

Religion, Art, and Visual Culture

Religious Studies/Art History 375

Instructor: Dr Brent (Rodríguez) Plate

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Office: Room 206 Benedict Hall

Class Times: MW 2.30-3.45. Mandatory Field Trip 27-28 Feb.

Office Hours: 10.00 - 11.30am 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) {Abbreviated *RAVC* below}

Other readings will be available via Blackboard or Library reserve

Course Requirements:

Presence. 25% 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. "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 February trip to NYC. The grade also entails that students have read assigned readings *before* class, and come prepared to discuss the readings. 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, 2) your own self-assessment of your contributions to class discussion, and 3) your assessment of others in the class. Assessment will occur twice during the semester, and I will calculate your presence grades based on the three components listed here at that time and report them back to you.

Critical Response Paragraphs. 25% of final grade. One per week.

Approximately 200-300 words. These should be focused chiefly on the viewings in relation to the readings. They 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 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.

Two Papers. 30% of final grade (15% each). The bare bones: These should be 1300-1500 words each. (put word count at the bottom of the paper); double spaced; well-written. We'll spend part of one class early in the term dedicated to more detail of these assignments and, as always, feel free to ask Prof Plate about this.

Final Project. 20% of final grade. The final project will be part research project, part creative endeavor. 25% of the project's grade will be given to an oral presentation during the final week of class. Ideally, this will be a group project (2-3 people per group), though working alone might be in option in rare cases. Students will apply insights learned from the course, and apply them to the theme of their choosing. Strongly encouraged are projects that incorporate visual images (of whatever medium) with the written words. A balance between research and creativity should be sought, though no one will be graded lower for "not being an artist."

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.

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:

Introduction to Art, Culture, and Religion

Week One

19 Jan-	Introductions
21 Jan -	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 1-16. In class discussion of religion and visual culture. Definitions.

Perception

Week Two

26 Jan	Readings: selections from Oliver Sacks, "To See and Not See", (BB)
28 Jan	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 19-26, 33-45 Discussion. CRP#1 Due

Imagery in and Beyond Christianity

Week Three

2 Feb	<u>Representing Jesus Christ in Icons and Oil</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 53-61 Viewings: Film: <i>The Face: Jesus in Art</i>
4 Feb	Readings: 62-86 CRP#2 Due

Week Four

9 Feb	<u>Non-Representing Religion: Abstraction, aniconism</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 27-32, 46-51 Viewings: Brakhage, Abstract painting
11 Feb	Readings: Selection from Elkins/Morgan, ed. <i>Re-Enchantment</i> (BB) CRP#3 Due

Books, Writing, Printing in Christianity and Islam

Week Five

16 Feb	<u>Art in books, books as art</u> Meet in the Clark room of the library. Readings: TBA (BB) Viewings: Library books
18 Feb	Readings: TBA (BB) CRP#4 Due

Week Six

23 Feb	<u>Writing the Word of God</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 89-105 Viewings: Islamic Calligraphy
25 Feb	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 106-123 CRP#5 Due

27-28 Feb. Field Trip to NYC. Details TBA

Darshan: Seeing Hindu Divine Images

Week Seven

2 Mar	<u>Seeing the deities</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 161-170 Viewings: Hindu deities
4 Mar	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 171-181 CRP #6 Due

Week Eight

9 Mar	<u>Divine mass media</u> Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , 182-193 Viewings: <i>darshan</i> and mass media
11 Mar	CRP #7 Due
14-29 Mar	Spring Break

Shinjin: Body-Mind Relations in Buddhism

Week Nine

30 Mar	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 125-139 Viewings: Film: <i>Dream Windows</i>
1 Apr	Readings: <i>RAVC</i> , pp. 153-158 CRP#8 Due

Masks and African Arts

Week Ten

6 Apr	Readings: From Robert Farris Thompson, <i>Flash of Spirit or Face of the Gods</i> (BB) Viewings: Class visit to the Emerson Gallery
8 Apr	Readings: from <i>Art in Small Scale Societies</i> CRP#9 Due

Week Eleven

13 Apr	Readings: from Allen and Polly Roberts on Sufism in Senegal (BB) Viewings: from <i>Saint in the City</i> exhibit
15 Apr	More from the Roberts CRP#10 Due

Blasphemy and Iconoclasm

Week Twelve

20 Apr	Readings: from Plate, <i>Blasphemy: Art that Offends</i> (BB) Viewings: Rated R for today
22 Apr	Readings: from Plate, <i>Blasphemy</i> (BB) CRP#11 Due

Week Thirteen

27 Apr	Readings: from Gamboni, <i>Destruction of Art</i> (BB) Viewings: Iconoclasm around the world
29 Apr	Readings: from David Freedberg, <i>Power of Images</i> (BB) CRP#12 Due

Week Fourteen

4 May	Presentation of final projects
6 May	Presentation of final projects
8 May	FINAL PROJECTS DUE