, bronze and building materials and that contemporary art fosters spiritual growth. Through verbal and visual descriptions, they can be shown that Henri Matisse (1869-1954), an avowed agnostic, created an environment in the Dominican Chapel at Venice that forces the initially disinterested viewer to become contemplative — a visual act of grace. White walls act as screens for the blue, magenta and gold light, reflected through the stained-glass windows designed in the leaf shapes of area plants. Matisse viewed the chapel as the summation of his career, exclaiming that "all art worthy of the name is religious."[4]

Besides focusing on the multifaceted ambience within the Western tradition in art history, the department determined that its revised curriculum would emphasize the importance of art objects representing the civilizations of diverse cultures. The text used by all faculty for the basic survey gave impetus for enrichment, noting that: "A glance at a globe will show Europe to be a diminutive peninsula of Asia, and a mere geographical fragment compared with the vast land masses of Africa, the Americas, Australia and the far-flung archipelagos of the Pacific."[5]

In the 15 years preceding 1994, the department had listed only the history of North American Indian art as its token non-Western art history course. In 1994 the department initiated five new topics courses in non-Western art, including histories of Oceanic art, African art, Meso-American art, Islamic art and Asian art. During the curriculum enrichment seminar in the summer of 1995, specialists in Western Asiatic art, African art and North American Indian art met with art history faculty. Seminar members discussed methods of introducing non-western works of art more naturally into the basic art history survey courses, Art History 151 and 152, while treating art objects and the peoples who created them with sensitivity and respect. Objects from the university's permanent art collection were used to suggest teaching methodology. The university's female Mende mask from Sierra Leone, Africa (20th century), for example, could be viewed from the viewpoint of ritual and religious object, yet could also be seen as a realistic and symbolic portrayal of an ideal African woman. As a result of the seminar, instructors revised course syllabi for 1995-1996 to incorporate a greater percentage of non-Western material into course content; thus, while art history has not reached an ideal state of more naturally integrating various disciplines and non-western material into its curriculum, it has begun a process of serious study and intellectual growth.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae by John Paul II serves as both catalyst and challenge to the contemporary university community. The pope's advocacy of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching, to bringing the tenets of the church into course content and to integration of multicultural content into the university's curriculum inspires each member of the university to re-examine his or her course's and vocation's present status and future goals.

Notes

1. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities, 16.

2. Mark Stansbury O'Donnell, "Report to the Curriculum Review Task Force," Sept. 22, 1995.

3. Diane Waldman, Mark Rothko, 1903-1970, A Retrospective. Exhibition catalogue, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1978, 279.

4. John Elderfield, Henri Matisse, A Retrospective. Exhibition catalogue, New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 419.

5. Richard G. Tansey, Fred S. Kleiner, Gardner's Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995), 463.