



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities

DIVISION OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Proposal

The attached document contains the narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful proposal may be crafted. Every successful proposal is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the program guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/education/enduring-questions> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Education Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: NEH Enduring Questions Course on Conceptions of Beauty

Institution: Middlebury College

Project Director: Cynthia Dee Packert

Grant Program: Enduring Questions

Is Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder?

Cynthia Packert, Middlebury College

Intellectual Rationale and Teaching Value. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of teaching Asian and Islamic art history is conveying different concepts of beauty. This new course considers selected Asian and Islamic artworks in the Middlebury College Museum of Art's permanent collection to explore the fundamental question: "Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?" We will ask how the act of beholding is entwined with cultural assumptions and conditioning and address those assumptions through an intensive combination of close looking, critical analysis, and comparative consideration of a diverse range of artworks and aesthetic traditions, with a focus on select Asian and Islamic examples.

When I take students into the Middlebury College Museum of Art (MCMA) and ask for their first impressions, one object in particular—a 12th-century Indian sculpture of the Hindu god Vishnu—always evokes confused responses. Carved in dusky black stone, the crowned deity is heavily ornamented with jewelry and garlands. His four arms wield weapons and symbolic objects with which he maintains order and harmony in his role as cosmic king. Around him are smaller figures—notably, his two shapely wives standing at his feet. Most students observe that Vishnu seems feminine and overwrought, and that his wives' diminutive size suggests that he is domineering, even (given the weapons) threatening.

Compare these responses to a South Indian devotional poem of the 13th-14th century, in which a similar image of Vishnu is eulogized as the revered ruler of the universe and ultimate source of love and compassion. Here, the ornaments and weapons, valued for their auspicious proximity to Vishnu's perfect body, dazzle the beholder. His skin is beautifully "dark as lamp-black, as the deep blue *kaya* blossom." He stands harmoniously united with his wives as "a dark emerald hill cut on either side by swelling mountain streams." These vividly evocative and

lavishly eulogistic devotional descriptions illumine the power of religious imagery and divine beauty—and through this textual imagery, students learn to behold the artwork as medieval Indian worshipers did.

Many complex questions are embedded in such a simple exercise. How do we explain such divergent interpretations of the same image? What must we know to recognize and understand the powerful beauty of art from a different culture? When and how does a material work of art become exalted as a thing of beauty and emotional or spiritual transformation? Are standards in beauty universal, or are they always relative? How do we develop our own aesthetic norms and standards of beauty? Why, indeed, do we value beauty in art? Conversely, when and why is a work of art *not* beautiful?

Most students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, mediate their experiences of the visual world through technology and the conventions of global contemporary culture. Few readily grasp radically different ways of working with artistic materials, visualizing the body, representing nature, portraying emotions, expressing spirituality, or encoding historical references. Confronting students with real works of art from different cultures and periods of history and asking them to *look*, *question*, and *compare* helps them develop broader, deeper, and more inclusive humanistic thinking. Looking intensively at individual works further allows students to cultivate powers of observation and a visual literacy possible only through repeated looking. “Reading” artworks like a text, not simply as exemplars of a particular time and place, can render the myriad questions that arise—and the answers they engender—intellectually and personally transformative. This is definitively *not* a survey course; instead, it engages deeply and inquisitively with individual works of art—framed by relevant readings—selected to deliberately provoke our enduring question about art and the concept of beauty. This course fits the *Bridging*

Cultures initiative well, and also addresses a new institutional initiative at Middlebury College. It satisfies the College's need for innovative, global courses on visual thinking that can attract a wide variety of students to the museum and to the humanities, and contributes to the recently-initiated Museum Studies track in my department.

Course preparation. Over the summer of 2015, I will look intensively at the selected artworks in the MCMA and develop a list of guiding questions (June 1-8). Although I have written about Hindu aesthetics in my two books, I need to deepen my specific understanding of the relevant primary material (in translation) on aesthetics, philosophy, and meaning—both western and Asian—to be a more effective educator and scholar. My knowledge of the myriad aesthetic theories is general, a *lacuna* that makes me uncomfortable, so I have consulted colleagues to select a list of primary and secondary texts that I will read between June 9 and August 30. To prepare for a class field trip, I will visit New York and Boston to select a range of appropriate comparative works (August 31-September 4). I will finalize my syllabus and create an online course site by the beginning of January 2016 to be ready for teaching in February 2016. I am on sabbatical from July 2016- September 2017, during which I will continue to read and deepen my knowledge of the material and perhaps change some of the museum examples for the subsequent seminar in spring 2018.

