

Great Books, Great Art: Integrating Art History in the Liberal Arts
Curriculum
Semi-annual Performance Report
December 31, 2005

The purpose of this grant is to properly integrate the study of art – Great Art – into the humanities curriculum of Shimer College. This grant is primarily focused on two audiences: 1) Shimer faculty who will be learning about visual works and texts in order to make innovations in the Shimer curriculum; 2) communication via a website to non-specialists in art history (college and university professors, elementary and high-school teachers, and the general public), who are interested in integrating art history into their courses, or who wish to explore images of great art related to books they are reading. As a Great Books College with two-thirds of the curriculum comprised of required core courses, every student enrolled at Shimer College will be a recipient of curriculum innovations that are implemented as a result of this grant.

The first period of the grant has now been completed: this report therefore comprises the initial work undertaken in this grant and will outline the next stage of our work. Following a short summary of what has been accomplished to date, the body of this report will include a detailed description of various aspects of the project that have taken place since July, 2005.

Briefly stated, eight faculty members supported by this grant have completed one of three working sessions with an outside specialist in art history; this group of eight faculty has brought its work to the entire Shimer faculty through two faculty seminars; professors have begun to experiment in various ways in their course offerings; and the website is ready to be launched in early January 2006.

Working Session #1: Three eight-day working sessions with specialists in the field of art history are central to the project. The first session was held over 8 days in July, 2005 with James Elkins, Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago serving as seminar leader. This session gave seminar participants a general introduction to the field of Visual Studies, as it is currently conceived. Eight members of the Shimer faculty participated in the seminar through the support of the grant; their areas of expertise included a wide range of work in the humanities such as

philosophy, theatre, German literature, and Renaissance history, along with a cultural anthropologist and a physicist. One participant had formal training as an undergraduate fine arts student, and one adjunct faculty member, a specialist in Asian Studies, occasionally joined the sessions. Preparatory readings introduced Shimer faculty members to Jim Elkins' writing, and to the directions and issues of contemporary art history scholarship. The seminars themselves consisted of presentations by Professor Elkins, discussions of issues raised in the readings, viewing of art works through slides in the classroom, a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago, and a discussion of Jaume Plensa's outdoor sculpture in Chicago's new Millennium Park. On the final day, Professor Elkins led all participants through a hands-on drawing session.

The overall theme of all these discussions focused on: How can we best integrate the study of visual works into a Great Books Curriculum? Some of the issues discussed included the following: Should students in their first course in art at the College study compositional elements as the current curriculum requires? Should students read secondary sources, given our curricular commitment to the reading of primary sources? Or, should this course serve as an introduction to art history? And, to what extent should students not only read about art, but actually practice skills such as drawing and/or painting to gain a better understanding of the artworks themselves? Knowing that this was the first phase of study, the faculty did not consider itself ready to make specific recommendations on these questions. Instead, there was general agreement that faculty members, as deemed appropriate, would introduce new texts and approaches in their Fall 2005 courses, and report back on how these experiments worked (See next section).

This work with Professor Elkins was extremely well received by all participants. All participants not only found him to be exceptionally knowledgeable, but very open to adjusting his initial syllabus to the issues raised by the relationship of art and a Great Books curriculum. His graduate training at the University of Chicago placed him in an excellent position to have a very good understanding of the principles and mode of learning of the Shimer curriculum. Amongst the many laudatory comments about the seminar, I include an excerpt from one faculty member, Professor Stuart Patterson:

Over the course of the sessions we spent with James Elkins at the Art Institute I realized how serious and valuable are the questions raised by Shimer's new

commitment to making visual arts a more integral component of our curriculum. To my mind, the most basic question running through our discussions was how best to combine texts and visual materials such that we could further enhance the kind of open and reflective yet productive inquiry we value at Shimer. I think it would have been hard to find a better leader for this encounter than Elkins, given his prodigious study of the uses of visual materials across a variety of academic fields. Certainly, he gave us an invaluable overview of current configurations of art history, studio arts, and visual studies programs of various kinds. But he also proved a helpful authority on visuality in the sciences, on the open-ended issues facing contemporary art criticism, and on how visual materials are taught in programs not based on Western works and historical models.

Professor Elkins served as a model seminar leader; his leadership was pivotal to bringing an exceptional level of engagement in this project to the participants. This level of excitement has continued in the ensuing months and work.

