

The Place of Asian Art in the Liberal Arts Classroom

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Editors' note: This presentation was accompanied by slides illustrating many of the points mentioned. For the benefit of the interested reader, a description of the slides is provided in parentheses. Most of the slides were shown in pairs, and these are separated by a semi-colon.

(Map of Asia; Ganesha, Hoysala, 13th C. AAM)

Asia is marginalized in the curriculum of many, if not most, liberal arts colleges and universities, and Asian Art is even more so. South and especially Southeast Asian Art are virtually off the screen. The reasons are not hard to discern; we know and have heard them countless times. However, I am here to validate a discipline that I am totally committed to and think forms a vital and viable part of the liberal arts curriculum.

I have been teaching for twenty years, and I am fully aware of the biases held against the arts in general, let alone the Asian Arts. When I came to Mills in the mid-80s there was a movement underway to establish an Asian Studies minor. The inclusion of the Art of China and Japan (and perhaps a little Indian Art) was to be an integral part of this new program. This gave me the opportunity to completely reorganize the Asian Art History components, at which time I recognized that not only was Asian Art History peripheral to the general curriculum, but I discovered that even within the Art History program, majors and minors were not required to take any Asian Art at all. With both enthusiasm and persuasion I managed to negotiate the inclusion of Asian Art in equal measure to both Renaissance and Contemporary art in the newly reorganized majors and minors. The result has been that our students at Mills graduate with a strong foundation in art both East and West. For those going on to graduate school, or to work in museums or galleries, such a background is a necessity in the postmodern art world that is rife with postcolonial, poststructural and gender theories.

However, the larger question to be addressed here is the place of Asian Art History in the general curriculum, or why students should study the art of Asia, if their interests lie in other disciplinary areas, and their focus is on preparing themselves for the professional world of economics, political science, law, pre-med, computer science, etc. For us in the San Francisco Bay Area it is critical to know something about Asia. The largest Chinese population outside of Hong Kong, China and Taiwan is in the San Francisco Bay Area. This

year for the first time in recorded history Caucasians no longer form the majority in California. We can no longer educate culturally blind students. We need to acknowledge Asia and its contributions to society.

But why study the arts of any culture? For Confucius the five accomplishments of a gentleman were his skills in calligraphy, poetry, painting, music and archery. A knowledge and appreciation of art and aesthetics was and still is the mark of an educated person. The arts nourish the spirit as food sustains the physical body. And, by knowing the arts of a people, one can gain insights into the cultural values of a society. The arts allow us to see the world from a different point of view, to hear dissonance as music, and to enjoy measured movement as dance.

(Yaksi, 12th C. UP, MetNY; Yaksi, 11th C. Gyrapur, Gwalior)

The Orientalist view of Asia from the 16th century has been of an exotic place where beautiful women were mostly shielded from the eyes of foreign devils, i.e., white men, and where their gods and mythological animals were dreaded monsters. By investigating the exotic and the monstrous one comes to know other worlds, where women are *yaksis*, beautiful fertility spirits of nature, and where hybrid human/animals such as Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of auspicious beginnings and good luck, is the most beloved of all the gods of India, no matter whether one is Hindu, Jain, Moslem, or Christian, etc.

(Ganesha, late 5th C. Deogarh)

Ganesha is a guide who indicates the path to be taken, as in the rite of circumambulation of a temple.

(Daruma by I-Jan, 17th C. Ink Painting; Munakata, 20th C. Painting)
(Prime Minister Nakasone, 7/7/86; Clay Daruma, Okayama)

Another example whereby religious figures have been absorbed into the popular conscience is that of Daruma in Japan, who started out life as Bodhidharma. Knowing why Ganesha is invoked in India, or why Daruma presides over political events and examinations in Japan, can lead to insights into cultural traditions that have evolved over the millennia; these are traditions that are not to be casually cast off, but are to be acknowledged and respected.

(Mahakala, 17th C., Tsang, Tibet; Mahakala, det.)
(Vajrabhairava, 17th C. Karsha, Sangskar, Tibet;
Vajrabhairava, det.)

