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“Object Lesson”: Using Family Heirlooms to Engage Students in Art History

After having engaged with an object close to their and their families’ lives, students become sensitive to the connections that people and communities make with works of art of all different types.

MARICE ROSE

“**My English great-grandfather was captured in the Mediterranean during World War II and was taken to Germany, where he was imprisoned.** The British Red Cross was allowed to enter the prison to give the men things to do to keep themselves busy. My great-grandfather chose embroidery as something to do during the long days, even though he had no idea how to sew. The days had become quite long because he had been in the camp for over two years. He created a circular embroidery of an English garden. This is the object which I chose for this project (student essay, Fall 2009).

The excerpt quoted above is from a student essay written for an undergraduate introductory art history class I teach every year. This first written assignment of the semester—an essay where students describe and reflect upon the significance of a family heirloom—is instrumental in meeting class objectives. My objectives in this class are for students (a) to broaden their conception of what art is while being able to explain it, (b) to understand the importance of context when studying art, and (c) to consider works of art—in their creation and reception—as important parts of real people’s lives. Evidence within the class as well as pedagogical research support that the assignment’s qualities promote student motivation within the class. Ultimately, I hope that students will continue to be motivated to learn about art in its infinite variety, and why it matters.

After having engaged with an object close to their and their families’ lives, students become sensitive to the connections that people and communities make with works of art of all different types. Students maintain the under-

standings they gain through this assignment throughout the rest of the semester. This article describes the details of this first assignment, highlighting how it helps meet class objectives and how it can inspire students to learn about art and its history.

OBJECTIVE: An Articulated, Expansive Conception of Art

The student quoted at this article’s beginning chose her great-grandfather’s embroidered garden scene as her essay’s subject after the course’s first meeting. On the first day of class, I ask a big question: “What is art?” and initiate a dialogue in which students suggest adjectives that one can use to describe works of art. Typically, words such as “creative,” “expressive,” “individual,” and “aesthetic” are recorded on the board. The words are ones we return to in our analyses of art over the course of the semester. During the discussion, I underscore that definitions of art can change in different contexts, and are never simple or tidy. At



the end of that first meeting, I assign a two-page essay on a family heirloom: an object in the student's own or a relative's household, that is meaningful in some way to his or her family and can be considered a work of art (following parameters established in our class discussion). The final qualifier is important, and I learned to clarify the instructions after receiving essays on a majestic oak tree in grandma's back yard, and a thermos that an uncle brought to a construction site every day. Such subjects can provide interesting stories, but they only provide the necessary links to my course objectives and class content if the student is able to present the objects as artworks. The tree, as discussed by the student, was not an example of human creation or expression—there was no mention of trimming it or planting it in a special location for a specific aesthetic. In the thermos essay, the student did not describe the object's formal design qualities, or decorations her uncle may have added to it, as examples of its aesthetics or expressiveness. If she had, it would have connected to the class better. I found that for the purposes of the art history course, stipulating that students choose heirlooms that they consider to be art, and asking them to explain why they are, helps students meet the objective of being able to recognize and knowledgeably talk about art that is present throughout their lives, not only when they sit in the art history classroom or visit museums. The revised assignment now prompts students to answer: what is the object, what does it look like, who made it, when and where was it made, why is it meaningful to your family, and: why is it art?

Following my prompt, several students in their essays have shared that their parents gave them information about things the students had encountered on a daily basis but never thought of as art before, such as a silver tea service, or a framed *wycinanki* (traditional Polish intricately cut paper) wedding invitation, or the embroidered garden now hanging on the living-room wall.

Every semester, some students protest that their families own neither heirlooms, nor art. I emphasize that they should ask their relatives about heirlooms, and think about the class discussion of art's qualities. An essential aspect of the activity that helps reinforce the discussion is that the heirlooms do not have to be traditional "high art" paintings or sculptures. Textiles, ceramics, and jewelry can be considered art. Following my prompt, several students in their essays have shared that their parents gave them information about things the students had encountered on a daily basis but never thought of as art before, such as a silver tea service, or a framed *wycinanki* (traditional Polish intricately cut paper) wedding invitation, or the embroidered garden now hanging on the living-room wall. One student wrote that that she had thought her family didn't own an heirloom, "However, I found out that my uncle has one of the family's greatest heirlooms made 110 years ago. It was a huge surprise to find that the heirloom was a piece of art that I always saw in my uncle's living room" (essay, Spring 2010). The heirloom is a *cantaro*, or large terracotta jar. She learned her great-grandfather in Ecuador made a jar for each of his five children, and this was one of them. The vessels were used to store water, because the closest water source was a day's journey away. She described the aesthetic choice made for this particular jar—it was the only one created from a red clay found high in the mountains, especially made for the family's only daughter.

