

Great Books, Great Art: Integrating Art History in the Liberal Arts
Curriculum
Performance Report
December 31, 2006

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.

We are now beginning the final phase of the grant; this report will summarize the work completed since June 30, 2006, and outline the work to be accomplished by the end of the grant period, June 31, 2007. Due to the move of the College to the IIT campus (See Interim report of June 30, 2006 and Change request of October 31, 2006), we have made significant changes in our timelines and grant staffing. These changes are already having a positive impact on our work, and will insure completion of the website and curricular decision-making with the kind of care, detail and excellence that exemplifies our mission.

Briefly stated, our work during this period has focused on three major areas: 1) Reconfiguring grant staffing and preparing new timelines to complete the grant work in a timely fashion; 2) Further experimentation in the use of visual materials in Shimer courses and staff training in the use of the new SMART classroom; 3) Development of the “Great Books, Great Art” website. In addition, we took our work to the larger academic community through participation in the Fall 2006 Association of Core Texts and Courses (ACTC) conference, *Trends in the Liberal Arts Core: Cooperative Integration Between the Humanities and the Science*, which was held in Walnut Creek, California, September 21 - September 23, 2006. Dean Barbara Stone chaired a panel on

“The Fine Arts of Science,” and Shimer faculty member Jim Donovan gave a paper on Teaching Scientists to See.” The remainder of this report will summarize our work during Fall, 2006 and report on the final phase of the project.

Curricular Innovations:

In Fall, 2006, experimentation continued in Humanities I: Art and Music, which introduces our students to the study of visual works. Building on some of the innovations Professor Harold Stone had implemented the previous year, Assistant Professor Stuart Patterson engaged a mix of materials that included tried and true texts like Tolstoy’s *What is Art* and Joshua Taylor’s *Learning to Look*, but also used Leon Alberti’s treatise *On Painting* and Leo Steinberg’s *Leonardo’s Incessant Last Supper*, both introduced into the course in Fall 2005. Two new texts were also introduced to the course: Roger Fry’s *Cezanne, A Study of His Development* and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters on Cezanne*. These texts were chosen partly for their concentration on important artists and works, but also because they represented a range of possible approaches to thinking and writing about art: didactic, historical, biographical, critical, formal analytical, sociological and moral.

Of course, the major “texts” were the artworks themselves. We “inaugurated” our new “SMART” classroom in our new facilities with this class, using the video projector to show digital images of artworks. This technology has greatly improved the quality of the reproductions discussed in class, leading to better discussion and much more reliable assertions about the color and other details of the actual works. A list of all the paintings and (relatively few) sculptures viewed would be too long to provide here; suffice to say that over the course of seven weeks, the class considered upwards of 80 different works. This is a much larger number than had usually been viewed; previously a few were chosen per class and viewed intensively. To be sure, some only received a few minutes of attention, others almost an entire class. Most intensive scrutiny was given to Leonardo’s *Last Supper* in conjunction with Steinberg’s book, in which he intends indeed to demonstrate the inexhaustible richness of the painting. An entire week was devoted to Cezanne, first through Rilke’s epistolary and rather poetic encounter with the painter’s work in the collection of letters, then through Roger Fry’s slightly later attempt to portray

Cezanne as the forerunner, in his own artistic development, of almost all early 20th century painting. To this end, the class viewed many Cezanne images, including various portraits (Mme. Cezanne and G. Geffroy), still lifes, and landscapes, most of them dating from after 1880, the period of Cezanne's maturity as an artist. Other artists that figured significantly in class viewing and critiquing sessions included: Lascaux cave paintings, Giotto, Massaccio, Piero Della Francesca, Botticelli, Michelangelo, El Greco, Breughel, Rembrandt, Rubens, Velasquez, Chardin, Delacroix, Goya, J.W.M. Turner, Church, Manet, Monet, Hokusai, Hiroshige, Van Gogh, Seurat, Picasso, Braque, Miro, Magritte, Pollock, Rothko, urban graffiti, and Kwakiutl and Zuni masks (the latter two items in conjunction with readings from Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, which is read in Social Sciences 1: Society, Culture, and Personality).

