

# Cultivating Habits of Mind in Qualitative Research Through Intensified Engagement with Art in Museums

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Qualitative  
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## Abstract

Research education is a central component of doctoral programs. Recognizing the sophistication and the complexity of the Ph.D./Ed.D. degrees, doctoral students are heavily screened based on their ability to do well in traditional courses. However, the conduct of dissertation requires a major leap beyond that tested ability. The act of doing research in any field involves fresh perception, re-conceptualization, a deepening of interpretation and understanding, and communication. Processes that are rarely attended to in schools, it rests upon research educators to attend to their cultivation. Focusing on how these processes can be addressed in the teaching of research, I discuss the important and unexamined contributions that intensified engagement with artwork can offer to research education.

**Key Words:** Art Education; Experiential Learning; Museums;  
Qualitative Research methodology

Research education is a central component of doctoral programs. Due to the sophistication and complexity of Ph.D./Ed.D. degrees, doctoral students are heavily screened based on their potential abilities to do well in traditional courses. However, conducting a dissertation requires a major leap beyond that tested ability. The act of doing research in any field involves fresh perception, re-conceptualization, a deepening of interpretation and understanding, and communication. Because these processes are rarely attended to in schools, it rests upon research educators to attend to their cultivation (Bresler, 2009). Focusing on how these processes can be addressed in the teaching of research, I discuss the important and heretofore unexamined contributions that intensified engagement with artwork can offer to research education.

Given the out-reaching nature of research (unlike the typically self-contained nature of courses), students need to situate their work in the larger research literature and—equally important—to address that world in communicating their research. This calls for a change of worldview: from satisfying their teachers' typically well-defined criteria to meeting broader world-class criteria of research merit, trespassing the class setting and the specific teacher, to include the broader scholarly and practitioner communities with which we engage in public presentations and publications.

The focus on fresh perception and original interpretation necessitates new intellectual and affective competencies. In a doctoral program students move from a relatively passive role of acquiring a defined body of knowledge and set of skills to generating new knowledge, initiating projects, and venturing beyond the boundaries of the safe and chartered. Accordingly, undertaking research requires not only traditional school intelligence and discipline but also openness to re-conceptualize, take risks, and deal with complexity. Research education aims to cultivate a life-long commitment to continuously develop and expand. This process entails a strong intrinsic motivation in order to persist when the answer is not evident, to sustain a long and unpredictable research journey.

How do we teach those qualities—qualities that define the heart of the conduct of qualitative research yet are so elusive, defying recipes and readymade prescriptions? These qualities are about attitudes and relationships, cultivated through experiential learning. Experiential learning

theory is based on the demonstrated value of active, personal, and direct experiences in contrast to vicarious experience of watching others or reading about something (Kolb, 1984).<sup>1</sup> Beyond providing rigorous, thought-provoking reading materials and assignments that target comprehension and an engaged processing of readings and theories, we research educators need to facilitate experiences that promote these qualities, essential as they are for responsive inquiry.

### ***Connections with Research***

Researchers' abilities to form connections and to invite others' connections is key to a research methodology that aims at *verstehen*, understanding (e.g., van Manen, 1990; von Wright, 1971). One level of connections is between the student-researcher's empirical research and the existing body of established theories, aiming to expand and deepen these theories. At a more fundamental level are the connections between knowledge "out there" (existing theories as well as data) and personal knowledge—beliefs, subjectivities, and "folk theories" (Bruner, 1996). A third type of connection, supported by the first two, involves the communication of research to audiences.

While my qualitative courses aim to provide broad knowledge of the field and its research methods, it is the students' ability to connect—with ideas, with the phenomena they study, and with their own values and situated perspectives—that I regard as key to becoming a researcher. Indeed, the most basic aspect of research (and, curiously, the one least addressed in textbooks) that facilitates and sets in motion everything else is the process of fresh meaning making: getting connected to one's data, to an issue, to a setting, to a conceptual framework. Connection motivates the development of all skills and interpretations. Connection enables responsiveness in attending to what is encountered, challenging researchers' pre-conceived notions, reconsidering what questions to probe in the face of emerging

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on experiential learning has focused on articulating the process of moving dialectically between the modes of action and reflection (Schon, 1983). This interplay of doing and thinking allows educators, scientists, artists, business people, and researchers to interpret the outcome of their decisions and actions and make changes.

issues. These connections and the new understandings they bring support the communication to audiences, a process that is similar to creation in the arts (Bresler, 2006a).

Connections integrate the affective and cognitive. When designing a syllabus, I select course materials, an eclectic mixture of classics and state-of-the-art readings, for their potential to illuminate significant theoretical and practical issues—and also for their communicative and emotive power. In observations of real-life phenomena, students are asked to attend to data that include diverse forms of representation (e.g., visuals, sound, kinesthetics). They are required to acquire knowledge from non-textual sources and to develop the ability to perceive, interpret, and evaluate complex ideas, interactions, and patterns in a diversity of forms of human expression. These are the very abilities they will need as practicing researchers in the social sciences.

