Sabancı University

MAJOR WORKS OF WESTERN ART

[HUM 202]

Fall 2011

Class schedule
Lectures: Thursdays, 10:40-12:30
Discussions: Thursdays, 15:40-16:30 and 16:40-17:30

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will deal with groundbreaking achievements, milestones in the history of Western art. Each lecture will focus on one work of that is paradigmatic of an epoch, but will include comparisons with related works and discussions on the historical, intellectual, and aesthetic background in which they originated. The course will be more comprehensive than art promotion and 'art appreciation' courses offered elsewhere. Students will have the opportunity to consider the intricacies of human creativity and the complex factors in play in a work of art through the lectures and discussions. The main themes explored in this course relate to the changing role of art within the general cultural context and its interaction with other fields of human creativity. Such an exhaustive exploration should assist students in developing criteria for their appraisal of the arts, as well as to stimulate them to reconsider their systems of values and to pursue their interests in the arts and humanities.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course consists of a lecture followed by discussion section. Students are expected to attend all lectures, discussions and a study trip to a site in Istanbul. Students will also take a midterm and a final examination.

GRADING

20% Attendance and participation in discussion section
30% Midterm examination
50% Final examination
COURSE SYLLABUS

The lectures and discussions are structured around the following themes: The Role of Art. Vision and Visuality; Art as Ideal; Art and Religion; The Artist as an Individual; Art, Politics and Society; Art, Science and Intellectual Diversity

THEME I: THE ROLE OF ART. VISION AND VISUALITY


The goal of this introductory lecture is to provide students with the basic tools for understanding and appreciating art. The lecture discusses the notion of a ‘major work’ and addresses significant issues by comparing examples of art from a variety of different cultures and time periods. These issues can be formulated as questions: Why? What? and How? ‘Why?’ refers to the purpose, or function, of art. To answer the question why art is made the class discusses issues of patronage using examples from prehistory, antiquity and the Middle Ages. ‘What?’ discusses subject-matter, or what is represented in art by examining typical themes and the importance of subject-matter in a work of art. ‘How?’ discusses how things are represented, or the style. Analyses of different modes of representation are based on examples from ancient Egypt, the Middle Ages and modern art.

THEME II: ART AS IDEAL

This part of the course will discuss the early period of human creativity called classical antiquity, which comprises the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. These cultures used the visual arts and architecture to express grand principles: ideals of harmony in Greece and ideals of empire in Rome.

2. Ideals of Harmony: The Art of Ancient Greece

The ancient Greeks abandoned the strict and hieratic art of the Egyptians and focused their interest on man. The paramount achievement of the Classical age of Greek art was the Acropolis, the sacred mount of Athens. This complex, constructed under Pericles and the legendary Phidias, embodies the Classical style and its ideals of perfection. Dominating its center is the Parthenon, a magnificent temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, and the supreme example of classical ideals: symmetry, proportion, order, and unity of all parts to achieve the utmost beauty. This canon remained uncontested throughout the Classical period not only in architecture. In sculpture it finds its most complete expression in the Discobolus by Myron. This is one of the great achievements of the age and a true epitome of Classical aesthetics: harmony of form and content to achieve perfection. By introducing movement, Myron gave a new dimension to these ideals. Arrested in an ideal pose, the Discobolus brings together beauty of form and balanced motion to create a unity never seen before.

3. Ideals of Empire: The Art of the Roman Empire
The ancient Romans sought different ideals than the Greeks. Rather than to achieve absolute perfection in the arts the pragmatic Romans strove to display the grandeur of their empire. Roman culture is best exemplified by its architecture and engineering. Among its principal achievements was the arch, an engineering breakthrough that allowed for the construction of countless technological wonders across the vast realm: amphitheaters, bridges, aqueducts, cisterns. Rome’s architectural achievement is epitomized by the Pantheon, a temple dedicated to the principal gods of the Empire. This magnificent building bears witness to the glory and splendor of ancient Rome. Its interior, finished in splendid marble revetment and crowned by an awe-inspiring dome, is the best preserved of all surviving Roman structures. Its revolutionary design left a powerful imprint on the future as one of the most influential buildings in the history of architecture. It stood at the beginning of a long line of domed structures that were to characterize the architecture of the Mediterranean in the following centuries. A further development of Roman domed structures took place in Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, where it reached its high point at Emperor Justinian’s great church of Saint Sophia.

