

Great Books, Great Art: Integrating Art History in the Liberal Arts
Curriculum
Performance Report
June 30, 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 completing the second phase of the grant; this report will therefore report on the work completed since January 1, 2006, and outline the work to be accomplished by the end of the grant period, October 30 2006. Briefly stated, our work during this period has focused on three major areas: 1) two faculty seminars in which grant participants have shared their work with the entire faculty; 2) the second working session with a specialist in art history, Professor Paul Barolsky of the University of Virginia, an expert in Renaissance art; and 3) the opportunity to share our work thus far with a larger academic community through sponsorship of a panel on “Great Books, Great Art” at the Annual Conference of the Association of Core Texts and Courses in April, 2006. Our ongoing work on curricular review, revision and experimentation has also continued. In preparation for this report, we have also looked at the timeline for completing the remainder of our projects. All of these issues will be addressed in the remainder of this report.

Faculty seminars: The spring 2006 faculty seminars were very successful; grant participants used this time to share their work with the entire faculty and to prepare for our June seminar meetings on Renaissance art with Professor Paul Barolsky. For the first

seminar, the entire faculty read Valerie Shrimplin-Evangelidis' article on 'Sun-Symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's Last Judgment.' In this article Ms. Shrimplin-Evangelidis argues that the evidence from Michelangelo's painting of the Last Judgment suggests that he was aware of the Copernican theory of a heliocentric universe, and that this work of art was inspired by the notion of a sun-centered universe in which Christ appears as an Apollo figure. It was clear that this subject would be a topic with rich possibilities for a faculty discussion, for both those well-versed in the natural sciences and those in the humanities. And it was. On the curricular level, the shift from a geocentric world view to a heliocentric one is a common theme through many of our core courses, especially those in the natural sciences. But students also encounter this shift and explore it deeply in our senior seminar, Integrative Studies 5 & 6, where they read materials such as Aristotle's "On the Heavens", selections from Ptolemy's *Almagest* and other writings by Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. In literary texts, they have also followed the movement from Dante to Milton, and the way in which developments in the understanding of the structure of the universe impacted these writers' understanding of religion and philosophy. Faculty member Eileen Buchanan, who was teaching the senior seminar this spring, also brought this article to the students. She considered this to be an experiment, since it is very rare for us to include this kind of secondary literature in our core courses. Her reflections on this experience suggest that we can integrate works of art in ways that are more than merely "illustrative of a philosophic idea," and that they can enrich our understandings of ideas and philosophic movements in deeper ways. She has written the following about this classroom experiment:

Instead of presenting a slide-show of "Renaissance Art" somewhere between Dante and Milton, we were also able to hone in on one exceptional work and, through looking at it carefully, were able to examine contextual issues. Art was no longer something that simply happened on a more or less parallel track to what we saw happening in literature and cosmology. All three came together to form a picture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a time rich in cross-references between disciplines which, today, we separate from one another.

In future offerings of this course she is hoping to find one or two other such exemplary works of art that she will likewise be able to use in such an integrative manner.

For the second faculty seminar, we read excerpts from Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, a text which art historian Professor Paul Barolsky has extensively studied

and written about. This text has been regularly used in our senior seminar with varying success. Much of our discussion focused on how best to read the text; is it best read as an introduction to specific artists? Or is Pater really a historian? What do we make of Pater's prose style? Is it off-putting to our students, and is this a good or bad thing? Or, is Pater putting forth an aesthetic theory. Though all instructors recognized the importance of this text, and concurred that it provided a good starting point for experimenting with texts that would further the goals of the "Great Books, Great Art" grant, our discussion was quite inconclusive in terms of how to work with it more successfully in the classroom. We found ourselves eager to get Professor Barolsky's "take" on it, and see if those discussions would give us some more ideas.

Working Session # 2 Professor Barolsky spent three working days in June 2006 (June 5-7) at the Waukegan campus with roughly the same group of faculty who had worked with Professor James Elkins in Summer, 2005. As with Professor Elkins, Paul Barolsky combined his expertise on the Renaissance with a series of ideas on how to relate works of art into the Shimer curriculum. He came ready to talk intensely about the larger curricular issues with which the Shimer faculty wrestles. Both art historians prepared for these seminars through a careful study of our curriculum so that they would have a good understanding of what would really be helpful to us. Project Director Barbara Stone shared with Professor Barolsky the readings and notes from the Elkins workshops so that he would know what we had done so far. Much of the purpose of our work with Professor Elkins had been to get us "up to speed" with contemporary issues in the field of art history; in contrast, Professor Barolsky wanted to look specifically at the relationship between selected great works of literature and art. Two major works of literature provided fertile materials for our study of works of art: 1) Ovid's Metamorphosis which is the source for so many mythical treatments of art, and 2) Dante's Divine Comedy which offers rich materials for artists of many periods, but especially for Botticelli's work during the Italian Renaissance. In addition, Professor Barolsky compiled a series of readings for us to broaden our conception of how to integrate literary texts and works of art; many of the shorter selections included poems that commented specifically on paintings. In some cases, we had multiple responses to the same work of art by different

