

Religion, Art, and Visual Culture

Religious Studies/Art History 375

Instructor: Prof S Brent (Rodríguez) Plate

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Office: Room 108 Benedict Hall

Class Times: MW 2.30-3.45. Mandatory Field Trip 4-5 April

Office Hours: 10.00 - 11.00am Monday/Wednesday, or by appointment

Course Description:

Have you heard the story about the man who mistook his wife for a hat? His eyes were fine, he just lost the ability to *understand* what he was seeing. Vision is not simply a matter of "If I see it I'll believe it," it is a much more complicated experience. And if vision is complex, "religious seeing" is even more so.

This class will begin with questions such as: *How* do humans see? *What* do humans look at, and how do such images impact their religiosity? What would it mean to *see religiously*? How does vision affect the way religions are practiced and, consequently, how might an understanding of the role of vision affect the way we study religion? Furthermore, what do visual arts tell us about religions in ways that written texts cannot? And what does religion tell us about the meanings of visual arts in ways that art history cannot?

We are not merely examining the arts, but instead seeking to understand the overall process of *visuality* whereby the human activity of seeing becomes a meaningful and religious experience. We will look at the role of the arts in relation to religious traditions, but also looking some of the ways seeing itself changes from culture to culture, religion to religion. Particularly in a religious setting, the visual arts are not objects of sight distanced from the viewer. Instead, the viewer becomes a participant and intimately bound to the object looked at.

Course Materials:

Required text: *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture*, S. Brent Plate, editor
(Palgrave Press, 2002) {listed as "RAVC" below}

-Other readings will be available via Blackboard (listed as "BB" below).

Course Requirements:

I. Presence. 20% of the final grade. This grade includes attendance and participation, but entails a more general sense of bringing both body and mind to the classroom for discussions. There are readings for every day of class (listed below). You are required to have read *before* class, coming prepared to discuss the readings and images. "Presence" means not coming to class and asking what you were *supposed* to have read; "presence" means listening to the others in the classroom; "presence" means not checking your watch every 10 minutes; "presence" means, to use the title of one religious film, "being there."

This course is a seminar, and therefore relies on informed comments by students on a regular basis. The grade for "Presence" includes attendance, which is required for the regular MW meetings and the field trip to NYC. You will be graded on your ability to analyze and synthesize images and readings; on the frequency, relevance and insights of your comments; and on your ability to present your ideas coherently to the class. Presence grades will be calculated from: 1) my own notes from class sessions, in which I note who was significantly involved in discussion, and 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion.

Finally: You are expected to treat this classroom as if you were on an airline flight: That is, all electronic devices must be turned off and safely stowed away for the duration of our flights. Cell phones will not be tolerated in this classroom, and laptops are not allowed, except on particular days. A ringing phone or text messaging during class will result in that student being marked absent for the day.

II. Paper. 30% of final grade. The bare bones: This will be 1800-2000 words. We'll spend part of one class early in the term dedicated to more detail of the assignments and, as always, feel free to ask Prof Plate about this. Due before spring break.

III. Critical Response Papers (CRPs). 20% of final grade). One per week.

250-300 words. These should be focused chiefly on the *viewings in relation to the readings*. Prompts will be provided in class. CRPs should demonstrate at least one key theme or idea that you thought worthy of note. Although these are short and should not take long to compose, they should be carefully written and thoughtful. The purpose of these papers is to engage the readings and viewings and to articulate your engagement succinctly and clearly in writing. Show why the material is important, what implications it might have for the study of religion and visual culture. Be prepared to share your work in class. And because they are intended as conversation starters for the class, No late CRPs will be accepted.

Grading levels for CRPs:

- F - fails to answer the questions or address topic, expresses little accurate information, and/ or is not coherent.
- D - shows effort, but the information and explanation are weak. You need to make more references to the readings/labs.
- C - articulates what you think clearly. You need to engage in a more detailed and systematic way with the readings.
- B - explores why you think the way you do.
- A - reserved for excellence, when you use the material as a springboard for higher-level thinking. You elaborate a creative and original take on the readings, viewings, and issues being discussed in class/museums/films, and you articulate your thoughts in your own voice. You go beyond stating your point of view to evaluate the pros and cons of thinking the way you do.

IV. Final Project. 30% of final grade. The final project will be part research project, part creative endeavor. More details given in class, but basically the assignment is to create a museum exhibition demonstrating some aspect of religious visual culture. Projects will incorporate visual images with written words. A balance between research and creativity should be sought.

Blackboard

I will be making use of Blackboard through the semester to post readings, links to websites, etc. Please be sure to bookmark that site. Also, if I have to send an update to the syllabus or assignments, I will send it to your Hamilton email address. You will therefore need to check that on a regular basis.

Statement on Disabilities

Prof Plate will work with any students with disabilities as need be. Students should contact Prof Plate in the first two weeks of class to discuss any specific needs, and should have already spoken with Dean Harrison (aharriso@hamilton.edu) about this. If in question, feel free to contact Prof Plate.

Reminder: this is a 300-level seminar, and will be evaluated at that level. Studying religion is both an academic and a personal exercise. In your written assignments you will be graded on thinking and argumentation. I will not grade your personal beliefs or non-belief. Nor will I grade on the particular position you take. I will grade how well you articulate why you (or someone you are supporting) thinks this way, as well as your ability to reflect critically on the position you take.

