Chapter Three: The Themes of Art

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

• Representing Nature
• Representing Everyday Life
• Making Things and Creating Space
• Representing the Spiritual
• Representing the Mind
• Representing the Beautiful

Works in Progress
Pablo Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon

The Critical Process
Thinking about the Themes of Art: Robert Mapplethorpe’s Parrot Tulip

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This Chapter Will:

• provide an overview of the varied themes in art, from genre to fantasy
• discuss the human desire to find pleasure in the representation of everything – from the mundane scenes of everyday life, to images that attempt to capture the spiritual and the sublime
• specify the difference between objective and subjective representation
• introduce the conceptual and philosophical concerns of aesthetics
• present how artists represent the world to preserve that which is transient, or to isolate and/or amplify that which they find beautiful

KEY TERMS

aesthetic; aesthetics
genre painting,
subjective
objective,
Surrealism
Impressionism
vanitas
LECTURE AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Themes in Art are Themes in Life
This chapter introduces students to some of the basic terms of the language of art, the various themes of art, and issues debating the definition of art as it is known by Western cultures. Open the discussion by having students name people, places, and things. Arrange their answers in lists to provide some of the themes in art. For example: kings and queens (court portraits); presidents (political portraits); farm workers (genre) and so on. This association will emphasize how artists make art about life. Pose questions such as: Why do artists usually work in one theme? What theme would you choose to represent?

2. Realism and Reality: Representing the Mind
Claude Monet’s The Regatta at Argenteuil (fig. 39) is a classic example of the Impressionist style. Discuss the art movement of Impressionism as both psychological and physical states of interpretation. Emphasize to students that Impressionist artists were concerned with capturing their personal interpretations of a scene, a psychological interpretation, and were also interested in the optical illusions of color, a physical interpretation. Introduce the concept that one’s understanding of reality is subjective because one’s perception is subjective.

3. The Reality of Imitation
Segue into a discussion of realism, as an imitation of reality and note its Western heritage. Using Thomas Cole’s The Course of the Empire (figs. 40-44) further the analysis of realism to include the human desire to understand the world we live in. The various states in the Course of the Empire are detailed representations of the power of nature and the human condition.

4. Representing Nature
The desire to represent nature perhaps derives from the tension between the natural world’s transience and the relative permanence of the work of art. Claude Monet’s Grainstack series, referenced in Chapter 2, documents this change while Durer’s The Large Turf (fig. 47) documents the fertile density of a summer pasture in a manner that is more scientifically objective than subjective. Discuss the role the visual arts has played in recording events, people, places, and things...like a lump of grass.

5. Representing Everyday Life
If life is a fleeting event, daily experiences in life are even more so. A traditional theme of art is capturing these experiences, especially the more pleasant ones in a form of painting called genre painting. Renoir’s Luncheon of the Boating Party (fig. 57) depicts an afternoon gathering on a restaurant terrace. Ask students to think about how they document the pleasantries of their life with snapshots or video footage.

6. The Aesthetics of Art in Non-Western Cultures: Making Things and Creating Space
Utilitarian objects created by Native American, African, Oceanic and Asian cultures represent the basic human desire to make the mundane beautiful and pleasing to the eye. Yet, in many cultures the word ‘art’ does not exist. Discuss philosophies of aesthetics and creative processes as they relate to non-western cultures. Consider aboriginal dreamings, Native American sand paintings, and the works featured during this discussion in the chapter, including Kane Kwei’s, *Coffin Orange in the Shape of a Cocoa Pod*, (fig. 59) and the *Karaori* kimono (fig. 61) in your discussion.

7. **Representing the Spiritual**

   Spiritual understanding is a realm of comprehension that is unique to each individual. Using visual imagery used to educate and recruit parishioners has been an historical practice as seen in the works of Matthias Grunewald, *Crucifixion* (detail) from the Isenheim Altarpiece (fig. 64) and Jan van Eyck, *God*, panel from the Ghent Altarpiece (fig. 48). Discuss the use of ‘stereotypical’ imagery in these examples of Christian art as a tool to reinforce belief systems. Compare with the work by Pedro Perez, *God* (fig. 53), created with the artist’s personal interpretation of Jesus. Debate how the power of the imagery contained within the historical and contemporary works sustains one’s spiritual belief system.

8. **Beauty is Subjective: Representing the Beautiful**

   Pablo Picasso’s *Gertrude Stein* (fig. 52) is the artist’s personal interpretation of his patron Gertrude Stein. How do students respond to this portrait of a woman? How does Picasso choose to portray Stein? *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* by Picasso is also a subjective representation of women, one that represents how deeply Picasso was affected by imagery he had seen of Iberian Masks. Have students consider our own culturally determined notion of beauty by looking at current fashion magazines.