### ***Habits of Mind***

In their study of the impact of learning opportunities in the art curriculum on students' academic learning and general attitudes, Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles (1999) found a variety of skills and dispositions associated with the arts. They conceptualized these competencies as *habits of mind*, the interweaving of intuitive, practical, and logical modes of thought that characterize arts learning. My own discussion of research, whose processes are inspired by engagement with art, is conceptualized in the same spirit. Teaching research is not merely about transmission. It is also not about a simple transfer of artistic skills to research. Rather, the focus is on the cultivation of affective, cognitive, and embodied ways of doing and being in a qualitative research context. These habits of mind are prevalent in the arts.

The contributions of artistry to research are not self-evident. Research in arts education has traditionally followed the worldviews, texts, and tools of the social sciences. As have our colleagues in other scholarly disciplines, we in arts education have typically privileged the numerical and the textual (Bresler, 2006a). This was particularly true at the beginning of research in arts education, in the first part of the 20th century, when the discipline parents were psychology and philosophy. We note a change in the last thirty years, with the expansion of discipline parents to anthropology, and with the

emerging area of arts-based inquiry (e.g., Barone & Eisner, 2006; Bresler, 2006b; Cahnmann & Siegesmund, 2008; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Knowles & Cole, 2007; Sullivan, 2005). Examining the ways in which the arts provide rich and powerful models for perception, conceptualization, and engagement for both audiences and artists, I highlight their potential to cultivate the processes of qualitative research in the social sciences, in general, and in arts education, in particular. In the remainder of this paper I discuss engagement with artworks in museums for developing the skills of observation, identifying relevant contexts, and generating further inquiry, thus cultivating habits of mind for the conduct of qualitative inquiry. These ideas are presented not as prescriptions to follow but as invitations from which readers should feel welcome to generate their own activities and experiences.

## Qualitative Research Course: Context and Background

I have been teaching qualitative research methods<sup>2</sup> for doctoral students at the University of Illinois since 1991.<sup>3</sup> My students come from various disciplines: I have counted in my qualitative research courses students from seventeen different departments, including educational psychology, educational policy studies, library and information science, psychology, social work, communication, kinesiology, art, and music education.

My typical introductory qualitative research course overviews fundamental assumptions of the post-modern paradigm, for example, assumptions about the inherent contextuality and multiplicity of *truth* in the social sciences; the inevitable *situatedness* of the researcher; and the necessity for new research *criteria* that these two basic assumptions generate (e.g., Lincoln and Guba, 1985.) We discuss shared concerns of qualitative research and the more traditional positivist worldview (for example, the concern with the applicability of findings) and the different responses within these worldviews (generalizability in quantitative versus

<sup>2</sup> My two teaching areas are qualitative research and arts education.

<sup>3</sup> On occasion, I have also taught intense mini-courses on research in other countries, including Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Spain, and the Netherlands.

transferability in qualitative), given the different assumptions of the two paradigms (objective truth versus multiple truths). We then discuss and practice the use of research methods appropriate to qualitative goals, focusing on in-depth observations and semi-structured interviews. Students are asked to do “mini exercises” to practice those techniques in situations that are relevant to them.

A course can be viewed as an *occasion* rather than as a tool:<sup>4</sup> research courses, then, can be viewed as occasions for students to engage in developing skills of observation, attending to contexts that shape the understanding of cases, cultivating curiosities that will generate further questions—all toward deepening skills in meaning making and interpretation. Beyond the explicit contents, teaching imparts implicit messages, cultivating habits of mind. In teaching qualitative courses, the habit of mind is one that juxtaposes a critical detachment with empathic connection (Bresler, 2009). These habits of attentive, nuanced observing and conceptualizing need to be facilitated through theories and skills, as well as through experiences.

Klemp et al. (2008) suggest that learning was adapted in modern America as a term for what individuals only *sometimes* do—with a narrow range of materials in a narrow range of contexts. For Dewey—and for the jazz community, note Klemp et al.—learning is more ubiquitous and continual. This would be a non-controversial position if learning were not taken, and mis-taken, to be a thing—an entity, and a measurable one—rather than something people must do constantly in the course of getting their lives to “sum up and carry forward” (2008, 5). Sharing this belief about the ubiquity of learning, I integrate research experiences that aim to facilitate and intensify students’ explorations.

To that effect, I provide students with cumulative occasions, structured to reflect on dissonance (for example, examining the small dissonances of daily life generated by diverse cultural backgrounds which, in my own experience, are manifested in different types of eye contact, body language, and discursive styles, leading to comic “faux pas”) and consonance (coming to understand the discrepancies). Mobilizing affect and cognition can

<sup>4</sup> Here, I am paraphrasing Tom Barone (1990), who suggested that, when used for educational purposes, a text of qualitative inquiry is better viewed as an occasion rather than as a tool.

maximize students' intellectual and emotional investments. The actual teaching, orchestrated and structured throughout the semester, strives to form "an experience" (Dewey, 1934). The operational day-to-day curriculum of the course, while based on the pre-planned *ideal* and *formal* curricula of goals and texts (Goodlad & Associates, 1979), aspires to support a dynamic interactive encounter with students. In this process, I expect students to explore and traverse their own intellectual and emotional landscapes, the research conducted "outside" in the world—as well as the search and research conducted "inside," within their selves. It is this sense of participation, at the heart of engagement with the arts, of research, and, I believe, of all effective learning, that I hope to cultivate in myself and in my students.