Envisioned course design. This will be a 13-week, full-credit, twice-weekly seminar for 18-20 students (comfortable for the MCMA galleries and lively discussion), offered in the spring semesters of 2016 and 2018. To attract students who come from diverse backgrounds and majors, there will be no prerequisites. Alternatively, I could offer it twice as a First-Year Seminar course as an ideal introduction to the liberal arts college experience, with a focus on intensive writing and thinking about large issues. There are five approximately two-week units,

each focused on different works of art in the MCMA. The sequence of units will create an ongoing comparative thread for discussion. A trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is planned for the final weeks. This course will be question- and discussion-based and highly interactive; students will work singly and in pairs to lead discussions and make presentations.

The primary “texts” of the class will be the works of art, supplemented by 50-75 pages a week of historical, theoretical, philosophical, and aesthetic readings that put the artworks into contextual and comparative perspective. Students will write and revise two papers for each unit: a 5-page formal analysis of the relevant artwork (with extra training on writing a museum catalogue entry), followed by a 6-8-page analysis of a specific aesthetic aspect of the work, chosen after engaging with the readings. An 8-10 page final research essay on a comparative artwork chosen from the Metropolitan or Boston Museum of Fine Arts will allow me to assess how students apply their learning to similar, but unfamiliar, works of Asian and Islamic art. Class participation will factor as 10% of the final grade, and the papers will total 90%. I will distribute an anonymous mid-term evaluation, and students will do periodic peer evaluations of each other’s presentations and writing as part of the collaborative learning process. I plan to work with the college’s Office of Planning and Assessment to develop tools for assessing learning outcomes.

Unit 1: The Eye of the Beholder: What Makes Beauty in Art? This initial unit will introduce students to general aesthetic concepts about beauty in western art history. Relative ideas about beauty and its beholders will be explored through questions centered on a variety of artworks in the museum, from classical to contemporary art. Students will learn the basics of

visual analysis and read excerpts from such texts as Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (1976).

Unit 2: *The Devotional Beholder and Indian art.* This unit on Indian concepts of ideal beauty will focus on the 12th c. Vishnu Stele (2004.050) and a 17th c. *Ragamala* painting of *Vilaval Ragini: A Lady Gazes into a Mirror* (2002.001). We will study the concept of *darshan*, or “sacred seeing,” central to understanding Hindu visuality, as well as the highly complex viewer-response categories of moods (*rasas*, ‘juice’ or ‘essence;’ *bhavas*, ‘emotions, moods;’ and *ragas*, ‘melodies’) elaborated in such classical aesthetic treatises as the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, the *Natya Shastra*, and devotional poetry. We will explore how Indian art sets the aesthetic stage through its dense iconography of temporal, seasonal, gestural, and personal symbols.

Unit 3: *The Scholarly Beholder and Chinese Art.* The focus here is a 14th-15th c. Chinese hanging scroll, *Appreciating Plum Blossoms* (2009.004). Students will explore why monochrome ink is favored over color; the inseparable connection between calligraphy and painting; the role of the scholar-poet; the language of landscape metaphors—mountains, bamboos, plums, pines, water and mist—and their significance for human behavior and ethics; and entirely different approaches to visualizing spatial relationships. Readings will be from translations of a variety of Chinese theoretical texts on philosophy, landscape painting, and nature.

Unit 4: *The Refined Beholder and Japanese Art.* An 18th-c. six-panel folding screen depicting scenes from the early 11th-century novel, *The Tale of Genji* (under consideration for acquisition by the Museum) introduces students to such Japanese aesthetic values as etiquette, restraint, refinement, the sublimity and fragility of nature, and a Buddhist-influenced

appreciation for transience and the illusory nature of reality. We will also explore the balance between material ostentation and classical refinement. Students will read and discuss selections from *The Tale of Genji* and a number of readings on such Japanese aesthetic ideals as *mono-no-aware* (“the pathos of things”).

Unit 5: *The Respectful Beholder and Islamic Art.* The terms of beauty in Islamic art will be explored with reference to a 9th-century North African leaf from the Qur’an (2006.070) and a 17th-century painted tile from Syria (2007.006). Topics explored: rendering the Word of God through beautiful calligraphy, expressing the infinity of divine power through natural (floral, vegetal, celestial, luminous) and geometric symbols, and related readings from such texts as Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, 2001.

Dissemination. An online course website will be linked to our Art History library resource page, and student essays will also be linked to the Museum’s public webpage—a major contribution as the Museum has minimal educational materials online. I will also work with the new Curator of Museum Education and the student museum interns to maintain the website and develop a more expansive and inclusive educational program around the ideas generated in this course. The Museum regularly hosts “Off the Wall” Friday lunchtime lectures focusing on works in the museum, and students would be encouraged to make presentations in that series. I intend to share the course syllabus and resources with relevant art history and Asian studies Listservs, as there are perennial calls for syllabi on how best to teach Asian and World art courses. This would be a very welcome contribution to the field—indeed, I wish I could have found such a course online myself. This course could serve as a replicable model for any institution that has access to an art museum: providing a template for using actual artworks as a way to address an enduring question in the humanities while focusing on artworks from Asia and the Islamic world.