Course Outline:

Introductions

22 Jan	Introduction: What is Religion? In class reading: Mark C. Taylor, on "Religion", Webster on Religion.
26 Jan {Sunday}	7pm-9pm KJ 125. REQ attendance: <i>Samsara</i> , film by Ron Fricke, with Q&A after.

Aesthesis: Perception

27 Jan	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 1-16. In class discussion of <i>Samsara</i> and readings.
29 Jan	CRP#1 Due in class. Discussion about CRP in class. Prompt: How does <i>Samsara</i> influence our way of "seeing religion"? Does the film itself create a "religious seeing"? {reread CRP instructions for this}
3 Feb	<u>Non-Representing Religion: Abstraction, aniconism</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 19-51; David Morgan, "Art and Religion in the Modern Age" from Elkins/Morgan, ed. <i>Re-Enchantment</i> (BB) Viewings: Brakhage, Abstract painting, Perceptual tricks
5 Feb	Visit to MWP Museum 2.30-4.15. Meet at Sadove circle at 2.30 sharp!
7 Feb {Friday}	CRP#2 Due on Friday, by 5pm. In response to museum visit. How have modern artists attempted to "unlearn" ways of seeing? And how is this unlearning bound up with a form of spirituality? Refer to specific images in the museum.

Visual Culture and Art

10 Feb	What is visual culture? What is art? Readings: "Do the Arts Matter" (BB); John Harvey, "Visual Culture" from Routledge Handbook for study of Religion (BB)
12 Feb	CRP#3 Due

Space and Perceptions:

Church Architecture and Stained Glass Windows

17 Feb	Field Trip to the Village of Clinton, for look at church architecture. Meet: Sadove circle, 2.30 sharp! Return by 4.00 Readings: Jeanne Kilde, <i>Sacred Power, Sacred Space</i> (BB)
19 Feb	Field Trip to Utica, for look at stained glass windows. Meet at Sadove circle, 2.30 sharp! Return by 4.00 Readings: from V. Raguin, <i>History of Stained Glass</i> (BB).
20 Feb {Thursday}	Required attendance: Ivan Gaskell lecture, "Exhibiting the Sacred: The Meaning of Things" Wellin Overlook, 6pm. Keep notes on this for final project!
21 Feb {Friday}	CRP #4 due by email, Friday at 5pm.

Icon: Imagery and Christianity

24 Feb	<u>Representing Jesus Christ in Icons, Oils, and Pixels</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 53-61 Viewings: <i>The Face: Jesus in Art</i> ; Renaissance images
26 Feb	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 62-86 CRP#5 Due

Picturing Faith

3 Mar	Meet at Wellin. Look at photography exhibitions. Readings: from Colleen McDannell, <i>Picturing Faith</i> chs 1 & 3 (BB)
5 Mar	CRP #6 Due
6 Mar {Wednesday}	4.10pm. Prof Plate's lecture (please come!) "A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects" SCCT Kennedy Aud.

Papers, Individual Meetings

10 Mar	No regular class - individual meetings with Prof Plate about Paper #1. Bring your thesis statement and at least three images and two references you will be using in your paper. This will serve in lieu of CRP # 7.
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12 Mar	No regular class - individual meetings as necessary
14 Mar {Friday}	Paper #1 Due via email.
17-28 Mar	Spring Break

Al-Qalam:
Books, Writing, & Printing in Islam

31 Mar	Art in books, books as art Readings: RAVC, pp. 89-100; Plate, "Looking at Words" (BB) Viewings: Library books, special collections and exhibit
2 Apr	CRP #8 Due.
7 Apr	Islamic Calligraphy Readings: RAVC, 101-123 Viewings on Islamic calligraphy in class
9 Apr	No class/ no CRP for this week. Begin reading for NYC trip

Field Trip to NYC: 11-12 April
(**Read:** *RAVC*, 125-144; 161-181 before going)

Darshan:
Seeing Hindu Divine Images

14 Apr	Divine mass media Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 161-193 Viewings: <i>darshan</i> CRP #9 Due on Islamic Calligraphy from NYC visit
16 Apr	CRP #10 Due on Hindu Icons from NYC visit

REQ: Students **must attend** 2 of the following 3 events:
17 Apr (Thurs) 4.15pm: Polly Roberts, "Exhibiting the Sacred: Altar as Museum, Museum as Altar" Wellin Overlook

18 Apr (Fri) 9.00am: Al and Polly Roberts on "Online Saints". Library (classroom TBA)
18 Apr (Fri) 12.00 KJ (classroom TBA), Al and Polly Roberts on Museums and cross cultural display.
CRP #11 (due by Monday, 21st) based on the Roberts' talks, and on the topic of the "visual display of religion" (whether online, or in a museum, or ...)

Buddhist Visual Culture

21 Apr	Readings: RAVC, 125-158 Viewings: Japanese Gardens.
23 Apr	CRP#12 Due on Buddhist Arts/Body from NYC visit

Resituating the Visually Sacred in the Museum

28 Apr	Readings: Crispin Paine, Introduction (pp. 8-21) from <i>Religious Objects in Museums</i> (BB); and Ivan Gaskell, "Display" (BB).
30 Apr	CRP #13 Due on museums and display
5 May	No regular class.
7 May	No regular class.
17 May (Sat) 9.30-12am	Final projects and short presentation DUE