## Research Education: Tales from the Field

In this section I discuss one set of activities that I use to facilitate the development of students' observation skills; help them generate issues and conceptualizations, identify contexts, and develop further questions for inquiry; and ultimately promote a deeper connection to what they study. Encouraging students to form an intensified relationship with what they study, getting beyond their habitual rapid ways of seeing and hearing, in the same ways they will do with their own research projects (as well as with scholarly texts, theories, and others' research) is key to becoming a qualitative researcher. I structure a visit to the campus art museum, asking students to choose two artworks—objects with well-defined, small-scale boundaries. The choice of paintings, sculptures, or installations, compared to the ever-moving temporal world of music, drama, and dance, implies stability of qualities.<sup>5</sup> The assignment of two artworks, one that they find appealing, that is, that they connect with easily, and another one that they don't, is meant to facilitate two different types of journeys. I ask students to spend at least 30–40 minutes with each artwork. This, I explain, is not an assignment to prove their knowledge in art history but is rather an assignment about

<sup>5</sup> Musicologist David Burrows has noted that where sight gives us physical entities, the heard world is phenomenally evanescent, relentlessly moving, ever changing (Burrows, 1990). For a discussion of temporality and stability in research, see Bresler, 2005.



perceiving: observing, describing in detail, aiming to interpret in a fresh way. Perception and description lead to the more abstracted activities of deepened interpretation and openness to emerging themes and issues. Students identify their curiosities and come up with queries and directions to further their understanding and knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Aiming to cultivate a space for inquiry, I ask students to generate a list of questions addressed to various people situated differently in relation to the artwork: for example, the artist; the person who first bought the work; the curator in the museum; another museum visitor of different age, gender, ethnicity. The exercise serves as a prologue to a subsequent exercise in the course where students practice the craft and art of interviewing. To expand their horizons beyond the specific case, I ask students to identify relevant contextual information: What else would they need to know to better understand and relate with the artwork? Where will they search for this information? Useful contexts for the artwork range from general history and art history to local community contexts.

In observing their unfolding engagement with the artwork and aiming to cultivate appreciation for prolonged engagement, I ask students to record how long they stayed with each artwork—and how the first 10 minutes were different from the last 10 minutes. I am often amazed by the commitment, concentration, and depth of insights that students bring to the assignment. Some students stay beyond the allotted time. The journey with the non-appealing artwork, a journey whose thrust is on inquiry rather than evaluation, can illuminate how we form relationships with phenomena that trigger negative emotions (Bresler, in press). Given that these phenomena are part of qualitative research (reflecting the evaluative mind), an inquisitive observation of this encounter aims to provide a space to reflect and expand current perspectives. Most students, but not all, find that this sustained engagement expands their awareness and understanding of their values and subjectivities (Peshkin, 1994).

A research endeavor requires methodological awareness for the cultivation of empathy within distance and responsiveness to the artwork

<sup>6</sup> Nobel Prize-winner Naguib Mahfouz suggests that “You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions” (in Gelb, 1999, workbook p. 2).



rather than to an a-priori theory. Specifically I ask students to reflect on their assumptions regarding the nature of the realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the examined event (sometimes addressing “objective reality,” for example, location of the work and its physical dimensions; sometimes “perceived reality,” depending on where students are physically situated in relation to the event, in terms of their artistic background, etc.; sometimes the ethnographic “constructed realities” that focus on shared social and cultural values interpreting behavior and etiquette; sometimes the private phenomenological “created realities” involving individual, personal experience). Students reflect on the extent to which they have been attentive and receptive to multiple perspectives, particularly those different from their own, and what that multiplicity meant for their understanding of the event.

Given the centrality of the “researcher instrument,” I ask them to examine what values and lenses they brought to their observations. What surprised them in listening to others? Were they changed in any way by the encounter? I ask them to identify emotions triggered in the interaction and to note any shifts of understandings, cognitive and affective. I ask them to observe when they approach the event as a connoisseur, that is, as an expert, and when they adopt an anthropological stance of an uninformed but interested outsider, with its open space to see freshly. I ask them to note empathic relationship with their interviewers as well as hindrances to empathy. In this journey of research, students keep on-going logs where they record their evolving interactions and reflections.

The following section consists of excerpts from three doctoral students at the University of Illinois in the Department of Educational Organization and Leadership. In choosing the excerpts, I focused on descriptions and interpretations; questions for the artists, the curator, and another person of choice; and identification of contexts. I did not try to summarize: The point of these papers is to show the level of detail and complexity captured in this short assignment. While each student has their unique voice, in the selection for this paper, I aimed for diversity of artworks and styles; and different types of dialogue between student and artwork.