In addition to viewing and verbally discussing artworks, occasionally class time was spent doing various practica. Some of these took the form of in class writings on a given painting following readings in the texts, and focusing on the style, vocabulary and/or analytical approach developed in those texts. Building on last years course, the class also undertook a number of exercises related to perspective. Students practiced using what Leon Alberti calls "the veil," briefly, a gridded screen interposed between an artist and subject in order to render more evident the relationship of the composition's elements to each other and the frame of the scene when seen from a single point of view (the basis of so-called "single point perspective"). Students also practiced, on a number of occasions, the technique demonstrated by Joshua Taylor (and described by Fry in writing on Cezanne) of abstracting the main lines and shapes from a composition to understand one element of 2-dimensional design. Finally, students also studied and practiced copying (in an admittedly primitive manner) the mark-making techniques in a Chinese landscape painting of the 15th century (B.C.E.). This latter exercise was derived from the more formal and extended session of copying that the faculty had with James Elkins of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Summer, 2005 seminar. It is clear that the "hands-on" practica have been very successful; they have helped students gain a better understanding of both the process of creating a painting and their ability to articulate what they are in fact looking at with much greater precision. Though the faculty won't be discussing long-term curriculum innovations until May, 2007, there is every indication

that such practica will become required components of this course. This is a significant change from the previous version of the course.

A number of additional visual components were introduced into the Fall 2006 course offering of our 2 semester-long senior seminar, “Integrative Studies 5 & 6: History and Philosophy of Western Civilization.” Following the advice of Professor Barolsky, our second seminar leader, to use the city of Chicago as our classroom and laboratory, architecture became a more prominent theme in the course. Small field trips enhanced this work. The study of a group of Greek texts was amplified by intensive study of the Parthenon. This was done in conjunction with readings of Pericles' "Funeral Oration" from Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War and the concluding scene of Aeschylus' "Oresteia.". Students were already familiar with Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" where he described a Greek temple, from their previous readings in Humanities 4: Critical Evaluation in the Humanities. The class first viewed images of the Parthenon. This was followed by a virtual tour of a reconstruction of the Parthenon built in the city of Nashville, Tennessee. This gave a better sense of how the pillars, the pediment and the roof of the building worked together. In order to get a better feel for the space of the structure, the class walked to Crown Hall, just to the north of our building on the Illinois Institute of Technology campus. This building, which houses the School of Architecture, was, designed by Mies van der Rohe in the mid-fifties, and has similar dimensions to that of the Parthenon. The area of the Mies building is slightly smaller and its ceiling is a little lower than the Parthenon. The class outing gave students a sense of the space occupied by the Parthenon; in addition, an interesting discussion developed on the use of steel and glass in this modernist building in contrast to the marble of the Parthenon.

This course also includes a component on Chartres Cathedral in France, along with a reading of Henry Adams, "Mont St. Michel and Chartres." Discussion of the cathedral has frequently focused primarily on the stained-glass windows; this time the architectural aspects were given greater prominence. To get a more palpable sense of the size of the Cathedral and Gothic design in general, the class visited St. Alphonsus Church in Chicago at the corner of Southport, Lincoln and Wellington. This comparison led to a discussion of differences between German-style and French-style Gothic architecture and

decoration. The Chicago Church used the leaf and acorn decoration on the capitals of the pillars which was more typical of German rather than French cathedrals. The shape of the windows was gothic and the windows were made in Germany in the early twentieth century. To get a better sense of medieval stained glass the class went to St. James Chapel of the Quigley Preparatory school on Rush Street in Chicago. The Chapel is modeled on the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, a late Gothic building. The glass windows were made of English glass from the Medieval period. The Quigley School is designed as a whole in the late Gothic style and it was great fun to peer up at the gargoyles to the skyscrapers beyond. These kinds of excursions are meant to enhance our students' visual competencies, and draw their attention to the visual and architectural features in the world around them.

Looking ahead to Spring, 2007, paintings and architectural drawings will be used in a number of courses, the largest number of courses to date. In Integrative Studies 6, the second semester of the senior seminar, a visit to the Art Institute is planned to view their collection of Late Medieval and Renaissance art. In Humanities 4 a number of images will be used, mostly from modern movements, beginning with the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich in connection with readings on Kant's aesthetics. Students will also examine the response of artists to changes in conditions for the production and reception of art. For example, readings by Walter Benjamin on "mechanical reproduction" and excerpts from his *Arcades* project will be studied in conjunction with looking at "readymade" artworks by Duchamp, as well as pop art, body art, and conceptual art. In this class, students will have an opportunity to create artworks that respond in some way to these topics and trends, as well as re-investigate works that they encountered earlier in Humanities 1 but would like to look at anew with different eyes. The first readings in Humanities 2: Poetry, Drama and Fiction have always been selections of poetry from *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Instructors have considerable leeway in their choices in terms of forms, periods, length etc., though certain forms such as the sonnet have always been included. Based on Professor Barolsky's suggestion, this year students will be reading a number of poems with "art themes;" some of the poems are direct responses to a specific work of art, some speak about a particular artist, and some address the differences between writers and painters. Images will be viewed as appropriate. Two

