

## AMERICAN PAINTING



Prof. Linda Merrill

Office: Carlos Hall 135

Office hours: Monday 10–11, Thursday 3–4, and by appointment

[lmerr2@emory.edu](mailto:lmerr2@emory.edu) | 404-727-0514

Tu/Th 1:00–2:50 PM

Carlos Hall 212

What can we discover by reading between the lines of American paintings? How does the history of American art relate to our country's political and social history? Does a nation's art shape or reflect its values? We'll consider these (and other) questions in this course, which encompasses the history of American art from the colonial period through the Great Depression with a focus on oil paintings—two-dimensional objects in the “fine art” tradition—as expressions of national ambition and ambivalence. In our sessions together, we'll examine paintings in terms of their formal qualities while framing them within the cultural and historical context that may illuminate their function and meaning. Through lectures, class discussion, readings, presentations, and written assignments, we'll question the role that paintings play in establishing national identity, the way they negotiate issues of race and gender, and the opportunities they present for both representing and influencing culture. More generally, this course introduces the methods art historians use to analyze and interpret works of art, skills that apply to all kinds of imagery and permit an informed response to the visual culture of our own time.

*Objectives.* Our goal is to regard paintings as arguments rather than illustrations. If you enter into the optimistic spirit of this course, you'll become conversant with the major periods and preoccupations of American art history and the artists whose work stands out as exemplary or innovative. Moreover, you'll sharpen three skills you already possess, which are as indispensable in life, in general, as they are in college, in particular:

1. *Writing.* Although this course is not designated “writing intensive,” writing about art will be your primary occupation. It's hard to learn without writing, so you'll be asked to write in class and out of it. In both formal and casual assignments, you'll demonstrate how clearly and elegantly you can articulate ideas.

2. *Reading.* Critical, analytical reading reveals the intellectual process by which problems are solved. This course allows opportunities for you to practice such *active* reading, with an eye to the rhetorical strategies that make arguments convincing. Because we'll study both primary and secondary sources, you'll see how each contributes to a deeper understanding of art history.
3. *Talking.* Art is made to be talked about, and you'll be encouraged in this class to express your opinions—particularly those that are well-supported by evidence, both verbal and visual.

*Readings.* We're not using a textbook: please reserve the dollars you might have spent on books for tickets of admission to the High Museum (see below). The readings (and everything else you'll need, including images for study) will be available on Canvas, freely accessible on the Web at <http://classes.emory.edu>. There are assigned readings every week, usually one primary source and one scholarly article. To help you prepare for discussion of this material, I'll post questions for at least one reading a week. I ask that you upload your responses to Canvas *before* the beginning of the relevant class. I will *not* grant extensions on these homework assignments under any circumstances, but you get two free passes, so you can skip a couple of assignments, for any reason at all, without explanation or penalty.

*Assignments.* The assignments in this course build on each and revolve around a single work of art—an American painting of your choice, from the period 1660–1940, currently on view in the reinstated permanent-collection galleries at the High Museum of Art. To learn that painting by heart, you'll write a detailed analysis, “deconstructing” its compositional elements in order to discover, then demonstrate, how it operates on the viewer's eye, brain, heart, and memory. You'll also develop the theme for a hypothetical “focus show,” or temporary museum installation, designed to exhibit the work in a new light revealing an especially interesting aspect. This mini-exhibition will comprise a single pair of paintings, the High Museum work and another American painting from a *different* public collection that provides a telling comparison. To secure that second painting, you'll write a loan letter explaining the concept of your aptly titled show. Then, assuming the role of museum curator, you'll write the interpretive labels for the installation—one general wall text about the exhibition's theme and purpose, and one helpful but succinct text for each work. Finally, you'll draft a brief audio guide, which will be read aloud as part of your final, oral presentation to the entire class. At the end of the semester, you'll turn in a complete portfolio of exhibition-related material—analysis, loan request, labels, and audio-guide text—all revised, edited, perfected, and ready for publication.

*Exams:* Ever heard of the “testing effect”? Research shows that learning takes place *during* exams, which should require that you dig deep in your wells of knowledge to identify and locate relevant information, apply it to the test question, and lucidly express your findings on the page. We'll have two of these salutary exams, an in-class midterm exercise and an abbreviated final at the time scheduled by the college; these tests will assess your understanding of our readings, lectures, and class discussions. To emphasize conceptual understanding rather than the recitation of facts, they will both consist primarily (perhaps exclusively) of essay questions.