poets. Most of our time was spent viewing slides, connecting them with literary texts and themes, with much talk about how to approach the materials with students. Though to some extent this was a chronological “tour” of many of the greatest works of Western art, we regularly juxtaposed our viewings with reading of literary and philosophic texts, and raised questions, that students might ask, such as: How do we link Plato’s criticism of art in The Republic to the great works of Greek architecture? How is the idea of artistic inspiration conveyed in painting? How does the layout of a work of art, oftentimes of a fresco, in fact make a politic statement, or depict a certain hierarchical view of the world? We also looked at various depictions of Old Testament biblical narratives, and discussed everything from the size of figures, to how “spirit” and the idea of “inspiration” can be depicted in the visual arts. An overarching theme was: How do artists transpose the poetry of words into the poetry of paint or sculpture?

Professor Barolsky selected slides for us for many different reasons/ways, and this gave us lots of ideas on how use a study of painting in our teaching. Sometimes we looked at themes over time, or within a period, and got a snapshot of the development of a theme over the centuries; other times we spent an extended period of time on one particular art work. We focused most intensively on Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, Botticelli’s *Primavera*, and Raphaels’ frescoes. It was interesting to learn how our teaching of art, which has been mostly focused on compositional elements, was enriched through the juxtaposition of a text with a work of art. Professor Barolsky readily shared with us his techniques for working with these materials in the classroom. A sense of excitement was palpable within the group on lots of levels. In great part this can be attributed to one of Professor Barolsky’s major aims for the seminar which was to give us the confidence that we don’t have to be “art history experts” for our project, and that we have many avenues for opening up authentic questions about literary and visual texts to a class of Shimer undergraduates. This aspect of our work with Professor Barolsky is very important for our creation of a website that will be accessible and useful to teachers who are not specialists in art history. In addition, he frequently gave us suggestions for which works of art we might wish to include in our website toolkits.

Our first working session with consultant Jim Elkins in summer 2005 resulted in several interesting innovations in our teaching of Humanities 1 in the fall. We developed

a unit on the Renaissance theory of single point perspective based on Alberti's "On Painting" and spent a substantial amount of class time on actually drawing the sorts of objects Alberti described in his text. That kind of preparation made it easier for students when we undertook a substantial unit on Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper". Based on our work with Professor Barolsky, it is our intention to add another exemplary text in Fall 2006 to this course; we will be using Michelangelo's "Sistine Chapel Ceiling" as a primary text. These works are among those to be included in our website and teaching tool kits will accompany them.

Sharing our work with the larger academic community: In the original "Great Books Great Art" grant proposal we anticipated bringing our work to the larger academic world primarily through the creation of our website. We also envisioned other possibilities through panel presentations at meetings of the Association of Core Texts and Courses (ACTC), for example. ACTC is a national professional organization of over 100 institutions of higher education dedicated to the advancement of core curricular programs using required, primary texts in courses. Subsequent to receiving the grant, ACTC decided to hold its 2006 conference in Chicago, and invited Shimer College to serve as a co-sponsor. We accepted this invitation, knowing that it would give the College significant visibility, along with the opportunity to fully host our own panel on a topic of our own choosing. We chose this grant as the focus of our panel. Thus, participation at the 2006 conference of the ACTC gave us our first opportunity to bring our work to a wider audience. The format of this conference is unique: in order to foster discussion, all papers are limited to 5 pages each, and serve more as a "springboard" for discussion rather than a display of scholarly acumen. We used the grant title, "Great Books, Great Art: Integrating Art History into the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum" for our panel title. Following an introduction by panel host Barbara Stone, four faculty members gave short papers as follows:

Eileen Buchanan, "Michelangelo and the Copernican Revolution";

Ron Kidd "The Buddha: A Second Life in Art";

Stuart Patterson, "Figuring Space Out with Einstein and Picasso";

Harold Stone, “Getting Perspective into a Core Curriculum: Alberti and The Last Supper.”