## **A Visit to the Krannert Art Museum: Observations, Puzzlements, and Interpretations**

*By Steve Gump*

### **A Preliminary Postscript**

As I had predicted, I found the few hours we spent in the Krannert Art Museum on Tuesday to be most enjoyable. Most interesting to me, perhaps, was the wide variety of approaches taken to selecting, viewing, and interpreting the numerous pieces discussed. The approaches that I either did not consider or did not use stand out in my mind: June (for example), mentioned “living with the piece” she had selected; and I found that several other classmates used similar strategies. Many others selected pieces because of some sense of personal connection, even telling the stories of these connections or imagining stories of their own about the artists and the situations behind the creation of the pieces. Yasmin, for example, found herself “in the image”; and Traci imagined the physicality of the woman in the portrait she selected, even going so far as to try sitting in the woman’s position to understand how it must have felt for the woman who was painted. Susan considered her total experience with the installation piece she chose, even mentioning how she was able to block out the background noises of other exhibits that came and went, cyclically, as she studied her piece. In contrast to everyone who employed these approaches, I remained rather “detached” from the two pieces I selected and did not pay much attention to my *being* in relation to the works.

### **Preparing**

Friday, September 16, 2005: A cool, grey, overcast day. . . . I brought with me a clipboard, a pen, plenty of paper, and the assignment for CI 509. (I forgot the tape measure I had intended to bring along.) I wanted to identify two artworks efficiently so as to have ample time to spend with each piece. I made my task easier by deciding in advance to focus on two flat (two-dimensional), fixed artworks; and I wished to avoid photographs or computer-generated art.

## ***Touring and Deciding***

I wandered among the works on the ground floor for over 45 minutes. . . . Eventually I settled on my two works. Both are paintings; both were produced in the 20th century. I immediately “liked” the picture in the African collection.

## ***Scrutinizing a Work of African Art***

Here is what the first four lines of the identification label to the right of my first piece, acquired by the Krannert Museum in 1971, say:

*Ethiopian Orthodox Processional, Ethiopia, Goggiam Province, Pigment on vellum, Mid 20th C*

As I focused on the *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional* piece, I realized at once that I had forgotten my tape measure. Nonetheless, I jotted down the following physical descriptors in my notes:

Framed: approximately 17" wide by 13" tall

Natural wood frame: smooth, flat, polished, honey-maple finish; a little over 1" wide; 1/2" to 3/4" deep

Glass: is not non-glare

Two levels of matting: bisque on outside (approximately 1" wide); sage on inside (approximately 1/4" wide)

The piece is one of three that form a grouping—a colorful island—between two display cases that jut out like peninsulas (and which are filled primarily with less colorful objects). The piece above *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional*, perhaps by the same artist (definitely in the same style, and also on vellum), is *St. George Slaying the Dragon*; it is framed and matted identically, but its orientation is different (in that it is taller than it is wide—approximately 13" wide by 17" tall). To the right of these two pieces is a third, much larger piece: *The Story of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon*. . . .

Other contextual comments: The lighting is good. The picture hangs about 3 to 3½ feet off the floor. The wall is a pleasant shade of light blue. Beneath the triad of framed images is an ugly, black-and-chrome electrical outlet that, now that I have noticed it, seems to ruin the composition of the space.

Now to the image itself: What drew me to this piece initially were its vibrant, primary colors. I can practically name all the shades of pigment used: green, blue, orange, yellow, black, gold, white, brown, and grey. The name (provided by the artist? the curator? the original owner?), *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional*, is purely descriptive, since the picture shows a procession, before a crowd of onlookers, of three priests (in profile), each of whom carries an ornate gold-colored cross in his left hand and an equally ornate gold thurible (incense burner) in his left hand. The three men are equally spaced, with one at the left side of the image, one in the middle, and one at the right side of the image. The image itself is approximately 12" wide and 8" tall; the vellum on which it has been painted/inked is neutral-colored (beige).

Between the three priests are people who apparently make up the crowd that is watching the procession. Eight individuals are clearly identifiable; all but two face forward, intently peering out at the viewer (though, of course, within the image, they are watching the procession in front of them). At least six more heads are visible in the "background." The members of the crowd are a bit shorter than the priests (who are about 7" tall); but there is not much perspective—in the western sense—in this image at all. It is a very flat image, with little sense of depth or distance.

The priests wear three (visible) layers of ornate priestly garb: blue, green, and orange. The three are dressed with similar layers, but the colorings are different (with the green and blue layers reversed for one of the priests). They wear gold/brown head coverings and white headdresses. (The other people in the image wear no head coverings.) In my notes, I made a list of "threes" in the image: three umbrellas (to block the sun) held by members of the crowd (two orange, one green); three priests; three eyes, belonging to the priests (since only profiles are seen); three crosses (each is different); three thuribles (each with three chains).

The longer I stay with this image, the more detail I can pick out. There is no visible artist signature on the piece. There are, however, distinct black squiggles at the backs of each priest's headdress. What are these marks? Since I had earlier studied *The Story of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon*, which is a cartoon-like set of framed sequential images with accompanying text, I eventually recognized the squiggles to be text. (What type of script, though, I did not know.) I jotted the marks down in my notes and, after returning home, searched for "Ethiopian alphabet" on the Internet. To my surprise, perhaps, I found a page (<http://www.libraries.wvu.edu/delany/alpha.gif>) that provided an image of the "Old Original Ethiopian Alphabet."

