Notes

Art History for Pre-College Students:
A Museum Seminar

At what age should young people be encouraged to begin a serious study of works of art? Perhaps it is symptomatic of our traditionally lopsided veneration of the printed word that American colleges expect high school seniors to have at least a nodding acquaintance with the poetry of such diverse writers as Donne, Shelley, T. S. Eliot, Frost, and Dylan Thomas, while at the same time remaining almost totally ignorant of the works of El Greco, Rembrandt, Manet, Degas, and other great masters of the visual arts. Yet each of the 100,000 high school students who visit the Museum every year is expected somehow to “appreciate” within the space of a few hours—and usually without any preparation—an almost overwhelming array of powerfully expressive masterpieces by artists he has never heard of and may not hear of again until his last year or two in college. But should young people have to wait until their twenties to learn how to use their eyes or how to study a vital part of their own cultural heritage? Surely not. Yet what can be done to fill this curious gap in our educational system? What sort of contribution can the art museum make toward the aesthetic development of young people?

As a partial answer to these questions, the Museum’s Education Department decided to offer during the summer a special course entitled Backgrounds of Modern Art, designed for pre-college students interested in the history and appreciation of art. Unlike the Museum’s earlier programs for young people, Backgrounds of Modern Art was to be limited to a small enrollment and conducted as a seminar, where both teacher and students could participate in free and open discussions. Letters describing the course, along with application forms, were sent out to more than two hundred and fifty principals of public, private, and parochial schools in the greater New York City metropolitan area. After a careful screening, thirty-six outstanding students were selected and divided into two sections. One, which I taught, met in the morning, and the other, taught by Linda Lovell, staff lecturer, met in the afternoon. Class sessions were each two hours in length, three per week—a total of nine sessions. Students were expected, however, to spend at least an equivalent amount of time in the galleries and the Museum Library, where the Periodical Room was stocked with shelves of books on reserve. Three paperback textbooks were also provided for each student, two for outside reading during the course, the third to be explored in the months ahead, as a sort of continuing dialogue with ideas merely touched on but not fully developed during the summer.

Several of the thirty-six students enrolled in Backgrounds of Modern Art still had one more year of high school ahead of them, but the others had just graduated and were looking forward to continuing their study of art in college. Nearly all had received some kind of formal art instruction in high school, but those without it did not seem particularly handicapped—at least after the first sessions—because such instruction had been studio-oriented, with little or no emphasis on the study of works of art. A few members of the class had been exposed to some art history in brief introductory courses, but these seem to have been little more than superficial surveys.

The Education Department’s seminar, on the other hand, concentrated mainly on a relatively small number of paintings by leading artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that could be found in the Museum’s own collections, as well as in those of the Frick and the Museum of Modern Art. Consequently, one of the important differences between Backgrounds of Modern Art and most college art history courses was the daily opportunity it offered students to study original works rather than reproductions. To be sure, slides were used during parts of the seminar, but more than half of each class period was held in the galleries, where discussions could take place in the actual presence of paintings and sculptures. As a means of pointing up these discussions, all students were required to write analytical papers on two
paintings of their choice—an assignment that most agreed had made them look intensively for the first time at original works of art. Most members of the class also cited as particularly stimulating a special visit to the Print Department’s study room, where fine impressions of aquatints by Goya, lithographs by Daumier, and original prints by great artists in other media, along with drawings by such masters of modern art as Ingres, Delacroix, Degas, Manet, and Matisse, were placed on tables for close inspection. Studying these drawings and prints “behind the scenes” was far more exciting than if they had been glassed and framed and put on display in the galleries.

In a museum with collections as extensive and diverse as those of the Metropolitan, it is not only tempting but often very useful for teacher and students to make occasional digressions into other arts and historical periods than those under immediate scrutiny. Consider, for instance, the kind of background necessary for an appreciation of Jacques-Louis David’s The Death of Socrates, the first painting discussed during the seminar. To most young people in this psychedelic, multimedia age, a neoclassical picture of this sort must seem steeped in empty rhetoric and melodramatic posturing—unless they have had at least some introduction to the ancient classical world that David admired so much. Fortunately, the Museum has a fine collection of Greek and Roman antiquities that can be visited on the way to the painting galleries. But to understand the polemic significance of The Death of Socrates, it is also necessary for the student to be acquainted with the elegant but frivolous world of the rococo that David opposed when he painted this austere moral picture on the eve of the French Revolution. During the first day of the seminar, therefore, students also visited the Museum’s French period rooms, where paintings by Boucher and other artists of the second half of the eighteenth century are hung in appropriate architectural settings, together with furniture and decorative arts of the same era. Finally, on leaving these galleries for the paintings upstairs, the class saw two more reminders of the world David was to reject: Boucher’s Toilet of Venus, painted for Mme de Pompadour, and, directly beneath it, a superb commode made in 1784 for Marie Antoinette, whose execution David himself was to help bring about just nine years later.

In the painting galleries alone, all sorts of interesting comparisons are possible, which would be less effective if attempted by slides in a classroom. Only a short distance from The Death of Socrates, the student can again find a link to the classical past in The Rape of the Sabines, by the seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin, whom David admired above all other French artists. In the same gallery with the Socrates, portraits by David can be compared with several by his Spanish contemporary Goya and with others by Ingres, who succeeded David as champion of the classically oriented Academy of the Fine Arts. There, too, are several paintings by Ingres’s archenemy, Eugène Delacroix, whose passionate literary romanticism is wonderfully expressed in The Abduction of Rebecca.

In the questionnaire filled in by students at the conclusion of the course, much importance was attached to the fact that the class discussions, as well as most of the outside study assignments, took place in the physical presence of the works of art themselves. Many students felt strongly, however, that the seminar should have lasted four weeks rather than three. All enjoyed this opportunity to study in a museum. Indeed, about a third of the students in both sections returned for an extra, informal session the first week after the seminar had been terminated, and eight showed up again for another meeting toward the end of August. Several also expressed an interest in volunteer work at the Visitors’ Center during the coming summer, and one student inquired about the possibility of working at the Museum while attending evening sessions at college in Brooklyn.

No tuition was charged for the seminar. Expenses involved were covered by funds from a grant to the Education Department by the New York State Council on the Arts for the development of a pilot high school program.

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