In each paper, the faculty member reported on their teaching experience as they brought visual materials into the classroom in new ways. The papers by Kidd, Stone and Patterson reviewed much of the curricular experimentation from the Fall, 2005 semester; Eileen Buchanan’s paper focused on her work from the Spring semester and the first faculty seminar held in the spring 2006. As important as presenting the papers were, faculty members were of course most interested in listening and learning from the audience response. The audience offered sympathetic encouragement, some useful suggestions and admiration for the project. They considered the idea of developing an approach to teaching art for generalists, taught by generalists, as relevant to their situation. They looked forward to what will appear on the website; they liked the idea of teaching toolkits supported by Great Books texts. They particularly appreciated that we talked about both successes and failures. The audience was interested in using Michelangelo’s image of Christ the Judge in “The Last Judgment” fresco as a way of linking the science of Copernicus to neo-Platonic sun symbolism. The positive response assures us that there is real interest and need for the kind of work that we are doing in the larger academic community.

In Fall, 2006 two Shimer faculty members will be attending another conference likewise sponsored by ACTC. The theme of this conference is *Trends in the Liberal Arts Core: Cooperative Integration Between the Humanities and the Sciences*. The conference will be held in Walnut Creek, California, September 21 - September 23, 2006. Faculty members Barbara Stone and Jim Donovan will be attending. Jim Donovan’s participation in this NEH grant is worth noting. He is trained as a biochemist and physicist, and has identified himself throughout the grant sessions as the “non-humanist. And, he has become very engaged/ immersed in this grant. His knowledge of science has been very helpful, especially in our study of Michelangelo; he has helped the “humanities folk” better understand the ramifications of the shift to the heliocentric universe and how this revolution has impacted the artistic community. In turn, he has become much more aware of the visual representation of scientific ideas in models, textbook layout, web-

design etc., an idea which Professor Elkins, our first consultant, had introduced to us. For the September ACTC conference Donovan has proposed the topic of "Thinking in Pictures" for his presentation, a topic, he says "which will focus on the need for scientists to think symbolically and visually as well as verbally." He notes that he will involve our NEH grant work in it.

The final phase: As of August 1, 2006 the College is moving its undergraduate programs from Waukegan to leased space on the Chicago campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology. This decision was made by the Board of Trustees in late January; its primary purpose is to enhance our enrollment and fund-raising capabilities. Being located just south of downtown Chicago will offer us many opportunities to expand the work that we have already begun with this NEH grant. Foremost, the Art Institute of Chicago and other Chicago museums are close to the campus and easily accessible by public transportation. Faculty members are already planning numerous trips to the Art Institute; in addition, visits to the Newberry Library will give us the opportunity to view various editions of texts, many of them rare and illustrated, that are continuously used in our Core Curriculum. Our new location will also make it very easy for us to collaborate with faculty from near-by institutions, such as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago, especially those in the field of art history and studio arts. We expect to invite visitors from such programs to offer workshops and give presentations to both students and faculty of the College. In our June working session Professor Barolsky suggested that we use downtown Chicago and the IIT campus itself as a laboratory for a study of modern architecture. The faculty members participating in this NEH grant are planning on a series of architectural tours of the area so that they will be able to integrate this knowledge into their teaching as well.

Though we of course had no idea that such a move was in the works at the time of our grant proposal, it has played a significant role in all of our relocation plans. We have very much kept this grant in mind in the construction plans for the build-out of our new space. One of the classrooms is being designed as a SMART classroom, which will give us much needed state-of-the-art technology that is so helpful in studying visual materials; this classroom itself is in part being funded by a grant through the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities. The College will thus be shifting from

slides, a slide projector, and a screen to technology based on digital images which will allow us to enlarge parts of images, explore changes in color, and all the other options that this technology offers. For this reason, in a forthcoming change of budget request, we will be requesting funds for the ArtStore database so that we can access appropriate digital images for our course offerings beginning Fall, 2006.

The College's move to the Chicago campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology has understandably placed significant constraints on staff availability for some of our work, especially in regards to the technical aspects of website development. We will therefore also be requesting some changes to the original budget which will make it possible for us to create a website that truly reflects the excellent work that our faculty has garnered over the grant period. The forthcoming budget change request will also include a re-allocation of funds to cover additional faculty time for creating the text for the website toolkits, and outside consulting for website design and implementation.

Our third working session with Professor Elisabeth Helsinger of the University of Chicago will begin in early August 2006, with additional meetings in September and October.

Though we are just now completing the second stage of the grant, its impact has been felt throughout Shimer College in many ways that we could not have anticipated at the time of the proposal. In May 2006, the Visiting Team of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of College and Schools came to the College as part of our regular accreditation reviews. One of their concerns was a certain level of insularity that has in large part resulted from our location in Waukegan IL. Members of the Visiting Team were very pleased to see our increased involvement with ACTC, which has in large part been made possible through this grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Through our work on this grant we are well poised to take advantage of these new opportunities and to share our recent work with other academic communities.