THEME III : ART AND RELIGION

This part of the course deals with a new epoch that emerged after the disappearance of the ancient world. Divided into the Byzantine, Islamic and Western European cultural areas, a new world emerged from the ruins of the pax romana, a world of spirituality that initiated an age of faith that was to dominate culture of the western hemisphere in the following centuries.

4. Art and the Spirit : The Art of Byzantium and of the Islamic Domains

Unparalleled in scale and grandeur, Saint Sophia was a masterpiece of engineering and a daring exploration into the very limits of the conceivable. A sophisticated interplay of curved and spherical shapes created by a system of semidomes and vaults around the main dome replaced the traditional wooden ceiling. This monumental building stands as a symbol of the eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium – a culture whose espousal of Christianity signified an increasing immersion into mysticism. Despite its abandonment of Classical ideals Byzantium was the sole inheritor of the art of Classical Antiquity and its custodian during the Middle Ages. The extraordinary Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem stands as a testimony to similar developments that took place somewhat later with the advent of Islam. Emerging from the same cultural background as Christianity, Islam took its share of the deep-rooted traditions of the Imperial Rome. These two great monotheistic religions became heirs to the world of Antiquity and formed the groundwork of a new world order – the Middle Ages.

5. Heavenly Spires : The Art of the Middle Ages

A most extraordinary break with the classical tradition occurred in medieval Europe with the so-called Gothic, which developed out of an indigenous artistic tradition of the Germanic peoples. Any occurrences of the Classical tradition in the Gothic were but fragmentary survivals of a long forgotten age. An entirely new formal and decorative system emerged. Unlike the strict and austere lines of classical Greek and Roman architecture, Gothic churches were profusely strewn with ornamental details and elaborate stonework; the most distinctive
feature of Gothic architecture are the extensive sculpted programs, symbolic and narrative in content, which formed an integral part of the architecture. The Gothic is best known for the immense cathedrals that defined the skylines of medieval Europe. Chartres is the most notable of all the great Gothic cathedrals. Impressive neither in size nor in abundance of decoration but in elegance of form and proportion, it is an architectural masterpiece and a lasting symbol of this age of faith.

THEME IV : THE ARTIST AS AN INDIVIDUAL

A break with medieval tradition occurred with the advent of Renaissance. Ideals of man as center of the universe ruptured the solid foundation of medieval patterns of thought, while exploration and discoveries in all areas of human knowledge prompted revolutionary ideas. This part of the course will deal with two periods of this new post-medieval age: the Renaissance and the Baroque which laid the foundation for what shall term the modern age.

6. A Window Onto the World : The Italian Renaissance

Masaccio, Filippo Brunelleschi, Donatello, Piero della Francesca, and other pioneers of the great cultural revival in the fourteenth century set the stage for the appearance of the protagonists of the heroic age of the High Renaissance – Leonardo, Raffaello and Michelangelo Buonarotti. Michelangelo's extensive and complex visual rendition of the Book of Genesis which unfolds across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel remains his most notable work and a paradigm of the Renaissance itself. Of imposing philosophical erudition and powerful inner vision, this enlightened and highly individualistic artist produced an elaborate reinterpretation of the history of humanity that remains one of the high points of European culture

7. Capturing Reality : Netherlandish Art

The fascinating altarpieces of early Netherlandish art distinguished by their sophisticated symbolism and extreme realism of detail reflect the specific social and cultural setting that developed at about the same time as the Italian Renaissance. A new class of patrons emerged as medieval feudalism gave way to a mercantile economy based on trading and banking which turned Flanders into one of the most prosperous parts of Europe. The Mérode Altarpiece is one work that fully discloses the specific taste of the new bourgeois patrons and their artists - love of detail and a desire to describe physical reality by careful observation of the visible world. In many ways this art was unlike the Italian Renaissance, for the northern artists showed no fascination for classical antiquity as the Italians nor did they endeavor, as Leonardo, to discover the forces of nature and through the subtleties of the soul. Their desire was simply to describe the visible world through exquisite details and subtle nuances of color and shade.

8. Drama and Light : The Baroque

A major force in the creation of the fascinating new art that spread rapidly over Europe after the Renaissance was the unusual and seemingly contradictory union of religious zeal and radically liberal ideas. This resulted in bold artistic innovation whose most enlightened exponent was the grand master of Baroque art – Gianlorenzo Bernini. His masterpiece, the
Ecstasy of Saint Theresa in the Cornaro Chapel, exhibits the foremost traits of the new art: as if imbued with a heavenly force, the two marble figures seem to interact with highly charged emotions. Oscillating between naturalism and idealization, Baroque sculptors and painters imbued the dignified and somewhat detached art of the Renaissance with powerful emotions and intense drama. This unparalleled and exciting outburst of passion and drama, heightened by theatrical effects of light and shadow, spectacular illusion and extravagant invention, offers a radically new dimension to artistic invention.