9. **The Vanitas Tradition of Painting**

   Vanitas is a Latin word used since the Renaissance to describe the transitory nature of life. A reference to the theme may be found as far back as Biblical times: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-4, New Revised Standard Version). The term characterizes the appreciation of life’s pleasures and accomplishments joined with the awareness of their inevitable loss. The theme has long been the inspiration for some of the Western civilization’s most significant works of art, such as Philippe de Champaigne, *Still Life* (fig. 65). This 17th-century Dutch still life, with its iconographic inventory of flowers, overripe fruits, snuffed candles, skull and timepiece is exemplary of the traditional vanitas painting. Emphasize how Robert Mapplethorpe challenges that tradition with his photograph *Self-Portrait* (fig. 66), by presenting himself as a symbolic representation of death. Seemingly morbid at first, vanitas paintings play an important role in human spirituality and understanding. Discuss how this theme in art is a representation of the mind, the spiritual, and an historical record of a person. After reviewing the components of a vanitas painting, ask students to describe the impact of this theme to that of genre.
CRITICAL THINKING: More Opportunities to Think About Art

Several artworks are detailed in the Critical Thinking and Works in Progress features found in this chapter. In addition, diverse opportunities for studying these works are located on the Companion Website and Companion CD-ROM.

1. Works in Progress: Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon

Pablo Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (figs. 67-69) is a Work in Progress feature of this chapter. In this analysis, the author presents the creative process of the artist by examining several aspects of the work. In addition to examining several of the preliminary sketches Picasso created as he prepared for the finished painting, the feature describes Picasso’s research of Iberian masks and their inspiration in developing his style. The role of the conservationist is discussed while describing the x-ray process used as historians documented Picasso’s process of working.

2. Thinking about Robert Mapplethorpe’s The Parrot Tulip

In this analysis, the author discusses how this photograph of a tulip could be interpreted as either an example of vanitas tradition or an example of eroticism. This aesthetically pleasing photograph was part of the Y Portfolio, which was shown with Mapplethorpe’s controversial X Portfolio discussed earlier in the chapter. Be sure to refer to the detailed analysis of this work found in the back of the textbook, which elaborates upon and answers many of the questions posed in the reading. Present other images from these portfolios for student contemplation. As was practiced when the exhibitions of these works was on public display, offer students the option of viewing the X Portfolio. Mapplethorpe’s work is discussed again in Chapter 4 of the text and this may be an image that leads to a discussion of censorship and the Value of Art.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Direct students to their Student Study Guide when assigning Writing Assignments as the following assignments are written as instruction for the student and are contained in the Student Study Guide as they are here.

1. Preferred Theme

Have students visit an art exhibition, or peruse the textbook, and choose an artwork they particularly like, for whatever aesthetic reason, and would enjoy displaying in their home. After identifying the theme, have students write a personal reflection on why they prefer this theme in art. Have them consider who they are as a person, their hobbies, beliefs and career goals. How does their life experiences effect their choice of theme? For example, are they avid campers? Perhaps nature or genre is their preferred theme. The second half of this assignment is to have students identify a theme in art that they do not care for. Have them rationalize why works of this theme do not appeal to them, but may to another.

2. Why is Dali so Popular?
If asked to name their favorite painting, many people would pick Salvador Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (fig. 55). Have students write a brief essay explaining the popularity of Dali’s works. What are its thematic concerns? What are its aesthetic merits? What does it have in common with, for instance, Philippe de Champaigne’s *Vanitas* (fig. 65)? To view more works by Dali at the Salvador Dali Museum website: www.salvador-dali-museum.org.

3. The Aesthetics of Your Generation
One of the leading art critics of our time, Arthur C. Danto, wrote an essay at the end of the 1980’s entitled *Bad Aesthetic Times*. The essay begins: “There is an uneasy consensus in the artworld today that we are living through what …has been called ‘bad aesthetic times.’” [Painter] Roy Lichtenstein said in a recent interview: ‘There’s a lot of style, but there doesn’t seem to be much substance. The eighties don’t seem to have a soul,, do they?…And the seventies seem a kind of nonentity.” In an essay, have students answer the following questions: What kind of aesthetic times are we in now? Make a list of ten adjectives that you would use to describe the aesthetics of our culture. Then, write a one or two sentence description of why you chose that word.

