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Session: Teaching with Media: Pedagogical Approaches to Including Materials from Popular Culture and the Arts in Jewish Studies

Teaching Modern Jewish Art

In the past, teaching art history was a cumbersome task. For each class lecture I had to check out relevant slides from the slide library, lug around slide trays with my carefully chosen and placed slides, and during lectures hope that slides did not get jammed and that a projector bulb did not burn out in the middle of class. With the advent of PowerPoint my job has become much easier. The initial design of each PowerPoint lecture certainly takes time – from finding appropriate images to organizing them in a way that will best convey the ideas I am trying to share about the art. Now, once the PowerPoint presentation is made, the bread and butter of my lecture is done indefinitely.

While locating canonical art history images for classroom presentations, like Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, for example, is easily accomplished with a web search, this is not the case for more obscure artworks – and many Jewish images fall into this category. For Jewish art that is somewhat mainstream (e.g., Marc Rothko, Ben Shahn), I rely on ArtStor.

ArtStor is a digital library of more than one million images in the arts, architecture, and humanities, with a suite of software tools to view, present, and manage images for research and pedagogical purposes. ArtStor is available by subscription to nonprofit organizations. Most universities with Art Departments subscribe to ArtStor, which is available through the school's library. Site licenses to ArtStor allow unlimited number of simultaneous users to access the digital library, both onsite and remotely via username and password. Once logged in to ArtStor, the site is easy to navigate - akin to a book search in the library catalog. In other words, by

artist's name, artwork's name, or even a subject. For example, if I am interested in showing images of the Sacrifice of Isaac I can type the subject in the search field and relevant paintings, sculpture, and other media will appear in thumbnail form. Clicking on those images will reveal larger views as well as detailed information about the images: size, date made, current location, and so forth.

ArtStor is an excellent resource and over 90% of the time meets my needs in the more standard art history courses that I teach: "American Visual Culture," "Twentieth-Century Art," and others of that ilk. Only about 25% of the time does ArtStor have images for my Jewish art courses, an area of study that - unfortunately - still falls out of the master narrative of the discipline. Accordingly, I need to plan all Jewish art lectures in advance to give the media services department at my university time to scan needed images from books. I have my own scanner as well, so in a pinch I scan images that I need at the last minute - provided I have the appropriate books containing those images checked out of the library or in my own personal library. Those images are typically scanned at 100 dots per inch so that they are viewed clearly and also so that they do not make the PowerPoint presentation too cumbersome.

To give you a sense of what a typical Art History PowerPoint presentation looks like I would like to share a very basic one for an introductory course on Jewish Art. This lecture introduces The School of Paris, an umbrella term indicating a group of immigrant artists in the early decades of the twentieth century, with a modernist bent in the common base of Paris, most of whom were Jewish. I use the same PowerPoint format throughout the semester, beginning with a page indicating the lecture's title (fig. 1). Following the title are the images that I am speaking about that day, either with a single painting or sculpture or a comparative slide - always labeled the first time an image is shown. For example, here you see a nude by Amedeo

Modigliani (fig. 2) and then the next slide shows a sculpture by him (fig. 3). If I want to discuss Modigliani's highly individual and characteristic use of elongated forms and how that manifests in different media then I would show the images side by side (fig. 4). By offering a comparison, a hallmark of art history pedagogy, my students can better see how Modigliani reduced the face to its essence: notice the symmetrical almond-shaped eyes, elongated nose ridge, and tiny pursed lips. Neither the painting nor the carved sculpture portray a sitter, but rather point towards the exquisitely simplified likenesses that became Modigliani's hallmark during the teens. Once my students better understand Modigliani's form and style – which includes a discussion of the artist's exotic sources such as ancient Egyptian and modern African carvings – then we continue to look at the images but also contextualize them. In other words, how did the artist come to create the work(s)? What meaning does this object convey? Do these images tell us something about the artist's Jewish identity? If so, what? What historical, cultural or social forces shaped this work? How does this art fit into the artist's body of work as a whole?

All PowerPoint lectures for my courses are posted for study for the students on Blackboard, accessible through the University Library website. When slide lectures were the norm I was confined to teaching images in the assigned books because otherwise students would not be able to see and study the discussed art outside of class. PowerPoint lectures have opened up my teaching to a much wider array of images because students now can access anything I teach on Blackboard. This is essential for the study of Jewish art because there is no in print, university-level book that offers a discussion of Jewish art. I am happy to report that this unfortunate state of affairs will be rectified this May, at least for modern Jewish art, with the publication of my coauthored book, with Larry Silver: *Jewish Art: A Modern History* (Reaktion Books, 2011).

There are definitely logistical challenges to working with the visual. For example, I cannot teach in just any classroom, and at my school, for example, only about half include projectors and screens. Moreover, typically art history classrooms are windowless and have dimmers on the lights so that images can be seen and students can still take notes (thus an average classroom might not work). As I indicated, Blackboard is essential to my students' success, but some complain that they cannot access the material. Typically this is because they do not understand how to navigate the library website, and so I do spend one of the early days of the semester helping students learn to maneuver the library system. Other students do not have computers at home and do not take advantage of the university computer labs as often as they should. This problem, though, affects all of the students' courses, not just ones that require access to Blackboard.

Considering art history deals with the visual, without the material of study to engage with, students blindly grope in the dark. Thus, creating PowerPoint presentations to accompany lectures is essential to teaching in the field as a whole and Jewish art. In 2001, the first time I taught Jewish art, I was forced to put photocopies of all the images I wanted the students to know on reserve at the library, accompanied by a patchwork coursepack of articles. In the past decade the field of Jewish art has garnered greater acceptance in part, I think, because it can be taught in the classroom more effectively due to the accessibility of images on the internet and the increasing interdisciplinarity of Jewish Studies compared to when I first started teaching.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that most art historians at some point describe fully and accurately their objects of study in order to communicate their ideas about them. Indeed, art historians scrutinize objects and look carefully. Think of the object as a series of decisions that an artist made. An art historian's job is to figure out and describe, explain, and interpret those

decisions and why the artist may have made them, then interrogate what the object may mean.

Art cannot be reduced to illustrations to make a point. That is not art history. Art works must be discussed in a variety of ways including their formal and stylistic characteristics, the cultural and social conditions in which they were produced, and the meanings that have been and can be interpreted from them. Studying art also requires that we interrogate the changing ways in which art is viewed and discussed over time.