Tentative Course Readings

UNIT 1.

Hofstadter, A. and R. Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*. New York, 1964
(especially selections on Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche).

UNIT 2.

Ghosh, M. *The Natyashastra, a Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics, Ascribed to Bharata-Muni*. rev. 2nd. Ed, VI, Calcutta, 1967.
Sivaramamurti, C. *Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara*. Baroda, 1978.

UNIT 3.

Hearn, M. *How to Read Chinese Paintings*. New York and New Haven, 2008.

UNIT 4.

Murasaki Shikibu. *The Tale of Genji*. Translated and abridged by E. Seidensticker. New York, 1990.

UNIT 5.

Gonzalez, V. *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, New York and London, 2001.

Course Preparation Readings

- Aitken, M.E. *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting*. Yale, 2010.
- Barnhart, R. *Peach Blossom Spring: Gardens and Flowers in Chinese Painting*. New York, 1983.
- Barnhart, R., et al. *Mandate of Heaven, Emperors and Artists in China: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Zurich, 1996.
- Baxandall, M. *Patterns of Intention*. Yale, 1985.
- Behrens-Abouseif, D. *Beauty in Arabic Culture*. Princeton, 1999.
- Belting, H. *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*. Cambridge, MA and London: 2011.
- _____. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*. Chicago, 1994.
- Bush, S. and H. Shih, eds. *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. Cambridge, MA, 1985.
- Bush, S. and C. Murck. *Theories of the Arts in China*. Princeton, 1983.
- Cahill, J. *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty*. New York and Tokyo, 1976.
- _____. *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1850*. New York and Tokyo: 1978.
- Dehejia, V. *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries Between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* New York, 2009.
- Dodd, E. and S. Khairallah. *The Image of the Word*. Beirut, 1981.
- Eco, U. *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. New Haven, 1986.
- Fairchild Ruggles, D. *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*. University Park, 2002.
- Fernandez Puertas, A. *The Alhambra: From the Ninth Century to Yusuf I*. London, 1997.
- Finney, P.C. *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. New York, 1994.
- Fong, W. *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th-14th Century*. New York and New Haven, 1992.
- Fong, W. and J. Watt. *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*. New York and Taipei, 1996.
- Freedberg, D. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago, 1989.
- Geertz, C. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (chapter on "Art as a Cultural System). New York, 1983.
- Gnoli, R. *Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*, Varanasi, 1971.
- Grabar, O. *The Mediation of Ornament*. Princeton, 1992.
- Hamburger, J. and A. Bouché, eds. *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, Princeton, 2006.
- Hawley, J. S. *The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna*. Oxford, 2009.

- Holly, M. A. and K. Moxey, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*. Williamstown, 2002.
- Hopkins, S. *Singing the Body of God*. Oxford, 2002.
- Hume, N., ed. *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*. Albany, 1995.
- James, D. *Qur'ans of the Mamluks*. New York, 1998.
- James, L. *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*. Oxford, 1996.
- Janes, D. *God and Gold in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, 1998.
- Kaviraja, V. *Sahitya-darpana (or Mirror of Composition): With English translation and an original Sanskrit commentary*. Calcutta, 1851.
- Lafleur, W. *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*. Berkeley, 1983.
- Marra, M., ed. *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretations*. Honolulu, 2002.
- _____. *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999
- Mitter, P. *Much-Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Chicago, 1977, 1992.
- Morgan, D. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* Berkeley, 2005
- Necipoglu, G. *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*. Santa Monica, 1995.
- Odin, S. *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West*. Honolulu, 2001.
- Panofsky, E. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Chicago, 1982.
- Renard, J. *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims*. Berkeley, 1996.
- Richman, P. *Extraordinary Child: Poems From a South Indian Devotional Genre*. Honolulu, 1997.
- Roberts, M. *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity*. Ithaca, 1989.
- Robinson, C. *The Making of Courty Culture in al-Andalus and Provence, 1065-1135 AD*. Leiden, 2002.
- Schimmel, A. *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*. London, 1990.
- _____. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill, 1975.
- Sen'ichi, H. *The Vocabulary of Japanese Literary Aesthetics*. Tokyo, 1963.
- Shulman, D. *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*. Cambridge and London, 2012.
- Suzuki, D. *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Princeton, 1973.
- Tabaa, Y. *Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*. Seattle, 2001.
- Toshihiko, I. *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*. Boston, 1981.
- Zezhou, L. *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* Honolulu, 2010.