Evidence that the activity succeeds in underscoring a broad notion of art is found in class discussions, essays, and final learning reflections. A student wrote about a hand-made first communion dress: "This assignment enabled me to begin thinking about art in a different way. I quickly learned that art can come in many different forms. It doesn't have to be a painting or drawing but can be clothes or furniture" (final reflection, Spring 2010). Another student, on the subject of a ruby necklace her jeweler great-grandfather made for her mother, wrote: "After our 'What is art?' discussion at the beginning of the course, I came to see my mother's necklace as a truly meaningful piece of art, something I had never thought of before" (final reflection, Spring 2010).

This expansion of the definition of art is consistent with trends in the discipline of art history. Feminist art historians in the 1970s and '80s began to challenge the art history canon's privileging of painting, sculpture, and architecture, and the male artists who usually made them (Mainardi, 1973; Pollock and Parker, 1981). They disputed the categorization of "craft" given to art made—usually by women—in media such as textiles or ceramics. Now, introductory art history books include more of the so-called "minor" or "applied" arts (Stokstad, 2008). The activity also reinforces feminist and semiotic challenges to the prevailing myth of the master artist that dominated art-historical discourse since Giorgio Vasari in the 16th century (Salomon, 1991). Many of the heirlooms were made by anonymous hands or a family member whose primary occupation was not in the arts. The Ecuadoran farmer and the English prisoner of war are not stereotypical "great" artists, but knowledge of them helps students widen their artistic horizons. There is evidence that students' application of this broadened definition is sustained later in the semester. One student brought to class a newspaper article she had read on a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition featuring Victorian women's photo assemblages. She pointed out how traditionally the assemblages had not been considered "art," and then related them to collages she herself makes. She explained that, despite the time she takes to choose and arrange the images and texts, she had never before considered her collages to be art, but now she does.

OBJECTIVE: Understanding the Importance of Context

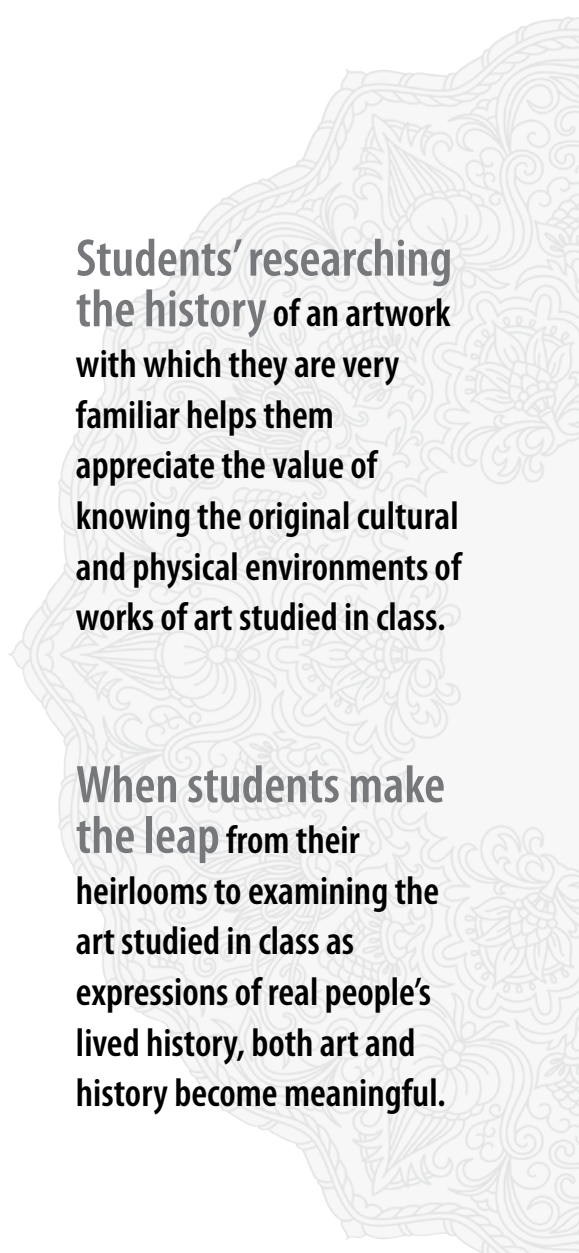
The needlework-garden essay provides an evocative context for an object that decorates the student's home. Such understanding of context is a major objective of art history instruction since the "New Art History" in the early 1970s began moving toward greater examination of the social aspects of art production (Rees & Borzello, 1986; Harris, 2001). Students' researching the history of an artwork with which they are very familiar helps them appreciate the value of knowing the original cultural and physical environments of works of art studied in class. One student wrote about a gold coin that his great-great grandmother had saved her

