



AWSNA
Waldorf High School Research Project

Art and Aesthetics in the 20th Century

by
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Objectives:

This year marks the third time we offer 11th grade students this course “Art and Esthetics in the 20th Century, a course in which the students can further their knowledge of art and which helps them see the difference in the visual arts before and after Impressionism. The viewing of paintings sets a space where questions about art today are raised and nourishes their interest in a facet of human activity that is overshadowed by the scientific-technological activity.

The main objectives of this course:

- Discovery of 20th century schools of art and artists
- Raise questions about our relationship to art
- Relating artistic activity to everyday concerns
- Preparing stretchers and canvas for oil painting
- Learning how to paint with oil
- Training for color mixture and precision
- Encourage and develop the ability for research
- Develop the expression of personal ideas and conclusions
- Encourage individual creativity

Method:

The layout for the course was organized in two parallel activities throughout the year, with a third step of conclusion and reflection at the end:

- Study
- Realization
- Reflection and conclusion

1- The study:

Starting with questions: What is different when we move in a museum through the rooms exhibiting works from different epochs? How do we feel when we come to the rooms where modern and contemporary art is shown?

This is followed with slides of works they have already seen in 9th and 10th grades and other works of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and discussions about the social changes that occurred with the industrial revolution.

We see the relationship of poetry to painting by looking at a figurative painting, in this instance Turner's *Slave Ship*. Then, each student writes a poem inspired by this painting and it is read in class. In poetry the words convey the image and the rhythm, the image unfolds in time, word after word. In painting form, color, and color contrast convey the image, it is given instantly. Space, not time is painting's element.

As we move on, the shattered image of art appears, an image that evokes the figure of Dionysos his murder and the scattering of his members. As Nonos'

Dionysyaques ends with the verse: “But the end of his life was the beginning of a new one,” a new way of looking at the world is starting.

By looking at paintings of Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh we try to name the qualities of each way of expression. As we write them on the board in three columns, I bring to their attention the block on “Man and Animal” they had had in 4th grade. The summary result is:

Cezanne	Gauguin	Van Gogh
Constructed representation	Harmony of color	Dramatic representation
Creation of form	Preservation of forms	Destruction of form
Thinking	Feeling	The will

When we see Kandinsky's works, that opens the way for abstraction and through his analogy of painting with music, the opportunity for a new exercise is set. The students listen twice to a piece of music, here *Cantus* by Arvo Part. They are then asked to picture this music through a drawing. After exhibiting the drawings we open a space for discussion. How did they feel after listening to the music? We then try to parallel this feeling with the drawing.

We continue through to view other art movements that flowered in the 20th century up to photorealism and pop art. Each of these is qualified and we try to see in which of the three columns they belong. Now, when they look at the board they realize the middle column has no entry very early in the century. Two main poles in modern art appear very strongly: realism and abstractionism. A student comments: “We are the middle column, the mediator between these polarities.” We explored the dangers of each polarity and discussed the polarities each of us face.

We finish by comparing the artist's work before and after the 20th century. In the Renaissance, the artist created what was asked of him. In the 20th century the artist creates out of his free will. Before 1900, the subject of a painting referred to something outside of man, after 1900, the subject refers to what lives in the individual. . . .

2- The Painting:

I give the students a list of painters from the early 20th century, an invitation for them to look at art books. Most choose out of this list, a few already have a painting they want to work with. Once we agree on a painting, they have to write a two-page paper about their choice. We then start building a frame the same size as the original, we then stretch and prepare the canvas for painting.

They are ready to start. The atmosphere is full of excitement. I show them how to mix oil paints and how to work with them. Now come the questions: where do I start, and with what? Calling on my knowledge of painting, painters and my own experience as a painter, I give each one leads as to how the artist they chose worked in general. They start full of enthusiasm. After a few sessions of painting questions about their work come up. The dialogue that I hoped for begins. A quieter, more thoughtful atmosphere takes hold of the class. Questions about the artist's choices to paint one and not another motif. What he meant by choosing one color and not another. What was he trying to say or what was he thinking when he painted. These

questions open up a very precious space of exchange with the student, first on the specific question, then leading onto personal or social experiences. Each day after painting the student makes a journal entry. In it, the students note the colors' names or mixture used, what they did and how they felt. Invariably they all reach a moment of doubt, or a feeling of being lost, of not being able to continue the work. Painful moments which ask for time and dialogue. A key moment where things fall in place, they have found for themselves how to get there. They now set out with confidence to finish what they started. Each student developed a palette of color for their copy. They will now use it to create a new painting, their own creation. They choose the subject, the size and the style. The only restriction is the color scheme. In doing these two paintings they have come full circle. When we look at a painting, we start from the representation to reach the intention behind it. They went from the visible to the invisible. Having reached that point they turn around and render the invisible visible.