4. Full Identification
Have students research another masterpiece of art and find out how art historians have identified specific qualities of the piece through carbon dating, x-rays and so on. Have them include a discussion of the benefits of completely collecting data on specific works in order to further understand the culture that produced them. Also discuss the process of revealing the artist’s mistakes or preliminary works that they did not want exposed. Is such knowledge necessary?

5. The Visualization of Beauty
Have students identify several historical works of art, throughout a range of time, that depict the female and male bodies. Then, have them identify common contemporary images of men and women as seen in advertisements and in contemporary figurative artworks. How do they think the historical works influenced cultural norms of the ideal body for the civilization that created them? Do they think standards of the ideal body changed so much in history?

HANDS-ON PROJECTS
*Direct students to their Student Study Guide when assigning Hands-On Projects as the following assignments are written as instruction for the student and are contained in the guide as they are here. For additional project ideas, remember to investigate the Hands-On Projects found on the Companion Website.*

1. Aesthetic Presentation of a Roll of Toilet Paper
A good way to begin to come to grips with the idea of the aesthetic is to consider to what degree, if any, various everyday items in your own environment are treated aesthetically. For instance, a roll of plain white toilet paper is simply functional, but one decorated with floral patterns is more aesthetic. Have students consider their impressions of a hotel
when the toilet paper end is folded by housekeeping. How does this simple action elevate the aesthetics of this very mundane object and alter your perception of the hotel? What other objects, when treated aesthetically, become more pleasing? Have students find ten everyday, functional items in their environment and describe their aesthetic qualities.

2. My Family Genre
Have students color a picture of your family with crayons, just as they did as a child. Have them consider the theme of genre and depict the group participating in an activity that they loved as a child. Upon completion, have students describe how the recording of this genre event acted as an historical documentation, was a pleasurable memory, and was a record of their culture.

3. My Surreal Family
Then, have students re-create their family portrait with a twist. Assign to them another drawing that is similar to Salvador Dali’s *Persistence of Memory* and portray their family memory as a surreal event.

RESOURCES

*A World of Art* Companion Website:
Remember to direct students to *A World of Art* companion website (www.prenhall.com/sayre) to help further their understanding of the materials discussed in this chapter with ideas for completing hands-on projects and exercises. Self-testing materials are also available and offer students the opportunity to evaluate their understanding of the chapter materials in a variety of formats. In addition, links to websites featuring contemporary artists, and museum and gallery exhibitions related to this chapter will enhance discussion and comprehension. Links for this chapter include:

**CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS:** Jorn Utzon is featured at an extraordinary site called *Great Buildings Online*—"a gateway to architecture from around the world and across history. *Great Buildings Online* documents hundreds of buildings and leading architects with 3D models, photographic images and architectural drawings, plus commentaries, bibliographies, and web links, for famous designers and structures of all kinds." Jorn Utzon is cited in your book for his remarkable Sydney Opera House (fig. 63). At this site, you'll be able to see a larger detail of the opera house, as well as other Utzon buildings.

**GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS:** Picasso's Homepage is worth a visit. In addition to informative text and biographical materials, you can view an extensive collection of images painted throughout his career. Viewing the work of this prolific artist, one begins to understand how Picasso helped to shape the direction of all twentieth century art.
Other Suggested Websites:

Claude Monet’s art and life are showcased at www.giverny.org.

Kane Kwei’s fantasy coffins are on view at www.artsonthepoint.com/fantasy_coffins/creators.html.

The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, America's first art museum dedicated to the work of a woman artist of international stature showcases the work, including themes of nature at www.tfaoi.com/okeefe/okeefe.htm


Beauty information and all its cultural ramifications is provided at http://www.beautyworlds.com/ or http://www.cichon.de/ideal-beauty/

Vanitas and the contemporary interpretations of this theme is presented at www.vmfa.state.va.us/vanitas.html

Suggested Videos:

Videos and other resources are available for purchase through any of the distributors listed in the Resources section of this manual.

Wild Wheels: Art Cars (aesthetics and the creative process)
America’s Weirdest Homes (aesthetics and the creative process)
Pieces of the Past (the authentication of ancient art by archaeologists and art historians)
Sandpainting: Navajo (non-western aesthetics)
African Art (non-western aesthetics)
Claude Monet: Portrait of an Artist
Impressionists on the Seine (Monet, Pissarro, Manet, Renoir)
Norman Rockwell, Painting America (genre)
The Definitive Dali (Surrealism)
John James Audubon (nature/birds)
Mary Cassatt (genre; Impressionism)
Pablo Picasso: A Primitive Soul (biography)
They Drew Fire: Combat Artists of WWII (genre/politics)