earnings to buy. She passed it on to her daughter, who passed it on to her own daughter, who still treasures it. Knowledge of the object's political context contributes meaning beyond its precious medium or image; the coin was a specific type used in his great-great grandmother's Greek village by British occupiers, who used such currency to monopolize the town's economy (essay, Spring 10).

A colleague who has adapted the activity for her own course reports that students, through telling the story of a family object and its history through generations, develop a realization of how individual works of art studied in class can be used to learn about societies and cultures (Katherine Schwab, personal communication, June 21, 2010). Students show evidence of meeting the objective of recognizing that connecting artworks, famous or not, to their specific and their larger histories is vital. A final reflection reports: "[The heirloom paper] reminds me of the many art pieces we have learned throughout the course that might seem like any old simple painting at first, but once we learned about its historical context and its function, it becomes much more complex" (Spring 2010).

OBJECTIVE: Art as Expression of and Connection to Human Experience

To embroider the garden, the prisoner-of-war "threaded each string through the holes to create his design. He used his memory of the flowers to create this artwork." The essay makes clear to both the writer and reader the personal nature of art's expression, as well as art's having real connections to real individuals in history. When students make the leap from their heirlooms to examining the art studied in class as expressions of real people's lived history, both art and history become meaningful: "[This class] helped to put history into a more tangible, human perspective. History was no longer just words" (final reflection, Fall 2008). Heirlooms, in addition to offering a catalyst to discuss experiences surrounding artworks' production, can also stimulate discussion on art's reception. In class, we consider not only artworks' original viewers, but also the later generations who make personal connections with the artworks in different contexts. For example, we discuss Leonardo da Vinci's



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reluctance to give the *Mona Lisa* portrait to its patron and his keeping it until his death; the acquisition of the painting by King Francois I of France who kept it in his chateau; the Dada response of Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* in 1919; and tourists who crowd the painting at the Louvre today. Part of the lesson is the monuments' original and later viewers' emotional relationships with the artworks; why were some artworks saved for generations, and then exhibited in museums to be seen today? In these discussions, students often link back to their heirlooms' histories across generations. In an essay about his family heirloom—jewelry given from his grandfather's family to his grandmother on her wedding day in Bangladesh—a student wrote, "Our forefathers have gone through a lot to get the jewelry made and preserved since there was revolutionary war going on between Bangladesh and Pakistan... This has been passed down in the family because it is considered not only a wedding gift but [is] also believed to have the blessings of our family" (student essay, Fall 2010).

The heirloom activity helps students develop new relationships to art and history through their reflections on the human aspects of both. For example, they understand how much people value art, as they learn about the motivations and sacrifices they make to create or acquire it, like the Greek grandmother and her gold coin, or one student's mother who owns a colorful, hand-made terracotta nativity scene from her native Guatemala. "Her family was very poor and could not afford to buy her the nativity figurines that she wanted. She saved her allowance until she could buy them herself. She brought [the figurines] with her when she came to the United States" (student essay, Fall 09). The concept of making, buying, or commissioning, and then owning, art becomes real and relatable when students consider how their own families achieved it.

Such consideration of art's human significance has been reflected lately in popular media; the British Museum and the BBC produced a radio series and a

website in January 2010 in which 100 objects from the museum were used to tell the history of the world (British Museum/BBC). One rationale for the exhibit is that over time, many people in the world have not been able to write their own histories, but have expressed themselves and their cultures by making things; art reveals and impacts aspects of human history in ways that words cannot (Creative Impulses).

