



Teaching Art and Design History “Beyond the Canon”

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Abstract

The “canon” of art and design history consists of those works that have come to represent major periods, styles, ideas and/or techniques. They are a summary of artistic ideas throughout history and the physical embodiment of the technological, aesthetic, political and social forces of their time period. The canon is quite useful in teaching art and design history because it provides clear and succinct examples that quickly summarize every time period. However, the canon can be quite restrictive because it is only a selection of the output that has occurred. While it is obviously impossible to show every artistic product that was ever produced, it is possible to “curate” a more inclusive selection. This inclusiveness refers to the actual works presented in class and also the people who produced them. This not only includes women, minorities, and other ethnicities, but also those intermediaries not usually considered in standard art and design histories. Lastly, this inclusiveness also includes the forums and institutions through which the art and design objects are distributed. This paper is an analysis of the process of teaching art and design history “beyond the canon” as practiced by the author. The aim of the analysis is to help others teaching in the same field re-examine the content of their own courses and go “beyond the canon.”

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1. The Canon

The “canon” of art and design history consists of those works that, over time, have come to represent major periods, styles, ideas and/or techniques. Some examples include: “The Venus of Willendorf” (25,000 BCE), “The Parthenon,” Athens (450 BCE), “Augustus of Prima Porta” (20 BCE), “Chartres Cathedral,” (c. 1200), Leonardo’s “Mona Lisa” (1505), “The Eiffel Tower” (1889), Picasso’s “Women of Avignon” (1907), Chrysler’s “Airflow” (1937), Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm” (1950), Charles and Ray Eames’ “Lounge Chair” (1956), Miedinger’s “Helvetica” typeface (1957), and IKEA’s “Billy Bookcase” (1979).

As a whole, the canon is a summary of artistic ideas throughout history. Specifically, it is the physical embodiment of the technological, aesthetic, political and social forces of each time period. In the teaching of art and design history, the canon is quite useful because it provides clear and succinct examples that quickly summarize the major talking points of every time period. During the teaching of a broad historical survey that rapidly speeds through the decades and centuries each week, the canon is a practical tool that conveniently summarizes the artistic output of an era.

However, the canon can also be quite restrictive because it consists of only specially selected examples of the artistic output that has occurred. Like a “greatest hits” compilation album that omits lesser-known and more challenging songs of a musician, the danger of the canon is that one or two artworks end up representing an entire time period, which is a complete over-simplification of history.

In an art and design history course, while it is obviously impossible to discuss every artistic product that was ever produced, it is possible to “curate” a more inclusive selection of examples. This inclusiveness refers both to the actual works of art and design presented in class and also to the people who produced them – not only women, minorities, and other ethnicities, but also those intermediaries not usually considered in standard art and design histories such as patrons, collectors, advisors, governments, corporations, manufacturers, and even the actual users of objects. In addition, this inclusiveness also includes the forums and institutions through which the art and design objects are distributed. In this way, the discussion moves beyond museums, galleries, academies, and specialized journals towards alternative spaces of art in the public realm and the popular press, television, advertising and the Internet.

2. Women

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It is a well-known fact that the “Western white male” (Wwm) dominates the history of art and design. This is partly due to that fact that the Wwm has dominated the production of art throughout history, but it is also due to the fact that the Wwm has dominated the writing of art history, excluding any contributions by any female, non-white producers when it did happen. To teach “beyond the canon” in terms of gender parity does NOT mean showing one woman artist per lecture. Instead, it means revealing the reasons and processes whereby women have been excluded from both the production of art and their inclusion into art history.

Chronologically proceeding through the centuries, it is possible to highlight women artists who were either denied proper training or not acknowledged for their output. In Ancient Rome, Helena of Egypt has recently been credited with producing the Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii (100 BCE). Many of the manuscript illuminators of the medieval period were women working out of convents and nunneries. Similarly, recent scholarship has revealed that The Bayeaux Tapestry, a medieval wall-hanging that is part of the canon, seems to have been made by a workshop of women, either under the direction of an aristocrat or within the confines of a nunnery.

During the Renaissance, Lavinia Fontana is significant because she worked independently from royal courts and convents, painting portraits and religious scenes. Tintoretto’s daughter, Marietta Robusti, is also worth mentioning because she contributed to much of the backgrounds of her father’s paintings, even possibly painting all of Tintoretto’s “Old Man and Boy” herself. The Baroque time period is represented by Artemisia Gentileschi, whose dramatic lighting style matches Caravaggio. The Rococo time period is represented by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, portrait painter to Marie Antoinette.

In the nineteenth century, the new genre of photography interested many women, such as Julia Margaret Cameron and Gertrude Käsebier because of its lack of tradition and institutional affiliations. In the twentieth century, the equal role of female spouses and partners who have been ignored or written out of history – Lily Reich (Mies van der Rohe), Charlotte Perriand (Le Corbusier), Ray Eames (Charles Eames), Denise Scott-Brown (Robert Venturi), just to name a few – must be acknowledged and written back into history.

