

# Teaching Medieval Art History to Art Students

Susan L. Ward

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Teaching medieval art history effectively to fine art students presents unique pedagogical challenges. It requires an understanding of what such students are like and an adaptation of teaching methods and materials to deal with their unique characteristics. I have taught classes of art students for five years, first at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and currently at the Rhode Island School of Design. Through these experiences I have discovered much about the learning habits of young artists and developed pedagogical strategies for effectively teaching such students about the Middle Ages. While these strategies were initially developed at the School of the Art Institute in classes composed entirely of art students, it is hoped that they may be useful to medievalists in dealing with single fine art students who appear in their courses.

The distinctive characteristics of art students may not be apparent to the medievalist who sees only an occasional fine art student in his or her classes, but are readily perceivable when one is presented with an entire class of such students. Initially the conventionally trained medievalist is aware of tremendous academic diversity within the student body. This is, of course, because academic achievement is not the primary admission criterion at an art school. A disproportionate number of the students have learning disabilities, especially dyslexia, or are not native English speakers. Again, while markedly affecting a conventional academic careers these factors do not affect a portfolio's quality at all. And it has even been suggested that dyslexics are pushed towards the fine arts as compensation for their lack of recognition in traditional academic areas. Like the low achieving liberal arts student, many fine art students come to post-secondary school improperly prepared. A substantial number has never written a research paper, and do not know how to approach a research library. Although the students I taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago had access to the Art Institute's Ryerson Library, the largest art history library in the Midwest, they needed much encouragement to use it. I have also found that art students are especially vague about historical and geographic particulars. Many have never heard of Charlemagne and can't find Rome on a map.

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On the other hand, fine art students as a group have some of the qualities associated with the best trained art history undergraduates. As is hardly surprising they are very acute visually and there is little need to laboriously delineate, for example, the stylistic differences between Romanesque and Gothic sculpture as must sometimes be done in an art history class for liberal art students. The bias against medieval abstraction, a burning issue in some less sophisticated classes, hardly comes up. Artists who see the development from Impressionism through Picasso and Kandinsky as having positive aesthetic value can easily be encouraged to have a similar reaction to the break up of classical style in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Curiosity, impetuosity and liveliness, all part of the clichéd view of the artist, are certainly present in classes with art students.

Another similarity art students have with proficient liberal arts undergraduates is less obvious. Young artists tend to be intensely interested in critical issues and the formulation of art historical questions. For example most of my upper level students are aware of Benjamin, Barth, Foucault and Derrida. They know something of Kant and Hegel and could explain formalism or structuralism in a basic way.

While my insights are based on classroom observation, the students at the School of the Art Institute were also the subjects for a series of scholarly studies by social scientists at the University of Chicago. The purpose of these studies, by Jacob Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, was primarily to understand creativity in the face of a variety of real world variables. However, their findings support impressions from the classroom and provide insight into effective teaching strategies.

It was shown by Jacob Getzels in a study begun in 1964 that,

problem formulation, more than problem solution, holds the key to original work in fine arts. Those art students who approached their canvas with an open mind, and spent much thought discovering what they were about to do, turned out paintings judged to be superior in creativity—though not necessarily in technique to the paintings of equally talented young artists who started to paint with a pre-established view of what they were going to do, and spent most of their efforts matching a picture already formed in their minds with the paints on canvas. (129)

As might be expected standard intelligence tests did not indicate facility at this process but a significant correlation was found with the so-called Divergent Thinking Tests (69-71). This study seems to explain the surprising sophistication my students have in framing art historical questions. This is a process which is most rewarded in their own art production and hence they carry it over into their academic classes.

On the negative side the absence of knowledge of factual particulars, which is easily observed in the classroom may not simply be due to poor high school training. In his dissertation Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asked how School of the Art Institute students who were oriented towards discovery would perform on a test where there was only one right answer (the Vigotsky test). The art students did not score as well as the subject with four years of college and performance was especially poor in the "finding solution" variable of the test. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that the "...accepted orthodox solution may not appear as a real solution to the questioning artist: which reminds us of a remark attributed to Einstein, 'I had to find something new because I could not understand the old'" (120).