After examining the picture for approximately 20 minutes, I realized that the picture has *sound*. I was quite surprised when I made this (strange) realization. I noticed, first, that the mouths of the priests are agape. (In comparison, the mouths of the people in the crowd are closed; they are simply drawn as lines.) Therefore, the priests must be chanting or singing. And one of the crowd members is holding a gold-colored bell, though the bell is in a rather static position. (In other words, it is not easily clear as to whether the bell has been recently tolled.)

I then realized that it is difficult to tell the "ethnicity" of the people in the image. The eyes of the priests and crowd-members alike are almost Egyptian: As most of the rest of the picture, the facial features are very simply drawn. . . .

In summary, *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional* is a very flat, full, colorful, vivid, clean image. I am reminded of European illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. The representation of people is relatively simple (yet effective); and only the slightest bit of shading is used to show folds in the robes, headdresses, and umbrellas. In my eyes, this work is a "beautiful" piece. I spent over 45 minutes under its gaze.

### **Puzzling: Questions to Ask**

Some questions [selected by Liora] for the artist of Ethiopian Orthodox Processional are as follows:

- Who are (were) you? Where and when were you born? What is your name? Are you male or female? Are you still alive? Do you still create art like this?
- Where did you learn your art? Were other people in your family artistic? What particular artistic conventions or traditions were you following as you created this piece?
- How old were you when you created this image? What were you thinking about at that time in your life? What does (did) the Christian symbolism in the image mean to you personally? Did you include three priests (and crosses and umbrellas) on purpose?
- Have you seen a procession like this one before you painted this piece? If not, from where did you get your inspiration?
- Where did you create this piece? Where did you get your raw materials? How much did the supplies cost? Do you think the supplies were expensive?
- How long did it take to make this image? What were the various stages of the process? How long did these stages take?
- Is your name anywhere on the artwork? If so, where? If not, why not?
- Are you proud of this piece? Is it one of your best works? If so, why? If not, why not?

Some questions [selected] for the person who first acquired *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional*:

- When, how, and from where did you acquire this piece? Did you buy it? If so, how much did you pay for it? (Or do you remember how much you paid for it?) Did you buy it directly from the artist or from an art dealer? Were you given it as a gift?
- Why did you acquire this piece? What attracted you to it? Did you buy it for yourself or for someone else?
- How did you use this piece? Where did you put it? How often did you look at it or see it?
- Did you have the piece framed, or was it already framed when you acquired it?

- Do you know much (or anything) about the history of this piece (e.g., why it was created, when it was created, whether it was intended to be sold/used as “art,” etc.)? Do you care about these things?
- How long did you have the piece? Who was the next person to own or have possession of this piece after it left your hands? Why did you give it up? Did (do) you miss the piece?

Some [selected] questions for the museum curator about *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional*:

- Who decided on the composition of this trio of colorful images in this particular space in the gallery? How and why did you select this particular piece for inclusion in this exhibition? Do you have other pieces similar to this one in your collection that are not on display?
- Is this a “popular” piece? Does it receive a lot of attention from museum visitors?
- How do you personally feel about this piece?

Some [selected] questions for a museum visitor about *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional*:

- What do you think of this piece? If you had to describe it in one word, what
- If someone gave you this piece, would you keep it? Where would you put it? Or would you pass it on to someone else? If so, to whom would you give it, and why?
- Do you think this looks like typical “African art”? If so, why? If not, why not

I could include many more questions, since beginning to ask questions (to me at least) always seems to make me think of other avenues to pursue (and other questions to ask). Indeed, if we are curious, we can potentially open up new areas of understanding—and can perhaps better identify our lenses, biases, and preconceptions.



## ***Considering Contextual and Archival Information***

I was pleased that the setting and staging of *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional* provides such rich contextual information. Before examining the picture itself, in fact, I decided to try to understand its context. The piece hangs in the themed room entitled “Re-Presenting African Art: One Continent/Many Worlds.” This room is the first that visitors (who enter the museum from the main entrance off the Art and Design Building) encounter. In my notes, I jotted down some of the explanatory text for the exhibit:

Although Africa has always been connected to and associated with its many local, national, and regional identities, the organization of this gallery reveals that world connectedness has a long-standing history in Africa and African diaspora communities.

Because the majority of objects on display were once used in religious and cultural contexts, the gallery space is divided into themes associated with religion. “Judeo-Christian Currents in African Art” demonstrates the presence of Christianity in Africa with a focus on Ethiopia and the Kingdom of the Kongo. . . .

There can be no single, authoritative way to create an exhibition of African art in the 21st century. Whether inspired by Islam or Christianity, Colonialism or Modernity, every object on display remains African in its structure and content.

And, from the text accompanying the “Judeo-Christian Currents in African Art” thematic division (into which my piece of interest falls):

In the fourth century A.D. the first coins in the world to bear the Christian cross were minted in what is present-day Ethiopia. Here the Axumite King Ezara, who introduced his people to Christianity, was the first to institutionalize Christianity in east Africa.

## ***Reflecting on the Entire Process***

I am looking forward to the museum presentations by other students; but I am also looking forward to being able to spend a few more moments with the pieces that I selected for this project. Did anyone else in the class choose the same pieces as I? I hope so, as I am sure my understandings of either piece could benefit from someone else's perspectives.