3. The Other

In discussing non-Western examples to teach “beyond the canon,” it is important that these are not simply presented as “what was occurring during a certain time period outside the west.” That is, the purpose of such examples is to actually challenge the (hi)story of art as told by the West. For example, the Indus Valley seals that date from c. 2000 BCE pre-date any such technology in the West by at least 2,000 years. Other examples include the “One Million Pagodas” commissioned by the Empress Shōtoku (718–770) which foreshadow the mass-production of the West by 1,000 years, and the first Great Mosque of Djenné (1200-1330), which was just as structurally ambitious than the French Gothic cathedrals of the same time period.

The “craft” aspect to non-Western art often excludes it from the canon, but since the distinction between “art” and “craft” is a Western concept anyway, this is easily broken down, allowing Ashanti *kente* cloth, Japanese *kagome* basket weaving, Guatemalan worry dolls, Zulu beadworks, Yemeni silver smithing, Vietnamese bronze-casting, Inuit figurines and Argentinian Gaucho belt buckles to enter the discussion.

Lastly, with regards to the introduction of “non-Western art” into the canon, the main point to keep in mind is not “difference” but “similarity.” That is, to think of these culture as different – as non-West – naturally results in their being categorized as “other.” Values such as familial ties, spiritual needs, identity construction and technological innovation are universally shared around the world and can serve as a starting point for presenting non-canonical artworks within an art and design survey.

4. Intermediaries

Because the canon focuses on individual artists producing individual artworks, it easily loses sight of the many other parties involved to envision, produce and distribute art. These can be clients and/or patrons like kings, queens, popes and even the modern industrialist, who, since they are paying for the work(s) have a huge influence on the forms produced. Patrons of Renaissance paintings often specified not only the subject matter, but also who would be depicted, in what manner, and in what relationship to each other – a fact that tremendously takes away from the independence of the artist. Another intermediary in the art world is the collector, who often times can also influence the form of artistic output by informing the art world what he/she would like to collect.

Governments and corporations, besides commissioning artworks – especially buildings – have also played a part in the production of art and design that is often overlooked. Although radically different in their organization and day-to-day operations, they are both large institutions that can influence the

production of art through subsidies, policy-making and sponsorship. These are all subtle aspects of the production of art and design, but nevertheless, deserve to be highlighted when such conditions exist.

Lastly, especially in the world of mass-produced designed objects, manufacturers, and even actual users can very often take credit for some of the forms that are produced. By means of value engineering, production processes, material choice(s), and even color choice(s), a manufacturer is able to “have their say” about the final outcome of a design. Similarly, the users of products – both test users and actual purchasers – can make comments and suggestions that are frequently taken into consideration, ranging from the physical to the philosophical.

5. Forums

Museums, galleries, academies, and specialized journals are the locations where art and design is officially exhibited and distributed. It is through these vehicles that the very notion of art is defined and re-affirmed. However, outside of these locations, art and design can exist. Very often, objects, styles, and personalities from the world of art and design can be found in other locations such as the popular press, television, advertising and the Internet.

In the teaching of art and design history, the author actively seeks such situations and reveals them to the class. For example, in a survey of modern architecture, the author will point out Pierre Koenig’s “Case Study House #22” (1959) has been used as a filming location for TV shows, films, music videos and commercial; how John Lautner’s “Sheats/Goldstein House” (1963) features in *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers, 1998), and Frank Gehry’s cameo appearance as himself in season 16, episode 14 of *The Simpsons*.

The world of pop culture often borrows from the world of art and design, sometimes more blatantly than not. The author also seeks out such examples to highlight in class: the “Last of the Mohicans” album cover for Bow Wow Wow by Nick Egan (1982) is a direct translation of Manet’s “Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe,” 1863; the “De Stijl” album cover for The White Stripes, (2000) is a summary of the Dutch De Stijl movement; and Shephard Fairey’s “Saks Fifth Avenue ‘Want It’ Advertising Campaign” (2009) is a summary of the Russian Constructivism movement. Often, *New Yorker* cartoons also help in this crossover, particularly those commenting on abstract art.

Lastly, feature films are very useful in depicting the same topics discussed in class. The author consistently uses clips from – amongst others – “Gladiator” (Ridley Scott, 2000) to visualize a non-ruined Colosseum; “Girl with Pearl Earring” (Peter Webber, 2003) to show the *camera obscura*; “Memoirs of a Geisha” (Rob Marshall, 2005) to accurately understand Japanese art and landscape. Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times” (1936) provides an excellent criticism of industrialized and commercialized society. Similarly, Jacques Tati’s “Mon Oncle” (1956) compares and contrasts an older, traditional French town with its newer, modern outskirts much better than any in-class discussion could accomplish.

6. Beyond the Canon

In conclusion, teaching “beyond the canon” means being a creative teacher. It means not being content with the textbooks that are assigned to the class. It means thinking “out of the box.” It means seeking out examples that challenge both yourself and the students. It means always striving to present a well-rounded picture of the production of art and design throughout history. It means not favoring any one culture, geography, gender, religion, individual, organization or method of delivery. In the end, the students will be receiving what they are seeking: an education.