Having elaborated the directly perceived and scientifically measured intellectual distinctions of art students, we come to the second part of the paper: pedagogical strategies for effectively teaching this population medieval art history.

However unusual the student body, it seems necessary that the entire class learn to recognize certain works of art and standard art historical concepts. It is unconscionable that a student should spend a semester in medieval art history and be unable to recognize Chartres Cathedral or unaware of the importance of the Virgin cult in the twelfth century. In addition to general scholarly standards my classes are diverse groups. Each year several students go on to study medieval art history at academically rigorous graduate schools and many who finally obtain teaching positions in their own media will be required to teach basic art history. It is, therefore, absolutely essential that the students receive a solid and somewhat standard basic foundation. I usually measure this facility in two exams of orthodox format: i.e. identifying slides and writing comparative essays. I prepare the art students for the factual portions of these tests much as one would prepare students with inadequate academic training—careful explanation and lots of repetition. The course concepts can be approached in a more sophisticated method. I was surprised in a Gothic course at the School of the Art Institute where both Robert Branner's short and straightforward, *Gothic Architecture*, and Otto von Simson's longer and more complex, *The Gothic Cathedral*, were assigned reading that Von Simson was the almost universal favorite. I was told that Von Simson, "really got you into the ideas behind the cathedral," while Branner was, "choppy and full of boring facts." This preference may not be incidental but instead may illustrate the theory of Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi that the students at the School are discovery rather than right-answer oriented. The concrete information in Branner's study was so distasteful that even its short length was not felt to be adequate compensation by my students.

If the two tests measure an acceptable general standard knowledge of medieval art history, I allow more freedom in the research paper or project

which I assign. I usually ask the student to find out something more about a work of art or concept which interests him or her and to show the results of that discovery process in a paper or project. All the papers and projects are explained to the rest of the class on a discussion day. Since the ensuing results show the unique aspects of my students, I felt the most useful way to understand the process would be for me to recount the work presented at a particular discussion day in an Early Medieval Art History course I taught at the School of the Art Institute in the fall semester of 1985-1986. I would like to thank my students for their imaginative contributions which made this article possible.

Several students in the class wrote conventional research papers (a requirement from any student who wants a recommendation to academic graduate school). Papers included one on the Symmachi-Nicomachi diptych, a fourth-century ivory commissioned by a patrician pagan family in Rome. The paper studied revival style in the context of patronage. Another paper studied North African floor mosaics as an early example of stylistic principles associated with medieval abstraction. A third paper explained the imagery in the synagogue frescoes in Dura Europos by exploring the complex relationship between Judaism and Hellenism in this Roman border town. A fourth paper applied Walter Horn's theories about the importance of indigenous wooden architecture to the Anglo-Saxon Earl Barton's tower (Horn and Born). All these papers were well-researched and well-written and very similar to those one might expect from any competent undergraduate class.

There were also more imaginative papers. Interestingly several of those were triggered by a question I left open in class. I said that I thought that in spite of the work of many renowned scholars such as J.J.G. Alexander, Janet Backhouse, Françoise Henry and Carl Nordenfalk that we were somehow asking the wrong aesthetic questions about Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts. Since I thought perhaps I had missed something I called two friends, both art history professors, and asked them how they discussed Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts. Both responded, "I love the manuscripts but there's really not that much to say about them," and referred me back to the authorities I already knew. I relayed this to my students and told them that several medieval art historians turned to exclusive study of these works near the end of their lives because of the compelling beauty of the manuscripts but that somehow that power remained illusive and undefined. I asked the students if they had any ideas.