Faculty seminars: The faculty members engaged in this project hosted two faculty seminars for the entire Shimer faculty during the fall 2005 semester. These seminars are a way of bringing the “Great Books, Great Art” project to the entire faculty, many of whom also teach in the humanities. The first took place on Wednesday October 5, 2005. Professors Harold Stone and Stuart Patterson chose materials on the subject of perspective for viewing and discussion. The second seminar took place on Wednesday December 7th. For that seminar we decided to work with a particular painting and other materials that are currently used in the curriculum. We chose Velazquez’ *Las Meninas*, which is studied in Humanities 4, one of the required core curriculum courses. Professors Beverly Bennett and Eileen Buchanan chose materials for this discussion.

For the first faculty seminar concerning the history and technique of perspectival space three readings were distribute to the faculty in advance of the meeting: passages from Leon Battista Alberti’s *On Painting* and Rudolf Arnheim’s *Art and Visual Perception*, and an article by Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr. on “Galileo, Florentine “Disegno,” and the “Strange Spottednesse” of the Moon.”

This seminar, which lasted about one and a half hours, began with a review of the passages from Alberti dealing with the construction of the “visual pyramid” in one-point perspective. After a brief outline of the history of Alberti’s ideas in Renaissance Florence from Harold Stone, the discussion turned toward the proper understanding of Alberti’s

geometrical constructions. Participants engaged in brief drawing exercises taken from Alberti's text. During and following these practical exercises, discussion engaged in the topic of the cultural determinants, historical developments and relations to natural scientific practices of perspective rendering. The session concluded with a consideration of how such materials may best be incorporated into our curriculum, whether as required elements or supplementary materials for existing core courses, and/or as possible anchors for a unit on perspective on our planned website.

For the second faculty seminar on December 7, we undertook to do an example of the exemplar technique discussed by James Elkins, namely, focusing on a single work from different perspectives. The work selected was Diego Velazquez' painting *Las Meninas*, a work that is often studied in Humanities 4 (Critical Evaluation in the Humanities (Enlightenment to Present), the final course in the Humanities sequence. Readings for this seminar were Michel Foucault's essay on "Las Meninas" from his book, *The Order of Things*, and Jiaying Yang's "Triangle within Triangle", and Joel Snyder's discussion of perspective in this painting. Our discussion ranged quite widely as we explored diverse ways of looking at a work of art. Consideration was also given specifically to the relationship of this mode of presentation/discussion to our classroom activities. This discussion of teaching implications was quite different than in the first seminar, in that this painting and analysis raises many questions of post-modernism and 20th century approaches to art. These are the kinds of issues which more advanced students are much better equipped to tackle.

Fall 2005 curriculum innovations: The workshop with Jim Elkins was full of practical suggestions on ways in which to incorporate visual material into our classroom teaching. Though a number of instructors incorporated visual images for a very particular reading, in two courses, Humanities 1 and Life of Buddha, the instructors made considerable changes to their syllabi as a result of this workshop.

Not surprisingly a significant portion of our conversations with Jim Elkins on curricular matters concerned Humanities 1 (Art and Music), the course which introduces Shimer students to the fine arts. In consultation with colleagues, Professor Stone took up some of the suggestions discussed in the Elkins workshop. Everything attempted in some

sense 'worked' but whether it was a success in terms of increasing our students' ability to discuss and think critically about visual materials will take longer to assess.

One thing which worked very well was to devote significant time to getting students to draw and copy images; actually “doing” and “making” art has not been a component of the course in recent years. After a trip to the Art Institute of Chicago, students spent one class period making visual maps of this trip – this was an exercise suggested by Professor Elkins. A number of new texts were introduced to the course this semester. For example, three class periods were spent on Leon Alberti's classic text 'On Art' and each day there was a different exercise in drawing perspective. Another class period was devoted to attempting to copy drawings. Rather unexpectedly, this application of hands-on methods influenced the music section of the course; in that section of the course students made, tuned, and composed music for and harmonized a simple monochord instrument.

Professor Jim Elkins encouraged us to try to incorporate non-Western art in a way that grew organically from our curriculum. Many of the students enrolled in Humanities 1 were also taking the initial Social Sciences core course (Society, Culture and Personality) and were reading Ruth Benedict's classic text, Patterns of Culture. Part of this text describes the Indians of the American southwest; to complement this reading, in Humanities 1 a day was spent looking at Zuni and Hopi visual imagery, mostly Kachina dolls.