*Student engagement.* “Engagement” in this class means more than just “participation”: it encompasses preparation, attention, and timely attendance. It depends, in other words, on your appearing at every class session having carefully read and reflected on the primary and secondary source materials assigned for that day, and fully prepared to engage wholeheartedly in a lively and informed discussion. I understand that extenuating circumstances arise from time to time, making it difficult or even impossible for you to come to class. If that's the case, please let me know, check the Canvas site to find out what you missed, and borrow notes from a classmate. If you have to miss more than 3 classes during the semester, you may have overextended yourself, and you should consider dropping the course. But talk to me first: I'm here to help.

*High Museum of Art.* Once upon a time, I was the curator of American art at the High Museum, so I know how useful its collection can be in tracing the themes of American art history. As a class, we'll make one trip

together to the High Museum at a time that works for all of us; the permanent galleries are being reinstalled, so we will be among the first to see them on our visit in mid-October. In addition, you'll visit on your own, as necessary, in connection with assignments, and just for the fun of it. The price of admission is \$14.50.

*Devices.* Let's remove temptation altogether: no phones, tablets, or laptop computers in the classroom. This is for your own good: research proves that students learn and retain much more when they take notes in writing. Moreover, I will often ask you to write in class and sometimes to turn that work in, so you'll need to have pen and paper on hand. I'll post the presentation PowerPoints after each class in case you want to transfer your notes to them, a process that should firmly anchor the images and information in your mind.

*Grades.* Credit for this course, whether taken for a letter grade or pass/fail (S/U), is contingent upon the satisfactory completion of all assignments. Final grades are calculated by the following distribution:

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>% of grade</i>	<i>Date due</i>
Loan letter	10	October 4
Midterm exam	10	October 16
HMA description & analysis paper	10	November 1
Label texts	10	November 15
Class presentation	10	November 29, December 4 and 6
Audio Guide script/portfolio	20	December 14
Final exam	15	December 18
Engagement/participation	15	

*Extra Credit:* To bolster languishing assignment or exam grades, you may elect to earn extra credit through additional coursework (though no more than 20 points altogether). For a maximum of 15 points, prepare a brief presentation and lead a class discussion of one of the readings. (This must be cleared with me well in advance; I'll assign articles on a first-come, first-served basis.) For up to 5 points, write a rhetorical précis of one of the secondary sources on the syllabus: this should be a succinct assessment of the reading that *analyzes*, rather than *summarizes*, its content and argument. You may repeat this exercise up to 4 times, for a potential total of 20 points. Guidelines will be posted to Canvas.

*Office of Accessibility Services.* If you require accommodations for any type of physical or learning disability, you should visit the Office of Accessibility Services (OAS) to learn about the registration process. If you have already registered with the OAS, please present a copy of your Accommodation Letter to me within the first two weeks of the semester; I would also appreciate having the chance to talk with you privately about the accommodations you need and how we can best manage them in this course, so please make an appointment. All discussions will remain strictly confidential.

*Academic integrity.* All students enrolled in classes at Emory College are required to abide by the Honor Code, which prohibits any form of academic misconduct, including plagiarizing, cheating (either by seeking or providing assistance), and lying to an instructor. The consequences of a violation are severe and may include failure of the course, a mark on the record, suspension, and expulsion. Please take precautions to ensure that your work and actions are consistent with the Honor Code. A list of Honor Code offenses and information about the Honor Council process may be found at <http://catalog.college.emory.edu/academic/policies-regulations/honor-code.html>.

## TENTATIVE CLASS SCHEDULE & ASSIGNMENTS

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Assignments</i>
1	TH August 30	Introduction	
2	TU September 4	New World Portraits	
3	TH September 6	American Old Masters	<i>For discussion:</i> Margaretta M. Lovell, “Eighteenth-century American Family Portraits”
4	TU September 11	Identity Politics in the New Republic	<i>For discussion:</i> Copley correspondence (1766–67)
5	TH September 13	The Vanishing Wilderness	<i>For discussion:</i> David Lubin, “Ariadne and the Indians”   <b>HMA Painting choices due</b>
6	TU September 18	Antebellum Democracy	<i>For discussion:</i> Thomas Cole, “American Scenery” (1836)
7	TH September 20	Doomed to Perish?	<i>For discussion:</i> Maurie D. McInnis, “The Most Famous Plantation”
8	TU September 25	Manifest Destiny	<i>For discussion:</i> J. Gray Sweeney, “Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia in Cowboy Art”
9	TH September 27	History Painting & the Civil War	<i>For discussion:</i> Clarence Cook, “Art. Painting and the War” (1864)
10	TU October 2	Postwar Reckoning	<i>For discussion:</i> Leslie Furth, “‘The Modern Medea’ and Race Matters”
11	TH October 4	The Heroism of Modern Life	<i>For discussion:</i> Contemporary Perspectives on <i>The Gross Clinic</i> (1876–80)   <b>Loan Letter due</b>
	TU October 9	<b>FALL BREAK</b>	
12	TH October 11	A Brave New World	<i>For discussion:</i> Nicolai Cikovsky Jr, “Winslow Homer’s (So-called) <i>Morning Bell</i> ”
	TU October 16	<b>MIDTERM EXAM</b>	
13	TH October 18	American Things	

14	TU	October 23	International Styles & Cosmopolitan Artists	<i>For discussion:</i> Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin”
15	TH	October 25	Revising Impressionism	<i>For discussion:</i> Letters from Paris (1873–78)
16	TU	October 30	Picturing Gentility	<i>For discussion:</i> Elizabeth Broun, “Childe Hassam’s America”
17	TH	November 1	The Ashcan School	<b>HMA Description paper due</b>
18	TU	November 6	The Shock of the New	<i>For discussion:</i> Michael Lobel, “John Sloan: Figuring the Painter in the Crowd”
19	TH	November 8	Modernism in America	<i>For discussion:</i> Theodore Roosevelt, “A Layman’s Views of an Art Exhibition”
20	TU	November 13	Negotiating the Machine Age	<i>For discussion:</i> Anna C. Chave, “O’Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze”
21	TH	November 15	Depicting the American Scene	<b>Label texts due</b>
22	TU	November 20	Painting the Heartland	<i>For discussion:</i> Barbara Haskell, “Edward Hopper: Between Realism & Abstraction”
	TH	November 22	<b>THANKSGIVING</b>	
23	TU	November 27	The Social Conscience	<i>For discussion:</i> Wanda Corn, “The Birth of a National Icon”
24	TH	November 29	<i>Student presentations</i>	
25	TU	December 4	<i>Student presentations</i>	
26	TH	December 6	<i>Student presentations</i>	
27	TU	December 11	Conclusion	
	FR	December 14	<b>FINAL PROJECT</b> due	
	TU	December 18	<b>FINAL EXAM, 3:00–5:30 PM</b>	

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Broun, Elizabeth. "Childe Hassam's America." *American Art* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 32–57. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/3109339>.
- Chave, Anna C. "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze." *Art in America* 78, no. 1 (January 1990): 114–24 + 177, 179. <http://annachave.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Masculine-Gaze.pdf>
- Cikovsky Jr., Nicolai. "Winslow Homer's (So-called) *Morning Bell*." *American Art Journal* 29 (1998): 5–17. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/1594617>
- Cole, Thomas. "Essay on American Scenery." *The American Monthly Magazine*, n.s. 1 (January 1836): 1-12. <http://thomascole.org/wp-content/uploads/Essay-on-American-Scenery.pdf>
- [Cook, Clarence]. "Art. Painting and the War." *The Round Table: A Saturday Review of Politics, Finance, Literature, Society and Art* 2 (July 23, 1864): 90. <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/docview/127967220?accountid=10747>
- Copley, John Singleton. Correspondence, 1766–77. Redacted from <http://homepages.neiu.edu/~wbsieger/Art313/313Read/313Copley.pdf>
- Corn, Wanda. "The Birth of a National Icon: Grant Wood's *American Gothic*." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 10, The Art Institute of Chicago Centennial Lectures (1983): 252–75. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/4104340>
- Furth, Leslie. "'The Modern Medea' and Race Matters: Thomas Satterwhite Noble's *Margaret Garner*." *American Art* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 37–57. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/3109271>
- Haskell, Barbara. "Edward Hopper: Between Realism and Abstraction." In *Modern Life: Edward Hopper and his Time*, edited by Barbara Haskell, 48–55. Munich: Hirmer, 2009.
- Lobel, Michael. "John Sloan: Figuring the Painter in the Crowd." *The Art Bulletin* 193, no. 3 (September 2011): 345–68. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/23046581>
- Lovell, Margaretta M. "Reading Eighteenth-century American Family Portraits: Social Images and Self-Images." *Winterthur Portfolio* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 243–64. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/1181182>
- Lubin, David. "'Ariadne' and the Indians: Vanderlyn's Neoclassical Princess, Racial Seduction, and the Melodrama of Abandonment." *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 2–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108976>
- McInnis, Maurie D. "The Most Famous Plantation: The Politics of Painting Mount Vernon." In *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, edited by Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius, pp. 86–114. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. "A Layman's Views of an Art Exhibition." *Outlook* 103 (March 29, 1913): 718–720. <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/docview/136627855?accountid=10747>

Sidlauskas, Susan. "Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*." *American Art* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 9-33. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/3109402>

Sweeney, J. Gray. "Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia in Cowboy Art." *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1, Manifest Destiny (1992): 67-80. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/1360489>

Young, Dorothy Weir, ed. *The Life & Letters of J. Alden Weir*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.