I received several papers on this subject. One was on animal interlace, a distinctive design motif in Anglo-Saxon and Hiberno-Saxon art. Much of the paper was fairly standard, tracing the motif from its early appearance in Luristan bronzes to western works but the student included an interesting section of her own devising about the relationship between people and

animals and how that was different in the Middle Ages than in modern times. Another student wrote about the view of nature as suggested in Irish poetry and in manuscripts. It was obvious that the relationship to nature in the poetry was immediate and sensuous. Initially that seems very different from the highly abstract manuscripts but the paper attempted to reconcile the two into a single view of nature. A third and most interesting paper was on the St. Chad Gospels and modes of seeing. This student had worked at Bell labs before returning for an M.F.A. and was aware of experiments at Bell measuring the actual physical processes of visual perception. According to the Bell scientists at a physical and unconscious level the brain organizes visual stimuli in a sort of abstract linear code of lines and curves projected against a void. This "shorthand" is then organized a second time into what we think of as sight. My student speculated that because of the meditative life of the monastic illuminator in the isolated Irish monastery, this purely unconscious sense of perception became consciously manifest and could be used as part of an artistic vocabulary. I found the student's ideas provocative and I asked a perceptual psychologist whether this process was possible. She was highly dubious that such a conscious recognition of a physical process could occur but she was uncertain and found the idea challenging.

In addition to papers some of the students chose to do projects. These projects tended to fall into two categories: exploration of medieval artistic techniques and imaginative works which were combinations of medieval artistic ideas or techniques with the student's own ideas.

Some of my students are intensely interested in exactly how medieval art was made. As a matter of fact I have become much more thoroughly acquainted with Theophilus's *On Divers Arts*, since I began to teach art students. In the same Early Medieval Art History class one of my students made chain mail (admittedly an art form which appears only at the very end of the early medieval period). The student observed actual chain mail in the Art Institute's Harding Collection and read about its manufacture. He then built a frame and put in the supporting strings. He made six-ring mail where each ring has six other rings attached to it. This kind of mail has a wave in it which protects the wearer from sharp points. Another technical project was a book showing different types of lettering used from the Roman period to the eighth century. The student used India ink and a modern pen nib but explained medieval materials in her report. Both these students emphasized the time-consuming labor involved in making such objects. The chain mail frame was originally supposed to be filled but the student was only able to make about a quarter of what he had originally projected. The rest of the blank holes stood in mute testimony to the efforts required to complete such a work. This particularly impressed the



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other students and went a long way towards helping them envision the non-mechanical, labor intensive world of medieval art production.

The second category of projects are in a way works of art themselves since they interpret medieval ideas in somewhat original ways. One such project was a set of garments including a hood and dress which a student designed and made from looking at different Ottonian women's garments pictured in manuscripts. The student explained that she did not copy a single garment but rather combined elements seen in several garments. She further modified the dress to facilitate wearing it today. According to the student the hood was extremely functional in Chicago winters and she wore it under her coat frequently in cold weather. A second project which was based on medieval art but did not copy a single work was a set of paintings based on manuscript illumination. Again the paintings were not a copy of a particular manuscript but a conglomeration of elements from several medieval works. The motifs in the paintings were based on the Book of Durrow but organization of motifs was more similar to that found in the Book of Kells and the Book of Lindisfarne. Interestingly this student chose to put her paintings into an elaborately painted box which recalled, but did not copy, the Irish book shrine. A final imaginative project was an Atlas of Medieval Space and Time. In this project the student placed a group of xeroxed articles, which she felt explained the medieval artist's view of space or time, inside a decorated binder. The student commented critically on each article. The cover of the binder was decorated with an actual contemporary Rosary and a reproduction of the figure of Christ from the Carolingian Drogo Sacramentary fixed to a photograph of particle tracks from Fermi Lab. The Drogo Christ, of course, suggests an essential understanding of reality to many medieval people and the particle photograph represented to the student our current state of knowledge about space and time.

Teaching art students is an interesting and challenging experience. One must never neglect to teach the discipline as it exists, but one must also remember that many of the students are using the material not as intellectual information but as the raw stuff out of which to make art. As an undergraduate I wrote a thesis on the use of Irish folklore in a play, *The Heme's Egg*, by W. B. Yeats. For his knowledge of folklore I learned that Yeats depended heavily on the scholarly writings of Jessie Weston and Alfred Nutt. While the scholarship Yeats used was revised and updated a long time ago, his play remains valid today. This kind of two-tiered purpose is always present when art students study the Middle Ages.

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