Besides the Alberti book, two works of contemporary art history criticism were included in the course. The first was Leo Steinberg's book on Leonardo's "The Last Supper". That was a natural pairing with the Alberti, and it provoked some very good class discussion. A second work, a difficult work, because it is written in the language of late 20th century continental aesthetics, by Gilles Deleuze on the modern painter Francis Bacon was also read. Whether to include a text of this sort so early in the undergraduate career is something which will take more discussion. Professor Harold Stone, who taught this course in the fall, summarizes this experience as follows:

In the long term, I don't know which of these innovations should stay in the Humanities 1 class - probably the practical drawing should. I had such a good time with the Steinberg book that I would want to do it again. In any

event, for me it brought new vigor to the course and I think not including the Arnheim text gave it new vigor.

Curricular change would not take place until several instructors will have taught a revised course with a number of different groups of students. But, we now have a new direction for such experimentation and evaluation.

Professor Ron Kidd, who teaches courses in Asian Studies introduced art in his Fall semester course Life of the Buddha. He assembled images of Buddha's life after his life--a second biography - as it were, in images. Due to time constraints the scope of this exploration was limited to India, Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and Java), and China. The idea was to study developing understandings of who the Buddha is/was via artistic expressions primarily in sculpture but also in stupas (originally pilgrimage places for his relics--places of his presence-in-absence), and paintings preserved on the walls of shrines carved into the walls of caves.

The planning of this work turned out to be a lot more than envisioned: scanned images, first, onto disks and, later, on to the internet with a coded user name (Buddha) and password (dhamma), accompanied by a prepared a hard-copy "guide" with, in effect, captions. The class materials were in excess of 60 additional images on Indian art and approximately 50 images each for Southeast Asia and China along with a dozen or so illustrated text books and a few art books. These materials were used in the last three classes of the semester, occurring after Thanksgiving with mixed success; students found the material hard to discuss. Though students were able to discuss compositional aspects of the images, what was next to impossible to do, it seemed, was to evaluate the developing understanding of the Buddha, which was the original purpose of the project.

Professor Kidd writes the following of this work:

What we saw was the changing cultural/artistic imaging of the Buddha from period to period and culture (or country) to culture. I suspect part of the reason for this was that successive artistic movements and changes in Buddhist imaging reflected, more than "theology," changes in aesthetic interests generally in the several times and places we visited. Perhaps with more knowledge of those movements, it would have been easier to read the "meaning" of the developments which we saw paraded so clearly on our screens... Nonetheless students' reactions to the experiment were uniformly positive. I asked for a written evaluation and all felt they "learned a lot" and gained new insight into the way the Buddha was perceived and rendered in art in the times and places we chose to regard... I will

certainly try to do this again in future courses where the material encourages it.

During the Spring and Fall 2006 semesters, instructors will continue this kind of innovation. With more such experiences, the faculty will be in a much better position to assess what works best and what is worth replicating, and sharing with others.

Development of the website: A subcommittee comprised of Professors Stuart Patterson, Barbara Stone, Harold Stone is working on preparation of the project website with Marc Hoffman, Director of Technology. The next step is to review his “mockups” and start getting grant information onto the website. Notes have been compiled for all the project work to date. This includes notes for the working sessions with Professor Elkins in summer 2005 and for the two faculty seminars held in Fall, 2005. Faculty who have introduced new texts and visual materials into their courses have also written up extensive comments on their experiences. These notes will all be available on the website. Though faculty participants consider it premature to create special tool-kits at this time, teaching prototypes of a few specific visual works will be included in the initial website materials. Barbara Stone, Project Director, will review and edit the summaries of the working session so that there is some degree of consistency in their formats in January 2006.

The next phase: As noted above, the launching of the website in early 2006 is of primary importance. Most of the textual materials for this stage of our work have been compiled, and a general design for the website has been completed by Marc Hoffman. In addition to editing the materials, much attention will be devoted to publicizing this website to the appropriate audiences.

Based on Working Session #1 with Professor Jim Elkins, a number of reading materials will be ordered to enhance the College’s library materials. The NEH faculty participants will meet during the Spring orientation staff retreat to determine the next step in disseminating and including the entire faculty in our work.

Working session # 2 with Professor Paul Barolsky of the University of Virginia was originally planned for January 2006. Due to scheduling difficulties, this session will

take place in late May and early June, 2006. The third session with Professor Elizabeth Helsinger of the University of Chicago will be later in the summer of 2006.

Therefore, by the next interim report (June 31, 2006) we will have completed two of the three working sessions, the website should be close to complete, and discussions of curriculum review should be in a more advanced state.