One unanticipated benefit of this project, however, was a heightened awareness along other lines. I altered my evening running path a little over a week ago to include sections of Devonshire Drive in Champaign. The night after I had written up my observation notes for *Ethiopian Orthodox Processional*, however, I realized that a Greek Orthodox Church was along my new path! I had run by the very spot at least five or six times without ever having noticed either the building or its sign before. (Now it seems surprisingly difficult to miss.) At once, I felt as if I were living the metaphor that you described in your "What Musicianship Can Teach Educational Research" article (2005): While I ran, I was *practicing*; but I was also *performing* the observational skills that I had exercised during my visit to the Krannert Art Museum last Friday afternoon. I shall try to remain alert, since the world is a much more interesting place if we keep our eyes open to the details that surround us.

The next excerpt represents a very different choice of artwork, a different type of voice, and processes of connection and dialogue.

## **Painting: Neroccio Di Landi's *Madonna and Child* (1447-1500)**

***By Elizabeth A. Yacobi***

As I walked into the Krannert museum, I had no calculated piece of art that I would select for an observation piece. I scanned two floors of various pieces of art only to be drawn back to one painting that I had seen as I first entered the museum. I passed by it initially because I thought I needed to look at more art pieces before making a selection. Perhaps it was the fact that I had a conversation about my mother prior to entering the museum with the teacher, or that the expressions on the faces in the painting drew me in, but

Neroccio DiLandi's painting of *Madonna and Child* drew me back to study it more closely as it made me think of my mother more deeply. The initial feeling that the painting gave me was one of loss and recognition. My mother died last winter of cancer, and I recognized how powerful the mother and child connection is from the events of that illness.

There was only one other person in the quiet, softly lit room and I recall being slightly embarrassed about picking a painting with religious content. I sat down in front of Di Landi's painting for twenty-five minutes and studied it closely for details. Any aspects about the painting were jotted down on my legal pad. The painting is an early Italian Renaissance painting that had been donated to the museum in 1943. It is not a large painting, only about the size of an 11" X 10" picture. It had been created in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and highly religious in nature. The medium is tempera on wood and the painting itself is full of brush strokes and textures as well as rich colors. It is a panel painting, with the frame resembling a church window; arc shaped and made of wood. The wood frame is old and worn, with a gold gild that has faded. The subject of the painting is the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child with two men standing behind her. All of the figures have halos behind them, and only one figure is looking directly at the observer – the Christ child. None of the subjects painted are smiling, but rather serious and thoughtful. The Virgin Mary is the predominant figure in the painting, with a rich black cloak and red gown underneath that looks as though they are velvet. While most of the painting consists of gold tones and muted browns, the red dress under the black cloak is the most striking color aspect in the painting. The dress draws the observer to the painting as it was painted in such detail with folds and texture that you almost feel that it could be velvet or velour. The Virgin Mary is looking to the left of the child, with a serene expression on her face, and is holding the child firmly, but not in a clutching fashion. The child is naked, with a knowing expression on its face. The man recessed to the left of the Virgin Mary looks to be a prominent church figure by the fact that the cloak he is wearing is rich in texture and color. He is wearing a hat that I have seen Catholic bishops wear, and is very ornate. The hat seems almost three dimensional with its jewels in the middle of it protruding off the canvas. The figure is not looking at the Virgin Mary or the child, but rather above at another

point. The second man is plain, painted in a plain brown cloak and seems to blend into the background of the painting. This bearded figure is looking to the right of the Virgin Mary and child, but not directly at the observer. There seems to be a yellowish cast to the whole painting, but very subtle as the vivid colors of the Virgin's gown and the jewels in the man's hat and robes are not diminished.

Obviously, the themes and issues of this painting is the role of the church and devotion to its teachings at this particular time in history. The mother-child connection is what spoke to me in this painting as the Virgin Mary is a primary figure and the Christ child secondary by their proportion to the canvas. The child seems older in expression than its physical body, but vulnerable, as it is naked. While all the figures have halos painted around their head, it seems as though their humanity is being emphasized, rather than their divinity. There is humanness in the Virgin Mary's expression, but it seems to go beyond the love for her child as he is not the focal point of her gaze. She looks thoughtful, but peaceful at the same time. She is not painted with jewels adorning her like the man behind her, but is not plain like the other figure in the picture.

The painting generated several questions about its origin and medium. The questions that I would want to ask the artist include: Why did you paint it? Who are the background figures? Are they saints? What is the technique that you used to get such vivid color and texture to the painting? Why is wood the canvas? What is "tempera on wood"? How long did it take to paint such a picture? What is the message you are trying to send with the picture? Who was it painted for? Is it strictly about religious devotion? What is the historical and social context of the Roman Catholic Church during this time? What is your life background? Why did you paint the Virgin Mary in the striking red gown?

The questions for the curator of the museum include: Why this painting? What makes it different from any other renderings of the "Madonna and Child"? Why was it put into the room that it is hanging in? What is its significance? Is it content, or technique? What about the donors of the painting? How did they come to acquire this painting from Italy?

Additionally, I think it would be beneficial to get impressions about the painting from someone who is not of a Christian background, and get their perspective on the work itself. The questions I would ask that person would include: What do you think the painting is about? What is it saying to you? Why do you think its hanging in a museum? What is its significance to the understanding of art?

