

# Select Graduate Program Courses from Recent Years

Below you'll find a selection of 500-level graduate seminars that have been held by the Graduate Program in recent years. A full list of courses for the current academic year as well as past courses in the Graduate Program and across Williams College can be found on the [College Catalog](#).

## **Sonic Ecologies: Queer Listening, Orientations, and Objects**

Caitlin Woolsey (Assistant Director, Research and Academic Program (RAP), Clark Art Institute)

This seminar considers sound, the aural imagination, and practices of listening in visual art and time-based media. Focusing on work produced in the 20th and 21st centuries, we will explore theoretical, media, aesthetic, and reception issues through an intersectional lens. While we will focus on queer theory and related artworks and art historical accounts, the course will also draw heavily on recent writings on and artistic practices that take up other related aspects of "ecology" broadly understood: interspecies relationality, the environment, the climate crisis, and scholarship grounded in the specificity of critical race theory, