

Art History 330: "Art and Contemplation in Christian Europe from Hildegard of Bingen to Teresa of Ávila"

Final Report, June 24, 2002

Susan Wegner, Department of Art, Bowdoin College

I taught this course as an advanced seminar in Art History in the spring semester of 2002. It was intended for art history majors and minors, although any student who had taken the introductory survey course in western art history was allowed to register. Eight students, all art history majors and minors, all seniors and juniors, with the exception of one intrepid sophomore, made up the class.

In this seminar I wanted to allow enough time for the students to reflect upon the practices of contemplation in medieval and renaissance Europe without feeling oppressed by an overfull reading list. To work toward this goal we used the images as our primary texts, starting with analyses of visual form and viewer response, then delving into style and content as it might relate to the writings of contemplatives and to specific historical meditative practices. Ungraded freewrites throughout the course allowed students to lift thought and reflection out of the limits of their formal, graded essays and research papers. I encouraged the seminar members to compare ideas from our art historical studies to images and ideas encountered in our own 21st century experience.

While I have not yet seen the official Dean's student opinion forms, I did ask students for their confidential responses to the texts we read together and to the "field trips" we took as a class. They found some of the translations of the renaissance texts repetitive and dry (*Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*), but found others immensely engaging (St. Teresa, *Interior Castle*). The whole class found the work with actual objects in the library's Special Collections and the museums to be very helpful in their understanding of the use of prayer books and private devotional images. All of them suggested that much more of this close work with actual objects be incorporated into the class in the future. Another highpoint for them was the chance to set up and walk the replica of the Chartres labyrinth, which provided a personal, physical experience of walking meditation.

Major highlights of the class from my perspective were the term projects which students presented in a formal talk to the class and in a concluding paper. Each seminar participant selected and developed her own topic, connecting it to the course as a whole. Some focused on paintings right at hand: an Italian renaissance painting of St. Jerome in the Desert which the student related to Jerome's writings on contemplative experience in the wilderness; a private devotional panel probably made for a Dominican religious in 15th c. Florence; and a series of ceiling paintings in a 16th c. private library reflecting on the contemplative life of the scholar. Two other projects followed art's connection to contemplation in the West up into the 20th century by examining the paintings and writings of Kandinsky, and the installation art of Bill Viola and the Iranian-born artist Shirazeh Houshiary. The deepest and most thoughtful paper investigated aspects of the architecture of contemplation using medieval and 20th century examples.

The biggest challenge in the class was to get the participants to slow down. I encouraged students to build quiet time into their work outside the class, but against the college culture of incessant activity, a tradition of rushing and completing assignments at the very last minute, I doubt that my efforts made much difference. Some of them even hurried through the labyrinth walk because of their commitments to evening sports team meetings. During class time itself, however, we were able to make time for silence, mind-clearing stillness and simple meditative sitting and breathing.

I wish that I had built into the class several assignments requiring the students to sit quietly in the presence of a renaissance painting or book of hours to allow a focused experience of close looking. Finding a way to offer this opportunity in a quiet, undisturbed place is a challenge. Even the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is not set up to allow an individual to sit with an object for an extended period (15 minutes) without being interrupted, engaged in conversation by a guard, or being surrounded by ringing telephones and office noise. When I offer a version of this course in the fall, I will try to set up appointment times when the museum is closed to the public or work in the Special Collections in the library where there may be a better chance for uninterrupted, focused viewing of an image.

This course presented me with many opportunities to expand my classroom methods. Our group worked at a level of relative informality, as much as is possible in that one of us was handing out grades to the others. All of us in the seminar shared on a very personal level information about our previous experience with meditation, coming out of several different faith traditions or none. It was challenging to try to approximate medieval Christians' contemplative practices without seeming to proselytize. For the fall of 2002, I will teach this seminar as a writing intensive class for first-year students. I plan to enhance considerably the experiential side of our work by inviting guest speakers and practitioners who can guide us all in the modern forms of *lectio divina*, contemplative prayer, and mindful sitting. Opening the course out in this way will strengthen the connections between our study of the history of Christian contemplation and current practice within and outside of a Christian context.