In order to understand the painting better, I would have to research the historical and social background of the church at that time and the impact that it would have on the artist. To find answers for my questions, I would start with electronic databases and resources on the web to find out about the artist, Neroccio Di Landi, and the technique called “tempera on wood”. Information could be found also in books on the Italian Renaissance and from art professors, as well as the curator of the museum. I would want to study other works from Di Landi and compare them to this one as well as to other pieces like it to identify similarities or differences to give me clues about the significance of this piece of work. I could access the catalogs of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, and the National Art Gallery to view images of similar pieces of work in order to gather this information.

As I stated earlier, as an observer and interpreter, this painting drew me in as thoughts of my mother were in the forefront of my mind. The painting was more personal in nature as I am a Roman Catholic (although I do not practice my religion as I was taught), and my mother had religious painting and statues all around our house in my childhood. She was an extremely religious woman and had a great deal of faith in the Catholic Church. We used to joke and say that her religious paintings and statues were “tacky” as décor items in a home, but she firmly reiterated that they were necessary reminders of what was truly important in life. I was taught that the Virgin Mary accepted all events and suffering given to her by God willingly, and dedicated her life to her son. I made the connection with my mother as she dedicated her life to taking care of her son when he became ill, and did whatever was needed without complaint. This piece of art made me reflect on my own capacities as a mother, and my own spirituality and relationship to God. It did not make me comfortable, nor uncomfortable, but very introspective – and days later I found myself still thinking of the painting. Images from the painting

of the Virgin Mary's serene expression, her red gown, and the Christ child's knowing expression, mixed together with images of my mother, my brother, their suffering, and my own son, presented themselves in my thoughts for several days after the museum observation.

The third excerpt, by Sean Walsh, centers on the differences between prior visits to museum and this one, where the focus was on sustained description, interpretation, and inquiry.

### ***Krannert Art Museum Reflection***

***By Sean Walsh***

Walking into an art museum was not an abnormal experience for me, but it is certainly not something that I do frequently. When I do go to an art museum I typically find myself walking about with the thought of rapidly taking in as much as I can while quickly ascribing a like or dislike label for each item. The labels usually have to do with the way that the object strikes me initially with no real in- depth thought or reason as to why.

In this instance, my visit to the Krannert Art Museum on the University of Illinois campus was different in that I was not there on a personal visit to take in as much as I could while assigning a like or dislike label. The item that I selected as the "like" piece was a photograph by Joseph Jachna entitled "Wisconsin" from 1974. The photograph was in the section of the museum on light and shadow and was one out of a collection of four that were on display from Mr. Jachna. While I found favor with all four of the photographs in the collection, the "Wisconsin" photograph grabbed my attention with the strongest emotion.

The photograph was done in black and white with a silver gelatin finish and was matted in a crème border. The frame was made of birch and was finished in a natural color. The photograph, itself, depicted a natural setting with woods in the distance and a meadow or grassy field in the foreground. In the immediate foreground in the middle of the picture was a portion of a post of some kind. It was not clear to me whether it was a signpost, a fencepost or some other kind of post. There also seemed to be some sort

of path through the grassy area that was notable by the way that the grass was stamped down.

In researching the artist, Mr. Jachna, I found it very interesting that I selected this particular photograph. Mr. Jachna is noted with great credited for his photographic work with water and its interaction with the environment. All three of the other photos in the collection of four very obviously followed this theme. The one that I selected was the only photo that did not obviously depict water. Why was it then that I selected a photograph that did not include the artist's favorite subject matter?

### *Reflection on the Artwork*

While sitting with the photograph I asked myself questions about why I selected this particular piece. I began at the level of wondering if it had to do with the media that the artist used to express himself. Photography is an interest of mine based on my wife's family members who are professional photographers. I have grown to appreciate the work that goes into the creation and composition of a good photograph. I previously just thought of photography of taking pictures of what was happening such that the memory would live forever. Especially with today's digital technology, the motto of just "point and shoot" allows for anyone to take as many pictures as they would like and to just hope for the best. You are bound to get lucky every once in a while and get a good photo.

The difference with good photography, such as "Wisconsin", is that the artist is limiting what their intended audience is viewing. With so many options for what to photograph, the artist very obviously has to take great care with how to select the object of the photo and then find a way to best frame that object through the use of a limiting lens. So, what was it that Mr. Jachna wanted his audience to take away from the viewing of this photograph?

At first I focused in on the obvious of light and shadows, as this was the theme of this section of the room. The use of the black and white photography was an excellent choice for this. I love the use of black and white photography. Our everyday lives are filled with a palette of colors that, ironically, we have almost become blind to. This blindness may be caused by the ongoing exposure that we have to these colors such that we almost



forget to appreciate that which is so readily available to us. The use of black and white pushes us to think beyond the color. We begin to see the objects more clearly as the color is removed and we see objects not as monotonous splashes of color, but as items of beauty in their own right and form. Viewing objects in this way forces the eye to notice variations and detail that the eye might otherwise overlook.

The other reason that I love the use of black and white photography is that the blemishes that might otherwise be emphasized by color are removed. Removal of blemishes, usually highlighted when seen in color, again forces an audience viewing a picture to look at the whole composition and to not focus on the minor details. This does seem somewhat paradoxical when considering the first reason as to why I enjoy black and white photography, but somehow the two work together.

