

AR204 ART AND INTERPRETATION

Art and Aesthetics
Module: Art Objects and Experience
Spring 2025

Seminar Leader: Geoff Lehman
Course Times: Wednesdays and Fridays, 10:45-12:15

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 13:00-15:00, or by appointment

Course Description

Describing a painting, the art historian Leo Steinberg wrote: “The picture conducts itself the way a vital presence behaves. It creates an encounter.” In this course, we will encounter works of art to explore the specific dialogue each creates with a viewer and the range of interpretive possibilities it offers. More specifically, the course will examine various interpretive approaches to art, including formal analysis, iconography, historical and political contextualism, aestheticism, phenomenology, the idea of the sacred, the oneiric, and psychoanalysis. We will engage interpretation in ways that are significant within art history and related fields (philosophy, literary criticism) but also, even more importantly, that are significant in addressing larger questions of human experience and (self-)knowledge, considering the dialogue with the artwork in its affective (emotional) as well as in its intellectual aspects. The course will be guided throughout by sustained discussion of a small number of individual artworks, with a focus on pictorial representation (painting, drawing, photography), although sculpture, architecture, film, and installation art will also be considered. We will look at works from a range of different cultural traditions, and among the artists we will focus on are Guo Xi, Correggio, Bruegel, Velázquez, Vermeer, Hokusai, Manet, Picasso, Matisse, Varo, Hopper, Martin, and Sherman. Readings will focus on a range of art historical, philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic texts (Baudelaire, Pater, Wölfflin, Freud, Weil, Panofsky, Carrington, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, Barthes, Clark, Elkins, and Krauss, among others). Visits to Berlin museums to experience works of art firsthand are an integral part of the course.

Course Books

Course Reader

Library and book purchase policies

The college book policy for 2024-2025 is that reserve stocks of books will be lent to students on the basis of need, or (thereafter) on a first come first served basis. Books not yet owned by the college will be purchased only to create a small library reserve collection, and for students receiving more than 70% financial aid. Otherwise, students must purchase all course books.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Use of Electronics

To facilitate a focused and engaging seminar discussion the use of electronic devices during class time is not allowed, unless for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation, please inform your instructor at the beginning of the semester.

Museum Visits

Four of our scheduled classes will be museum visits. Since it is not possible to go to a museum during our scheduled class time, museum classes will be on the weekends and each museum class will replace a regular Wednesday or Friday class, usually from the preceding or following week.

Assessment

Participation

Students should arrive to each class on time and prepared. Being prepared means

- (1) having completed the assigned reading (in the specific editions indicated above),
- (2) bringing to class a non-electronic copy of the assigned reading, and
- (3) being ready to initiate and to contribute to discussion.

Engagement in class discussion should be regular as well as productive; quantity alone will not favorably affect the participation grade.

Writing Assignments

There will be two principal assignments over the course of the term: a midterm essay, 2000-2500 words in length, and a final presentation accompanied by an essay, 3000-3500 words in length, due at the end of the term.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Extensions may be granted by the individual seminar leaders, but the request must be made at least 24 hours before the essay deadline. Late essays will be marked down one-third of a letter grade (e.g., from A- to B+) for every 24 hours they are late, down to a maximum grade of a C.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 30%

Midterm essay: 30%

Final presentation: 10%

Final essay: 30%

Schedule

I. The Encounter

Wednesday, January 29 *Las Meninas*

Reading:

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Part One, Section 43: "Unfair Intimidation"
Antonio Tabucchi, "The Backwards Game"

Friday, January 31 **Room Space: Vermeer and Hopper**

Reading:

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Chapter 6 ("Corners") and Chapter 9 ("The Dialectics of Outside and Inside")

Wednesday, February 5 **Henri Matisse**

Reading:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," Sections I, II, IV, and V

Friday, February 7 No class

Sunday, February 9, 14:00 **Visit to the Hamburger Bahnhof**

Reading:

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo"
Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," pp. 7-47

II. The Aesthetic Experience

Wednesday, February 12 **Linear and Painterly: Renaissance and Baroque**

Reading:

Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, "Linear and Painterly," pp.18-29 and 41-53

Friday, February 14 **The Ink and the Brush: Song Dynasty Landscapes**

Reading:

Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, Chapter 5, pp. 200-218

Wednesday, February 19 **Aestheticism: James Abbot McNeal Whistler**

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, "The School of Giorgione" and "Conclusion"

Friday, February 21

Abstraction: Form and the Formless

Reading:

Clement Greenberg, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting"
Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, Appendix, "The Accident: Material Radiance"
Kasha Linville, "Agnes Martin: An Appreciation"

III. The Oneiric Realm

Wednesday, February 26

Hokusai and the Floating World

Visual assignment: look at Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*

Reading:

Carl Jung, *The Red Book*, Liber Primus, pp. 118-126 ("The Way of What is to Come") and Liber Secundus, pp. 361-374 ("Nox Quarta")

Friday, February 28

No class

Sunday, March 2, 14:00

Visit to the Scharf-Gerstenberg Collection

Reading:

Selected poems (contributed by the group)

Wednesday, March 5

Remedios Varo and Surrealism

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Chapter 5: "Advice from a Caterpillar"
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, Chapter 6: "Wool and Water"
Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*, pp. 127-141

Thursday, March 6, 19:30-21:30 **Film Screening: A Selection of Short Films**

Films by Man Ray, Deren, Marker, Frampton, Kentridge, The Brothers Quay, Cociña and León, Rosenfeldt, and others

Friday, March 7

Film discussion

No reading assignment

IV. The Cultural and the Political

Wednesday, March 12

Iconography: Ovid and Renaissance Art

Reading:

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 568-750; II, 833-875; V, 337-576; and VIII, 183-235 (Penguin ed.: pp. 44-49, 72-73, 125-131, and 184-185)
Ovid, *The Art of Love*, I, 525-630
Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, "Introductory," Section 1

Friday, March 14

Counter-Iconography: Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ll. 383-694 (Nelson trans., pp. 84-94)

Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 9

W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"

Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, "Introductory," Section 2

Midterm essay due: 23:59 on Sunday, March 16

Wednesday, March 19

Manet and Modernity

Reading:

Charles Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, "To a Passer-By"

Charles Baudelaire, *Petits poèmes en prose* (English: *Paris Spleen*): I, X, XII, XXVI, XXXV, XLI, & Epilogue

Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Chapter 1

Friday, March 21

No class

Sunday, March 23, 14:00

Visit to the Alte Nationalgalerie

Reading:

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Chapter 1

T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, "The View from Notre-Dame," pp. 50-78

Wednesday, March 26

Cindy Sherman and the Society of Spectacle

Reading:

Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors*, "Cindy Sherman: Untitled," pp. 101-124

Norman Bryson, "House of Wax"

V. The Sacred and the Symbolic

Friday, March 28

Sacred Space: The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba

Reading:

Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, Chapter 1

Wednesday, April 2

Sacred Images: The Icon and the Artwork

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Hans Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Chapters I-III and IX

Anachronic Renaissance, edited by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, selections

Friday, April 4

Grebo Sculpture and Picasso's Collages

Reading:

Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers*, Chapter 1: "The Circulation of the Sign," pp. 25-55

Wednesday, April 9 Immersive Spaces in Contemporary Art

Reading:

James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, Chapters 5 and 6

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, selections

Friday, April 11 No class

SPRING BREAK (April 14 – April 21)

VI. Dialogue and Desire

Wednesday, April 22 Nature Morte (Still Life)

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

Friday, April 24 *Camera obscura: Photography, Time, and the Index*

Reading:

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” selections

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Chapters 1-3, 8-10, 18-20, and 35-36

Sunday, April 26, 14:00 Visit to the Gemäldegalerie

Reading:

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, pp. 73-83 and 100-118

Leo Steinberg, “Velázquez’ ‘Las Meninas”

FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Wednesday, April 29

Friday, May 2 no class

Wednesday, May 7

Friday, May 9

Monday, May 12, 10:45-12:15 replacement class (completion week)

Final essay due: 23:59 on Friday, May 16