The old saw, "A picture is worth a thousand words," is in fact very true. A visual image of a dragon elegantly pacing through the firmament, or a multi-armed god wielding numerous weapons makes a powerful impression, but it can be unnerving, as in the case of these Tibetan Tantric paint-

ings of Mahakala and Vajrabhairava. But to be able to deconstruct these images and to place them in their proper context is to begin to understand and respect their roles in their given societies.

(Durga, Pala, 12th C. MetNY; Kali, Rajasthan, 10th C. AAM)

In order to frame my argument I have selected disparate and unconnected examples, which may make sense to you, but would probably be bewildering to most students. Because most of the students in my classes are not art history majors, I want them to walk away at the end of the semester with a sense of understanding and appreciation for the arts of India, China or Japan; and, definitely not with a sense of being overwhelmed by an unreadable and unpronounceable vocabulary used to describe unfathomable images. I am not a fan of the survey course where one has to cover five millennia of India and China and two millennia of Japan in 15 weeks. Instead, I offer two introductory courses each year. In the Fall I concentrate on the Arts of Early India and the Himalayas (i.e., Buddhist and Hindu Art to the 14th century and Tantric Buddhist Art of Nepal and Tibet). In the spring I concentrate on Early Chinese Art: Bronze Age through the Yuan Dynasty. In this way by focussing on thematic islands students learn about a genre or period in depth.

For example, this semester we are tracing the roots of Taoism in the arts of China, in order to take advantage of the exhibition by the same name, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, that is presently at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. This past week we have been looking at early landscape paintings of the Five Dynasties and Northern Sung period and reading the *Tao Te Ching*, because poetry and *Tao* are so integral to an understanding of painting. We have also looked at calligraphy in order to appreciate the brushstrokes, the bones, of the paintings. When the students discover that they can recognize distinctive styles and purposes of writing, their fear and bewilderment of trying to decipher visually the hieroglyphics of an unknown script dissipates. They may not be able to “read” the actual characters for meaning, but they can begin to appreciate their form, line and character. [I teach Japanese Art in upper division classes: The Art of Early Japan: Buddhist and Shinto Art; and Painting and Prints of Japan (Heian through the Edo periods.)]

(Man-cheng Tombs, c. 113 BC, diagram; Po-shan-lu, Liu Sheng’s Tomb)

This semester we have also studied the Han tombs in detail. We have investigated the major Han excavations and any new ones that come to light (*The New York Times* is an excellent source for new finds). We have read K.C. Chang’s interpretive archaeological analogies of Han society, and the writings of Wu Hung and Martin Powers. We have read the *Tao Te Ching* in order to understand the belief in the natural order of the world and the binary theories of *yin/yang* and

po/hun, that led to obsessive searches for *ling chih*, the essence of immortality.

(*Fei-I*, Marquess of Tai’s Tomb, Ma Wang Tui, ca. 168 BC, 2 slides)

An excellent introduction to Taoist ideas and art can be found in the tomb of the Marquess of Tai at Ma Wang Tui. The *fei-I*, the silken flying banner that was laid over the inner coffin offers multiple readings; it can be deconstructed as a diagram of the journeys of the *po* and *hun* souls, from the cool, moist *yin* depths to the *yang* heavens. The *Songs of Chu* enhance the meanings of the images and lends the whole a poetic sense of yearning that dry art historical analysis would never allow.

(Reliefs from Wu-Liang Tombs, ca. 145-167 BC, Shantung, 2 slides)

We also read Confucius’ *Analects*, wherein an ordered society requires filial behavior on the part of the surviving sons, which explains the elaborate preparations and precautions apparent in the Wu Liang Ci tombs in Shantung.

By addressing the fundamental values of Chinese beliefs through funerary art based upon ancestral rituals students see concrete examples of *ming chi*, funerary objects, and learn their significance and meaning. It is all relevant, which is particularly important for students to understand. What students learn about Taoist and Confucian practices can actually be seen whenever they go into a Chinese store or restaurant, because usually tucked away somewhere is a small altar dedicated to a particular Taoist deity—a guardian deity, and one who brings good fortune. I try to make the esoteric accessible by encouraging students to see Chinese films, eat in Chinese restaurants, spend a Saturday or Sunday roaming through the Chinatowns of the Bay Area, and reading Chinese novels. Through these first-hand experiences I hope that they will come to know the cultural meanings of the iconography of China, and gain some insights into a world that is different, yet in many respects the same, as their own.