THEME V : ART, POLITICS AND SOCIETY

The age of political and cultural revolutions outlined the modern world. Concerns for social and human issues replaced abstract notions of ideals and religious concepts. Art became involved in cultural life as never before. This part of the course deals with the dramatic changes that took place in this period, from the Neoclassical to the Romantic visions.

9. The Art of Revolution

Rarely in the history of Western art did a single work embody the principal ideas of an age as the paintings of Jacques-Louis David. Firmly delineated forms, frugal coloring, and the ascetic setting of his Death of Socrates convey a sense of austerity that reflected the Spartan ideals of the Revolution of 1789. Reverting to the ideals of republican Rome, David and his neoclassicist followers celebrated such qualities as courage, patriotism, honesty, and temperance. This was a new art for a new society that renounced the gaudy and overly ornamented art of the late Baroque as it rejected the decadence of the Ancien régime. David’s political and artistic involvement in the French Revolution has suggested the terms of debate about the relation between visual art and politics ever since.

10. The Romantic Rebellion

Equally paramount as David’s paintings were to the ideals of revolution were the paintings of Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix to a heroic rebellion of the spirit called Romanticism. The Romantics, as Baudelaire described Delacroix, were ‘passionately in love with passion’ and opposed the cold rationality of the Neoclassicists. Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa is a true successor to the great history paintings of past times and a paradigm of the new heroic age. Rather than of great figures from history or ancient gods, this is a story of common people and their destinies: death and suffering are not elevated to the universal as in classicist paintings but are expressions of individual tragedy. The intense emotions and powerful drama in this painting have captured the spirit of Romanticism perhaps more so than any other painting of the age.

THEME VI : ART, SCIENCE AND INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY

Revolutionary changes in society were accompanied by revolutionary changes in culture. Art was not anymore restricted to interpreting or reflecting cultural values. Questioning traditional values opened up an unprecedented variety of possibilities for individual visions
and explorations. This part of the course deals with some of the groundbreaking movements of modern art, focusing on Realism, Impressionism and Cubism.

11. Interrupting Traditions: Realism and Impressionism

Although 'historical' in setting and in size, Édouard Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* does not endorse any lofty ideals or higher meaning. This was a visual manifesto of artistic freedom; one that follows the laws of the art of painting without adhering to conventions of subject matter and “meaning.” Manet, wrote Georges Bataille, was the first to make painting ‘illegible’. It is precisely for such subversive ideas that the 'Luncheon' caused great commotion among the public and critics of nineteenth-century Paris. Manet’s vision of ‘pure painting’ was founded on the belief that brushstrokes and color patches themselves constitute the art and not the subject-matter. This painting inaugurated the controversial principle of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ that dominated art theory in the following decades. Manet’s work undermines hierarchies of value associated with art, mixing up the trivial with the important, sketchiness with finish and vision with desire. More significantly, Manet’s disdain for expressive values, narrative, and symbolic content laid the foundation of modern attitudes toward art. It was particularly important for the emerging style of Impressionism whose protagonists such as Claude Monet focused exclusively on the two-dimensional surface of the painting to reflect for the first time the brilliance of natural light and color. This marked the end of the Renaissance concept of art as illusion.

12. A New Perspective: Modern Art

The major movements and artists of the twentieth century are examined with a focus on Pablo Picasso, the only true great ‘classic’ of Modernism. Picasso draws upon a number of traditions but retains an original means of interpretation. *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* is the first major work of Cubism, a style that radically broke with traditional conventions of representation and formed the groundwork from which subsequent modern art movements of the early twentieth century developed. Georges Braque, who worked with Picasso in the invention of Cubist art, thought the 1907 Demoiselles ‘brutal’. Not only did Picasso abandon the laws of perspective that had dominated painting since the Renaissance, but introduced several simultaneous viewpoints. In completely discarding spatial illusionism Picasso expressed a more complex and multi-faceted reality. His angular human and animal figures, anatomically dislocated, fragmented and tightly interlocked with other objects, such as angular solids and geometric planes, although not realistic, are unexpectedly ‘real’ in the message they communicate to us.

13. Revision

The last lecture sets into critical perspective the various issues raised during the semester.