The heirloom assignment therefore can aid learning throughout the semester, as students see value in art beyond (yet including) paintings or sculptures; learn the significance of context to art's production and reception, and see the possibilities of art as a means of human connection. As I describe here, the assignment can prompt motivation for engaging in the regular course content and activities throughout the semester.

GOAL: Motivation to Learn about Art

One of my goals for the course is for students to *want* to learn about art during the course. There is evidence this happens. Most of my students take the art history survey to fulfill the university's "art" requirement. The heirloom activity engages them immediately by forcing them to make a personal connection to the course. Many final learning reflections reference the heirloom assignment as sparking learning. One student wrote about his being a computer engineering major with no previous interest in art history who developed an appreciation and interest in the subject after the heirloom assignment:

Initially, I wasn't the happiest person to be taking an art history course. I walked into class for the first time and the professor asked the expected, but to me, the hardest question at that point in time, "What do you regard as an Art Work?" When I tried to answer the question, I kind of fell into a dilemma, I couldn't really explain what I regarded as art. We then had a take-home essay to describe a piece of art in our family. I couldn't really pinpoint what I

wanted to concentrate on so I talked to my Grandma who told me to use my Nigerian traditional dress. I picked it up and looked at it. This was a way for me to identify with my tribe in Nigeria. There were some cultural connections that I shared with the clothes. This initiated the birth of a new thinking for me with respect [to] works of art. (Spring 2011)

This student performed very well in the course. Another student made the connection between the heirloom paper and being motivated to apply course content:

Overall the methods and the aspects of art that I learned in class have made me view all pieces of art differently. Even from the first assignment when we had to choose a family heirloom, I never thought of my heirloom as an actual piece of art just as a decoration at my house and a family tradition. I have also noticed myself looking more deeply into every painting that I see. For example, I was at a hotel recently and as I walked down the hallways I found myself looking at the painting and trying to quiz myself as to what time period it was from by looking at the techniques. (Spring 2011)

These excerpts show aspects of the assignment that researchers demonstrate can contribute to motivation, including: belongingness, cultural relevance, personal relevance, and emotion.

The concept of motivation is used to explain the initiation, direction, quality, and persistence of behavior (Brophy, 2010). There is a wide body of literature on theories and strategies of motivation. Student motivation is discussed in various terms, most broadly as a commitment to learning (Donald, 1999). Research shows that activities or lessons that increase interest by making course content relevant, relatable, and emotion-generating are key to intrinsically motivating students.

The heirloom assignment fulfills a key guideline for activities that promote individual interest as identified by Bergin (1999); it gives students a sense of

“belongingness” as they research something they identify with their families and/or cultures. This was clearly evidenced in the essay about the Nigerian traditional dress. Brophy (2010) emphasizes the importance of making connections to students’ cultural backgrounds, especially if there is a possibility they might think the course is not about “them,” which could be the case in my class, because the majority of my students enroll in art history as a distribution requirement, and most of the material I teach is pre-modern. At my university, which has a reputation of having a homogenous student body (Simmons, 2009), the heirloom topics reveal surprising cultural diversity. In Spring 2010, for example, heirlooms came from (in addition to the United States): Italy, Ireland, Cyprus, Greece, Ecuador, Honduras, Haiti, Pakistan, Poland, England, the Philippines, and China.