(Juran. *Asking the Tao in the Mountains*, c. 975. Hanging scroll, Taiwan; Taoism and the Arts of China, AAM, poster)

We are very fortunate being in the San Francisco Bay Area, as we have access to one of the finest collections of Asian Art in the United States. Every class I teach visits one of the area’s museums. As I have mentioned, this semester *Taoism and the Arts of China* is at the Asian Art Museum. My students attended the symposium that was organized by the museum, which gave them the opportunity to hear leading scholars in the field debate the many issues raised by the exhibition. The Curator of Chinese Art came to Mills to discuss the exhibition in class, and then last week we returned to the museum. Whenever we have a museum visit, I always give an assignment—this way the students take the visit

seriously. It is also a wonderful opportunity for them to see seminal works of art such as this painting by Juran, ca. 975 AD.

Studying the art of a people, like studying their literature, opens up a whole world of different ideas, beliefs and values. A visual vocabulary is learned, whereby the semiotic inference of sign which is implicit in iconography forms the basis for an understanding of most Asian imagery. To use but one example: to be able to distinguish between an image of the Buddha and a bodhisattva is fundamental, and should be known by anyone who pretends to a knowledge of Asia.

Note: Students enrolled in my courses have access to my Intranet sites, wherein most of the slides that I show during lectures can be seen, including multiple close-ups for details. Also all the Study Guides, reading materials, and assignments are posted on the Intranet.

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India's Globalization Experience

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Editors' note: This is one of the three presentations on globalization by UBCHEA scholars. The others will be published at a later date.

Livelihood, life forms and sustainable environments are local phenomena. Free market capitalism, deregulation and opportunism are global phenomena. Is there a process by which the local may be subsumed into the global, without becoming dysfunctional? Or does the idea of globalization argue a case for diffusionist dimensions? Globalization entails movement, whether of ideas, humans, human rights, goods, livestock, money, images or information. The movement may even be identified as a metaphor of flow, as Mary Louis Pratt seems to argue, suggesting horizontal movement in accordance to laws of gravity, creating a sense of leveling. However, in reality, the direction of the flow appears vertical, and rather than level, creating displacement. Pratt cites drug trafficking, flesh trade, mass labor migration, and the tourism industry as examples (Pratt, 2001). Pratt's observation serves to endorse an unintended consequence of globalization: that segments of the population cannot remain invisible anymore. This inclusive perspective, as it were, has come to inform

much of the world's experience of globalization, and has served to draw attention to increasing categories of people who, because they have neither the selling power nor the buying power, fail to claim occupancy in this new world.

Bhanwari Devi lives in Rajasthan, India. She works the potter's wheel for a living. However, the community has frozen her selling power, as a token of punishment. Bhanwari Devi had lived an indifferent life. She was inducted into domestic life as a child bride. She never thought much, she never objected. In 1985 she found a job as a grassroots worker. Her assignment was to report on child brides. Her reports were forwarded to the police. The community issued her warnings, they ostracized her, and as a final step, in 1992, five upper caste men gang raped her. She reported the crime and pressed for justice. In 1994 the rapists offered her compensation in return for withdrawing the case. She responded, "Tell our village elders you raped me, restore my dignity" (Sharma, 2001). In 1995 the accused were vindicated. A political party organized a victory rally; among the celebrants were women. Bhanwari Devi has appealed; her case is pending in the high court. Her story has been made into a film, *Bawander* (Sandstorm), which, while it parleys with the Indian censor board, has been screened at international film festivals. Bhanwari Devi stands as a witness to cross-border movement and the subsequent impact on policy when the local calls for beyond-the-border scrutiny. Her narrative has made it possible for women activists in Delhi to take up the issue of sexual harassment in the work place and follow it through legally.

The earthquake in Gujarat in January of 2001 has brought into focus a group of highly organized women from Kutch (Sharma, 2001). They are illiterate construction workers who also produce handicrafts and fabrics that have found a world market. These women have been able to save what is a significant sum in their small-world economy. With access to both buying power and selling power, they have gained a