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**DON'T THROW THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATHWATER: WHY ART HISTORY
SURVEY CLASSES ARE AN IDEAL WAY TO QUESTION THE CANON**

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The notion of any dominant art historical narrative with key universal works is controversial. On 24th January 2020, Yale News released a story about a decision to end the University's one-semester introductory survey course. The rhetoric articulating Yale's decision centred on diversity.¹ Right-wing publications, such as Breitbart,² Daily Wire³ and Washington Sentinel,⁴ circulated the Yale story days before the College Art Association, the main American organization for teaching visual art.⁵ A fundamental issue that has not yet been the focus of attention in this debate are the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the format of the art historical survey in higher education.

Part of the controversy surrounding the canon stems from political uses of the past. The immediate response among right-wing media highlights the widespread appropriation of historic symbols from the history of visual art, in particular the Greco-Roman past in contemporary political discourse⁶ and the urgent need to teach students the research tools needed to identify and challenge skewed narratives concerning representation and underrepresentation. This wide-

¹ <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2020/01/24/art-history-department-to-scrap-survey-course/>

² <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2020/01/24/yale-kills-popular-art-history-course-over-study-of-white-male-artists/>

³ <https://www.dailywire.com/news/yale-scraps-quintessential-course-now-deemed-too-white-problematic>

⁴ <https://thewashingtonsentinel.com/yale-university-dumps-famed-art-history-course-because-it-is-too-white/>

⁵ <https://www.collegeart.org/news-archive/news-archive>

⁶ <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2019/09/MAC-SWEENEY-ET-AL-Claiming-the-Classical.pdf>

reaching debate raises issues ranging from a lack of diversity in art historical teaching, to how we teach in higher education and the role of the student in shaping their own understanding, that of their professor and wider community.

We don't need to throw out the survey as an approach, or content such as the study of the pre-modern world, quite the opposite. My aim is to challenge one University's recent decision in order to begin a conversation about a teaching opportunity, that is how to prioritize student engagement in introductory art history courses. Instead of debating content and replacing survey courses with alternative narratives, why not guide students in the acquisition of the research skills necessary to begin to unpack and address issues of representation for themselves?

The One-Semester Survey in Art History

The traditional format for introduction to art history for non-majors in higher education is a one-semester general education course. I am the Co-ordinator for the one-semester survey at a land-grant research university teaching over 1,000 non-majors annually. I will draw upon my experience.

For the past decade Yale taught a one-semester survey of western art, presumably from *c.* 1300 to 2010. Any course covering seven centuries is, by necessity, a highly abbreviated version of the history of art. A crucial point missing from this debate so far concerns the curation of art and artists, not just in the survey but in any course incorporating historical material.

Key Concepts concerning Diversity

I have experimented with various formats for the survey. For a time I adopted a thematic approach. Concerning assessment, I realized that exams at the introductory level meant I was placing myself in the role of the expert imparting knowledge. Since my core aim is empowering students to think critically, I replaced exams with discussions and essays.

My main concern has always been students taking only one university arts course. My priority is to design opportunities to learn by questioning. However, a great deal of choreography is required to guide students to grapple with visual art responding to socio-cultural events as the intersection of artists and history. I learned to combine focused lectures and applications involving varied case studies to prepare for student-led activities designed to focus on critical engagement. For example, to foster discussion of thematic connections between reliquaries (such as the *c.* 2nd-1st centuries BCE Great Stupa at Sanchi, India⁷ and the 13th century chapel at San Chapelle, Paris)⁸ or relics (such as the Mandylion⁹ and late 19th century Reliquary Guardian Figure, Mbulu Ngulu).¹⁰ I found that students benefited from lectures, which are inherently an interpretive story, greatly reduced to focus on student analyses.

We must continue to teach pre-modern European art history because it is part of the story of the history of art. But it is not the whole story. What we learn from dead white men is similar to what we learn from contemporary artists of colour, LGBT artists and women artists, among others. In

⁷ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/524/>

⁸ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/111420>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thaddeus_of_Edessa#/media/File:Avgar_poluchaet_Nerukotvorny_obraz.jpg

¹⁰ <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4886>

my surveys, for example, we deconstruct periodization. Just as contemporary art is a label, so too are the Middle Ages. In the 14th century when the term Renaissance was coined, ‘middle ages’ emerged to help establish connections with the earlier Roman Empire, excluding the intervening centuries’ visual art and architecture. This is an ideal opportunity to assign Albin, *et. al*, *Whose Middle Ages?* (2019), and websites such as <http://medievalistsofcolor.com> to expand canonical narratives.

Similarly, when teaching students about plurality in the history of art and what that means today, I focus on the re-invention of the past, encouraging students to question the origins of the art historical canon. There is no perfect textbook for the thought-provoking, chronologically broad survey. Texts such as Karlholm, “Surveying Contemporary Art”, *Art History* (2009) and Iskin’s, *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World* (2017) are key to questioning inclusion and exclusion in art history.

Student Engagement with Fundamental Art Historical Questions

I design active learning activities to mitigate one story of art. They focus on: (1) improving art historical research skills, and (2) guiding students to identify and research work excluded from textbooks. This means regularly dedicating class time to augment narratives presented with student-led research.

As an art historian fascinated by the 1st – 8th centuries CE, I question any overarching narrative about the past because there have always been myriad stories. My work is grounded in artefacts

and their production, highlighting the contribution of original makers and re-presentations. We reconstruct the past in our present. The fundamental aim of an introduction to art history course, as I understand it, is to introduce visual literacy and to foster critical engagement. Art historical research skills prepare students for the rewarding challenge of questioning stories about art produced in the past and re-made in their present.

Art History Survey Classes as Ideal Venues to Critique the Survey

We do not need to throw out content or alter the survey format to address learning objectives. Instead we should consider how we are modeling engagement with debates and key questions in our discipline. These skills are the point of an introductory survey in the history of art. Although the same goals may be achieved through courses such as ‘Art and Politics’, ‘Global Craft’, ‘Sacred Spaces’ or ‘The Silk Road’, these subjects are inherent in the survey. Each theme is another way to reconfigure the survey; creating more narratives. Drawing attention to the limitations of the survey as part of the survey teaches students by demonstrating engagement with the strengths and weaknesses of the survey format; a format students will continue to encounter in higher education.

We teach not only the history of art, but also the history of the discipline. The survey is a common form of instruction. Although this fact alone does not justify continued use of the format, the art history survey affords an opportunity to bring attention to the deficits inherent in the format and challenges students to critique from within. The art history survey is an ideal venue in which to teach students the skills needed not only to identify underrepresentation but, perhaps more importantly, to begin to do something about it.

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