elective courses will also include viewing of images. A course on child development and theories of education will begin with a viewing of a series of images from different time periods that depict children, mothers or fathers and their children, and family portraits. The purpose of this segment of study is to help students recognize that our contemporary ideas and theories about child development may be very different from those formerly held. Viewing images from earlier times, for example Madonna and child, domestic scenes, or children at play, can demonstrate some of the changes in attitudes towards sexuality, gender, class, and the relationship between childhood and adulthood throughout history. Professor Barbara Stone plans to present the results of this work at the Spring 2007 meeting of The Association for Core Texts and Courses (ACTC). Finally, in an intermediate Latin course students will be reading a selection of letters by Pliny the Younger, who has much to say about daily life in Roman times; some of his descriptions include the physical arrangement of the household and descriptions of specific villas. Students will view some architectural drawings and replications of these structures as a way to get a fuller understanding of life in Roman times.

Development of the “Great Books, Great Art” website:

With the addition of a Website Development Assistant for this project, those involved with the website have been meeting weekly since late October. We have already accomplished an enormous amount of work in these initial meetings - from small details to larger theoretical issues. We have given considerable thought to the actual design and navigation of the website. We have also studied other websites for guidance and to help us differentiate our work from the many other “Art History” websites. Our website must be recognizable as “Shimeresque,” i.e. it must be similar in look to other College materials (website, print materials etc.) but it must also be immediately recognizable as an art website. This means, for example, having a front page that is not overly text-heavy, yet communicates immediately and effectively who we are, our approach to visual materials, and of what use this website can be to teachers.

We have agreed that we will only be creating toolkits for artworks or practica which we have actually used/taught in class. Thus the curricular experimentation of the past 18

months will serve as the basis for these toolkits. We recognize that no matter which images we choose to present, it is highly likely by now that there will be lots of other information on the web about the particular work. What must be distinctive about our presentation of the material is not all the encyclopedic information that we can provide, but rather our suggestions on how to teach the works of art, and how to relate it to other works, techniques, styles, and themes. Our purpose is to bring our experience in discussion-based classes to the wider academic community.

In consultation with our evaluator Scott Lee, we have reduced the number of high-quality teachable unit toolkits we believe we can create during this academic year to 52. We have identified all the art works and teachable units we intend to prepare for the initial launching of our website. The vast majority of our examples are from European art since the Renaissance but we have also sought to include works from other traditions as well. Given the immense number of works of masterworks we might have included, our preliminary sample will have an arbitrary character. We make no claim to comprehensiveness or inclusiveness; our hope is that what we present will at least be useful. We expect to augment this selection with further units after the end of the grant period. The first of these toolkits have been drafted. As we had hoped, faculty members have found that the hands-on experience of teaching these materials in the context of a Great Books curriculum, results in web-site materials that are very different than what a traditional art historian would produce. Our work with Dr. Paul Barolsky was very helpful in pointing out ways for us to do this, and giving us the confidence for this kind of work. We have also determined search categories for the website so that materials will be able to be accessed, for example, by artist, subject matter, style, and historic period.

The final phase:

One very positive result of Shimer College's changed academic calendar to fit with that of the Illinois Institute of technology is that there will be approximately four weeks after graduation to complete the curricular aspects of the grant in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. Professor Elisabeth Helsinger of the University of Chicago, our 3rd and final seminar leader is available in mid-May to begin this work. We expect to have more faculty members participate in this seminar than in previous ones. Following this

seminar, there will be significant time for grant participants to discuss their work with the entire faculty and then the entire faculty will decide upon long-term curricular changes resulting from the grant. Dr. Scott Lee, our evaluator, who has enormous amounts of experience in Great Books curricular innovation, will join us for some of this discussion. In addition, as a follow-up on a suggestion from Dr. Paul Barolsky, our second seminar leader, we plan to use some of this time for getting more knowledgeable about the art and architecture of the IIT campus, downtown Chicago, and Oak Park. Thereby, more faculty members will be prepared to integrate walking tours into their classes.

Between now and May our major work will be focused on the website. Faculty members will be creating the toolkits, and editing and arranging for the website all other grant materials (seminar notes, discussion notes, conference papers etc.). We plan to invite to campus at least two guests to speak on art-related topics, and we are arranging for a private architectural tour of the campus, which would be open to all students, faculty and staff. We are also at a point in the project that we are compiling and purchasing list of useful books to enlarge our library and to assist faculty in developing new courses. With these aspects of the grant taken care of throughout the semester, in late May and early June we will be in a good position for the last seminar and curricular planning which will conclude the grant work. As part of this final phase, we are also beginning to assess how we will sustain the grant into the future through allocation of faculty resources (time and budgetary allocations) for ongoing creation of toolkits, an e-newsletter and the necessary regular updating that all websites require. By the conclusion of the grant we will have a good understanding of these requirements and have made the necessary decisions to achieve them.