3- Conclusion:

- Research and reflection.

The student writes a four to five page paper on the artist's biography, his ideas, and his influences. A second part of the paper is a reflection on their journey. How do they see this painting after working with it so closely, what did they discover personally about it, about their work.

- Trip to New York

At the end of May we spend three days visiting museums where the students can see some of the paintings we have talked about: the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim and the Museum Of Modern Art.

Results:

We notice that most of the students chose a figurative painting where nature is very present. They seem to opt for a more allegorical representation that lends itself to the narrative and shy away from an abstract representation. The Impressionists and Franz Marc are the ones most chosen.

I presented the course as a journey such as an explorer would undertake. I was surprised to see their enthusiasm and readiness to get on with the work and participate in the discussion throughout the course. After setting the three columns, the possibility to exercise their judgment as to where a trend should go was an occasion of discussion on the qualities of the painting, before deciding under which heading it would best fit. Their arguments were often to the point. Working together in the same space they were aware of each others difficulties and shared in the joy of finding the solution. This gave them a greater insight not only on their painting but also on the other paintings. It helped them appreciate each other's effort and encouraged them to persevere at the task. The result was not the exact copy of the original since we worked from photocopies, we had to decide on one version. The final results were very good. Each painting could stand on its own. They acquired a new quality that each student brought with him. It was interesting that each one could see where his painting differed from the original. All the students finished that painting.

The journals were not very successful. The students did not hand in complete journals as was asked, and some did not hand in any. I think I should have organized a special time before the end of every session to fill in their journals. In the accounts I have read some refer to the moments of doubt, feelings of wanting to stop or seeing themselves into the painting.

“I feel I am in this infinite open space Marc painted, (a girl working on Marc's Blue horse).

“Oh, this is painful, I don't know if I can go as far as Van Gogh went, (a boy working on Van Gogh's Wheat Field. He finished his painting and metamorphosed this experience into vertical musical painting).

“Today, everything I do seems to turn to mud, (a girl working on Pissaro's Berge d'Oise. Two days later: "Yes, this is great!")

Their written assignment showed their interest in the biography of the artist. Most were well researched, even if a few students wrote about the same artist. They each expressed their particular interest in the artist by putting the emphasis on different aspects of the biography. As for the report of their experience, they mostly concerned themselves with the choices the artist made of a motif or a color, and especially on how they experienced this task.

Conclusion:

When I first thought of this course I was not sure if this content would raise a positive response from the students, and I was open to see how far we could go. During the course I had the opportunity to really experience the students' mobility of thinking and maturity. This reception helped to go far enough to explore the polarities in art, and the danger today's artists have to watch for. With the pole of realism such as expressionism, form can enter in movement and becomes arbitrary and subjective (ex. Dadaism or surrealism). On the other hand, in the abstract pole the artist could get lost in the creative process. Forms and color become interchangeable and art can become a mere aesthetic experience (Op Art), or the artist disappears behind cold, technoid creations (Minimal Art). Once the premise of the course was set, I could count on a good quality of listening that expressed itself in very positive exchanges. In general I found that the 11th grade students showed interest in the questions of choices that every step of a painting called for. How those choices leave traces on the canvas that contribute to reveal the image. As one student put it “it's a new way of looking at things.

Another element of interest is the fact that the subject concerns the actual society in which they live and strive to understand. Real art and artists are trendsetters going beyond actual standards and look towards the future, they too are in the same position. This freedom acquired by the artist points to the dangers of getting caught in one polarity or the other: withdrawing in himself so much that

nobody can enter his world, or losing himself in the outside world. I think that this is one of the most important elements of this course.

As a teacher, the possibility to develop and give this course was received as a gift—the possibility to share with my students a passion for this particular period in art. It was an opportunity to weave a special link with the students. This course was also possible because of all the work done in the lower grades and in 9th and 10th grades. The richness of the Waldorf curriculum and the image of the human being as the source of this pedagogy were an inspiration and essential prerequisites to go this far on this journey. The way of measuring the success of this undertaking is in meeting some of these students ten years from now and see that they understood that this course was not art for arts sake but art for life.

