

AR204 ART AND INTERPRETATION

Art and Aesthetics
Module: Art Objects and Experience
Spring 2026

Seminar Leader: Geoff Lehman
Course Times: Mondays and Wednesdays, 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 2025-2026 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. 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.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

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 may 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. 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.

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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

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 30%

Midterm essay: 30%

Final presentation: 10%

Final essay: 30%

Schedule

I. The Encounter

Monday, January 26

Las Meninas

Reading:

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo"

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Part One, Section 43: "Unfair Intimidation"

Antonio Tabucchi, "The Backwards Game"

Wednesday, January 28

Room Space: Edward Hopper

Reading:

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

Monday, February 2

Windows: Henri Matisse

Reading:

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

Wednesday, February 4

No class

Saturday, February 7, 14:00

Visit to the Hamburger Bahnhof

Reading:

Selected poems (contributed by the group)

II. The Aesthetic Experience

Monday, February 9

Linear and Painterly: Renaissance and Baroque

Reading:

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

Wednesday, February 11

The Ink and the Brush: Song Dynasty Landscapes

Reading:

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

Monday, February 16

Aestheticism: James Abbott McNeill Whistler

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

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

Wednesday, February 18

Abstraction: Form and the Formless

Reading:

Clement Greenberg, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting"

Kasha Linville, "Agnes Martin: An Appreciation"

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, Appendix, "The Accident: Material Radiance"

III. The Cultural and the Political

Monday, February 23

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
Philostratus, *Imagines*, "Introduction, "Cupids," and "Andrians"
Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, "Introductory," Section 1

Wednesday, February 25

Counter-Iconography: Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 9
W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"
Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, "Introductory," Section 2

Saturday, February 28, 14:00

Visit to the Alte Nationalgalerie

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

Monday March 2

No class

Wednesday, March 4, 19:30-21:00

Guest lecture: Ada Naval

No reading assignment

IV. The Sacred and the Symbolic

Monday, March 9

Sacred Spaces, II: The Cathedral of Chartres

Reading:

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

Wednesday, March 11

Sacred Spaces, I: The Mosque of Cordoba

Reading:

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

Midterm essay due: 23:59 on Sunday, March 15

Monday, March 16

Sacred Images: The Icon and the Artwork

Reading:

Anachronic Renaissance, edited by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, "What is Substitution?" and "Icon Maintenance"

Wednesday, March 18

Grebo Sculpture and Picasso's Collages

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

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

V. The Oneiric Realm

Monday, March 23

Hokusai and the Floating World

Reading:

Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Ch. VII ("The Manifest Content of Dreams and the Latent Dream-Thoughts") and Ch. XI ("The Dream-Work")

Wednesday, March 25

No class

SPRING BREAK (March 30 – April 06)

Wednesday, April 8

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

Saturday, April 11, 14:00

Visit to the Scharf-Gerstenberg Collection

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")

Monday, April 13

No class

Wednesday, April 15

No class

Thursday, April 16, 19:15-22:30

Film Screening: A Selection of Short Films

Films by Méliès, Deren, Marker, Eames, Kurosawa, Kentridge, Maximov, Cociña and León, Kiarostami, and Dean

VI. Dialogue and Desire

Monday, April 20

Nature morte (Still Life)

Visual assignment: group presentation

Reading:

Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny"

Wednesday, April 22

Camera obscura: Photography, Time, and the Index

Reading:

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

Saturday, April 25, 14:00

Visit to the Gemäldegalerie

Reading:

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

Leo Steinberg, "Velázquez' 'Las Meninas'"

FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Monday, April 27

Wednesday, April 29

Monday, May 4

Wednesday, May 6

Final essay due: 23:59 on Friday, May 15