

8-22-24

Art 23: Survey of World Art

Statement of rationale for fulfillment of Westmont's GE JRD requirement

I am submitting a lightly revised syllabus for my course on World Art for JRD consideration. In my view, this course has already been accomplishing the broad aims of our JRD for many years. I begin and end the semester by insisting that our inquiries are **rooted in the cultural mandate (Genesis 2:15-19) to name and to tend the constituent parts of the world God has placed us in. In fact, naming and tending is rooted in our human nature, our *imago dei*, because God's naming and tending of us is at the very heart of God's nature.**¹ Taxonomy, then, and curation in all their forms, are activities we are called by God to do. Yet, because our *imago dei* is besmirched and deformed by sin, we do not always name well or tend adequately. In fact, all too often, our naming and tending merely ramify the deformation of the fall.

We read two books over the course of the semester (in addition to our textbook): James Elkins's *The Story of Art* and Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Elkins's book is a masterful, undergraduate-accessible demonstration of the oddness of modern, Western understandings of "art." Elkins sets normative western assumptions about "art" alongside rival understandings from other cultural contexts (e.g. Indian, Turkish, Persian, Soviet). While we needn't abandon our own modern, Western definition, it is crucial we see it as part of the "naming" and "tending" that's actually a product of *our* cultural work in the world, and *not* preordained or predetermined by God. Price's book looks at Western practices—which are embedded in those Western assumptions—Western practices of collection, display, and interpretation from an anthropological perspective, illuminating the vast power Western notions have—often devastating power, when exercised outside of Western contexts. Elkins and Price together make a perfect pairing. They 1) make the case for multiple possible definitions of art around the world 2) without *erasing or devaluing* Western understandings of art 3) but nonetheless exposing the destructive and often invisible consequences of power exercised in the thoughtless imposition of Western ideas of "art" beyond their own native (Western) context.

While I am confident the course as I've taught it in the past achieves the aims of the JRD, in order to meet the certification criteria and the learning outcomes, I've added an assignment that asks students to evaluate the cultural artifacts policies of a handful of **American museums**,² all of which that have been in the news lately for their handling or mishandling of non-Western objects.

¹ "develop biblically and theologically grounded understandings of justice, reconciliation, and diversity." "Students will analyze issues of justice and injustice involving race and racism in the United States in biblically and theologically grounded ways."

² "examine personal actions, social norms, and systemic practices involving race and racism in the United States as they relate to historic and contemporary patterns of belonging and exclusion, attending to how historical particularities and differences in power shape the responsibilities different parties have in the work of justice and reconciliation in light of God's kingdom"

This assignment demonstrates that all the questions in circulation in this “world art” course are very much present in our American context, that various forms of racism underly most collection practices in museums of natural history until very recently, that there are many justifications for resistance to addressing these racist practices, and that even for best intentioned, straightforward ways of repairing the harm can be amazingly challenging. Students are asked to frame potential policies to **redress the unjust aspects of past practice, be able to explain how their policies are rooted in their own personal Christian convictions, and how they might communicate the rationale for their policies to non-Christian colleagues in a convincing manner.**³

Art 23 can be an emotionally hard class for some students. First- and second-year students especially are sometimes overwhelmed by some of the things they learn—for example, the so-called Punitive Benin Expedition of 1897, which is the origin of most Benin objects on display outside of West Africa. This horrible episode in colonial history is the subject of a chapter in Sally Price’s *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. I often have to remind students that the capacity to love this world and our neighbors, which we *hope* a Westmont education enlarges, also means, paradoxically, that our capacity to be hurt by injustice and experience the consequent suffering must also expand. As I revisited my syllabus for JRD qualification, it strikes me that this assignment is a valuable addition. It means students will end the semester on a positive, proactive note, articulating a Christian contribution to writing past wrongs.

One last note. I tell students often over the course of the semester that all the ways in which we come to understand objects from other parts of the world, from very different cultural and religious contexts, and from epochs and eras different from our own, provide helpful templates and patterns for understanding *people* from other parts of the world, from very different cultural and religious contexts, and across the reach of time. What we really do in Art 23, is practice, in a safe way, some of the skills we need in order to do good rather than harm to real people—those neighbors whom God calls us rightly name and rightly and tend lovingly, for *his* name’s sake.

Below, find the wording from our GE document, with relevant course activities or themes indicated.

Courses satisfying this GE will...

1. develop biblically and theologically grounded understandings of justice, reconciliation, and diversity. These will enable students to understand justice and reconciliation in terms of the gospel and appropriate disciplinary frameworks, recognize sin, rebellion, and brokenness as such, and discern their responsibility in the work of justice and reconciliation within their own

³ “understand justice and reconciliation in terms of the gospel and appropriate disciplinary frameworks, recognize sin, rebellion, and brokenness as such, and discern their responsibility in the work of justice and reconciliation within their own local context.” “Students will identify Christian responsibilities to pursue justice and reconciliation in diverse relationships, practices, and structures according to the character of God’s loving reign expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.”

local context; The course is grounded in the cultural mandate, and we return often to notions of “taxonomy” and “curation” as activities that we do because we are created in God’s image. But also that we sometimes do them disastrously, because of sin.

2. examine personal actions, social norms, and systemic practices involving race and racism in the United States as they relate to historic and contemporary patterns of belonging and exclusion, attending to how historical particularities and differences in power shape the responsibilities different parties have in the work of justice and reconciliation in light of God’s kingdom; Elkins and Price provide a framework for the “Museum Policy Project” which asks students to analyze collection, display and interpretive practices in specific American museums, assess those practices for adherence to standard that a Christian might think best, articulate the Christian basis for those standards, and then translate their convictions into terms a non-Christian could grasp.

3. model Christlike dialogue reflecting God’s desire for justice and reconciled relationships among all image-bearers, especially when confronting challenging or sensitive issues. Classroom community and the group Museum Policy Project provide a way to practice on one another. The course as a whole provides templates and patterns for engaging the people beyond our classroom, beyond Westmont, and beyond the church.

Student learning outcomes:

- Students will analyze issues of justice and injustice involving race and racism in the United States in biblically and theologically grounded ways. Course framing of “taxonomy” and “curation,” Museum Policy Project.
- Students will identify Christian responsibilities to pursue justice and reconciliation in diverse relationships, practices, and structures according to the character of God’s loving reign expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Templates and patterns for people, practiced by analyzing and understanding objects; Museum Policy Project.