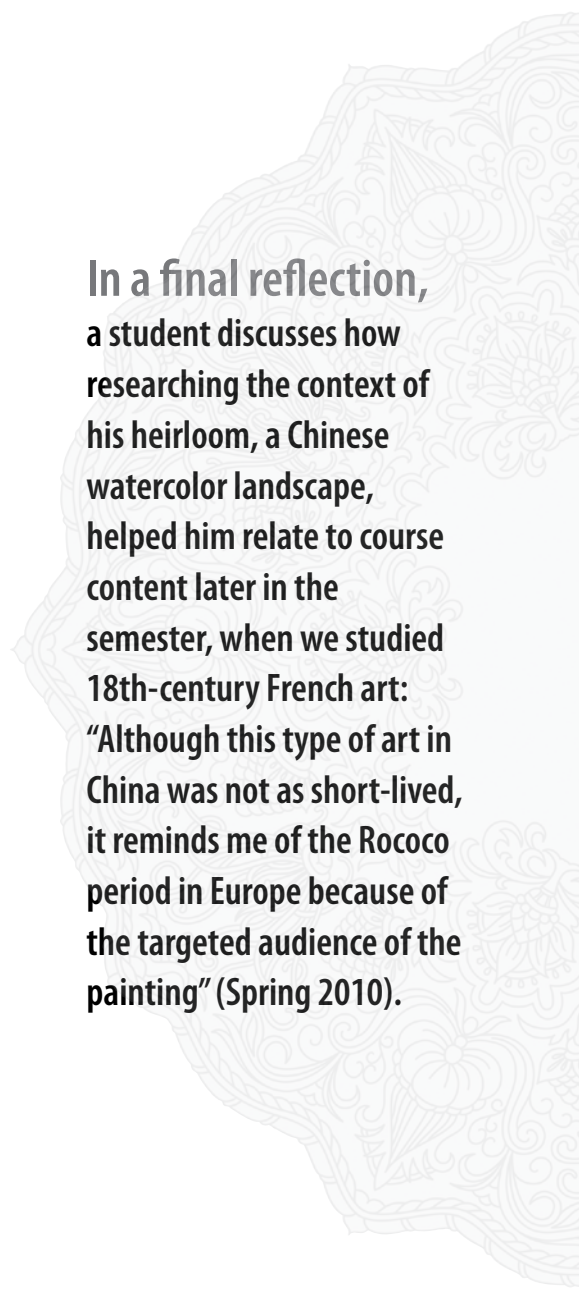
Personal relevance—perceived usefulness of the content—is an essential category in several theories of student motivation (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995; Keller, 1987; MacKinnon, 1999; Frymier, 2002; Brophy, 2010). A student’s final reflection essay shows an awareness of the assignment’s benefits: “I was most impressed by the applicative abilities that art history would have on so many aspects of my life that I never would have thought of prior” (final reflection, Spring 2010). There is neuroscientific evidence for the value of using personally relevant material in teaching adolescents. When students makes associations between old and new material, more neural connections are made, leading toward better long-term memory storage and recovery (Crawford, 2008). In a final reflection, a student discusses how researching the context of his heirloom, a Chinese watercolor landscape, helped him relate to course content later in the semester, when we studied 18th-century French art: “Although this type of art in China was not as short-lived, it reminds me of the Rococo period in Europe because of the targeted audience of the painting” (Spring 2010).

To promote individual interest, Bergin (1999) also recommends activities that generate an emotion. Students recall the emotional associations their heirlooms hold when they discuss the objects’ human elements. One wrote about a hand-carved

gilded wooden rocking chair, brought here from southern Italy by her great-great grandmother and used to rock generations of babies to sleep, including the student and her brother: “I believe the creator of this rocking chair intended for it to be used in a loving way, in hopes of bringing a family like my own closer together” (Spring 2010). The student whose mother brought Nativity figurines from Guatemala wrote about his family’s emotional connection with the set: “It reminds us where our mother came from and how much she has overcome” (Fall 2009). Some students make new emotional connections because of what they have learned. In her final reflection, the Ecuadoran-American student discussed the sense of pride she now feels when she sees the water jar (Spring 2010). Neuroscience supports the importance of emotion in the learning process (Feinstein, 2004). The brain focuses first on information that has strong emotional context, giving it privileged treatment in its memory system (Wolfe, 2001). The heirlooms’ emotional associations can be applied to course content; in class one can address the emotions evoked by the artworks studied. For instance, I assign an article about Vincent van Gogh’s emotional state when he painted *Starry Night* as revealed by his diaries, and after talking about it, we quietly reflect on what feelings the painting generates in us, individually (Gopnik, 2010). Evoking emotion can not only help motivate, but also help students make the human connection to art and its transformative potential.

In conclusion, by investigating a personally-relevant heirloom, students meet course objectives of recognizing the art that surrounds them, learning the importance of seeking contexts, and making connections between art, individuals, and history. My hope is that this preliminary activity of applying art history to their own experiences will continue to inspire students to open their eyes and minds to art throughout their lives.

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