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Proposal: Waldorf High School Research Project

Title submitted:

Early 20th Century Art: the creative process in art and the birth of consciousness

Submitted by:

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Intention: Can the study and practice of art awaken an understanding in teenagers of a new consciousness at the turn of the 20th century.

Study: Study and discussion of 20th century masterpieces. The shift from linear and hierarchical evolution to a simultaneous flowering of art movements. Try to relate and understand this apparent chaos through the threefold image of the human being: thinking, feeling and willing.

Practice: Students choose one painting of an artist from the early 20th century, and write a two-page paper about their choice.

Students reproduce the chosen painting; same size, same medium and technique.

Students keep a journal in which they write about their impressions and feelings at the end of every painting lesson.

At the end of their painting, students present a research paper on the artist and, using the journal as a guide, write about how they see the painting after this journey. Using the palette they developed for the painting, students create their own painting.

20th Century Art the creative process and the birth of consciousness

Genesis

Two questions formed the starting point of a reflection that led and inspired this course. The first question came from a student as we were ending a block on “Art History” in grade 10: “Monsieur, we saw paintings by Duerer and Rembrandt, but what about today? Is a white line on a canvas a work of art?” That was four years ago and at the same time the high school faculty was preparing for our first 11th grade. We were facing a problem: we had to offer two options, science and humanities.¹ The science option is a 5-hour weekly course. What could we offer the other students that did not choose this option?

Upon reflection these two questions coincided and, with a colleague Arie van Ameringen (history, literature, and language teacher) we worked on a new humanities program. Arie van Ameringen would use two hours a week for a course on “Economy And Society in the 20th Century.” I would use three hours a week for “Art and

Aesthetics in the 20th Century. The aim was to help the students weave an understanding of this seemingly chaotic world as they labor to give birth to their individual consciousness, and as they struggle to take a stand in front of that world.

Preparation

The student's question was a quest for the truth. I tried to reformulate the question in other words.

- How can I relate to modern art?
- What is art expressing today?
- When I compare a Matisse or a Kadinsky to a Duerer or a Rembrandt, which is art?

It is then that a sentence by G. Richter came to me:

“... the ideal to which the artist now turns as his highest goal is no longer called "beauty" but bears the name of "truth." ²

For the teacher, the question becomes: How to bring this change in individual consciousness, this moving away from a charted outside landscape to an inner, more chaotic landscape? It was evident that a simple study would not lead to an experience through which the student would find answers and new questions that he can carry with him.

“Fundamentally speaking, all teaching and instruction should constantly keep in view this integration of the ego into the rest of the human organization as I have just decided it. ³

Like those artists, the 16/17-year-old is at the threshold of a choice, an individual choice. After shattering the lost paradise of childhood, they discover a new dimension of their humanity. This is where a dialogue with the artist became a second element of this course, through the copy of an original painting.

A third element to bring the experience to the forefront was a personal creation and a written account on their perception of what the artist expresses.

The Method

Viewing works of artists from the end of the XIXth century and into the XXth century.

- Discussion on the flowering of movements
- Relating art to poetry and music

Practice

- Each student chooses one painting of an artist in the early 20th century

- They write a two-page paper about their choice
- The student reproduces the chosen painting in the same size, using the same medium and technique
- Students keep a journal in which they write their impressions at the end of every painting lesson
- At the end, using the palette developed for their painting, they create their own painting
- They present a research paper on the artist and how they see the painting after the journey

Throughout the course, I would like to see how the eleventh grade students, 16/17-year-olds, get involved both in discussion and in their painting, and how they can deal with the freedom in rendering something invisible visible: a thought, a feeling, an experience.

I hope this course will interest other teachers and that, through dialogue, we can see the pertinence of offering the eleventh grade a follow-up to the course in Art history.

Notes:

1. In Quebec, high school finishes in the 11th grade. Our students then have to go through government tests, since only the province(state) can deliver a high school diploma.
2. Richter, Gothfried. *Art and Consciousness*, Edinburgh, Scotland: Floris Books, 1985, p.229.
3. Steiner, Rudolf. *Education for Adolescents*, New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1996.