I next began to focus on just what it was that the artist decided to include in the photograph. Before I even knew the title I fell in love with the scenery based on my love for the type of natural environment that was depicted. It elicited many fond memories of my childhood and some of the experiences that I am now sharing with my own children. It brings me to a place that is about peaceful and joyful times when the hustle and bustle of daily living are far removed. It is about enjoying life and the blessing of living in God's beautiful creation. It deepens my appreciation for all that I have been blessed with. It allows me to see just how big the world is and reminds me not to just get caught up in my little corner of the world.

### **Questions To the artist (selected):**

Questions that I would ask the artist ranged from composition, to his history with water, to the technical.

- Given the endless variety of possible ways to frame the scene that was before you, how did you go about selecting this particular vantage point that you wanted your audience to see?

### **Questions for the Curator**

- Knowing Mr. Jachna's renown for work with water, why did you select a photograph that does not include water for the collection?
- Did the artwork come to you framed or unframed? If unframed, why did you select to display the artwork in the manner you did? Why the use of a crème matte and a natural wood frame?

### ***Final Reflection***

Spending time with this piece of art brought me to a new place of appreciation for the work that artists undergo when selecting and creating work. I previously viewed the artwork itself as the culmination to the artist's work and thoughts. I am now beginning to wonder if the artwork is not the end product, but the beginning to a story, thought, emotion, or idea that the artist would like his or her audience to join them in. It may not be about all persons reaching the same concluding destination that is viewable in the finite or tangible piece or art, but rather a process of sharing a common beginning that the artist allows us to be a part of.

I find myself growing in my ability to appreciate art. I am also growing in my ability to make observation beyond what is initially apparent. Leaving labels on items based on initial impression leaves a lot undiscovered. It makes me want to go back to the piece of art that I selected as the one I strongly disliked to reconsider why I selected it as such. There might be more behind the art that would lead me to a greater depth of understanding about the world around me that I have not yet considered.

### **Continuing the Experiential Journey**

Students' papers exemplify a research journey generated by this assignment. The dialogue between artwork and viewer is reminiscent of Armstrong's (2000) five aspects of encounter with artwork: 1. Noticing details; 2. Seeing relations between parts; 3. Seizing the whole; 4. The lingering caress; 5. Mutual absorption. While the first three aspects are task oriented and cognitive, the fourth and fifth aspects, allow the deepening of open-ended relationships (Bresler, 2006b).

Subsequent assignments building on the museum visit involve observations of live events and performances where we all attend the “same” event, yet attend to it differently, in both description (selecting what to attend to) and interpretation (the meanings we construct and the issues we identify). The diversity of departmental affiliations as well as enculturation to varied intellectual disciplines and the large number of international students routinely in the class guarantee a richness of perspectives, enabling us to examine the social and personal aspects of interpretation and understanding.

Just like in artwork, titles are important in synthesizing and succinctly conveying meanings. In the quest to trace emergent directions, I ask students to keep “weekly titles” for their field-notes and papers, illustrating the evolution of their thinking.

The final assignment, a methodology paper, includes reflections on design, identification of contexts, methods, the role of the situated self, and trustworthy criteria. Students note a-priori frameworks and structures versus those parts that have emerged in the process of prolonged engagement. Much like their choices of artworks, we reflect on choice of informants, what they ended up sampling, and what they did *not* sample. In discussing emerging issues and contexts we talk about which contexts were initially useful for the conduct of the study? Which contexts emerged as being useful once the study was under way? Which contexts were only minimally or not at all useful?

At different stages of the study, just as we did with the artwork, we pause to ask: What did we learn from doing this observation? I prompt them to note their surprises, to indicate an unexpected encounter, an emerging tension, an insight. In the process of reflecting on their research skills, I ask them: What aspects of the research activity were most difficult? Most frustrating? What did they learn from this methodologically? What else do they need to learn to improve their perceptions and skills?

A key purpose of this arts-based experiential approach in my qualitative course is to encourage students to think about these aspects of art and craft, providing them with the occasions to practice and reflect. There is no art without craft, writes sociologist Richard Sennett: the idea of a paper is not a

paper; the idea of a musical composition is not a musical composition (2008, 65). Craft—whether in creating art or in research—is founded on skill developed to a high degree. Skill is a trained practice. Materials are central. Just as becoming an artist involves proficiency with materials, becoming a researcher requires proficiency with the materials of research. The craftsman’s efforts to do good-quality work and shape materials depend on curiosity about the material at hand, with curiosity generating (and generated by) an interaction and a dialogue. The line between craft and art may seem to separate technique and expression, but this separation is false.

In summary, paralleling experiences in the arts, research is shaped by exploration, engagement, and craft. It moves recursively among the phases of absorption, introspection and synthesis, supported by the collaborative zone of the class and communication to peers. Mediated by cognition and lingering caress, it is inspired by the deep wish to understand. This paper makes the sense that researchers’ “inner landscapes” are central to what we do. I also suggest that as the research unfolds, in the process of absorption and mutual shaping, we also research who we may become.



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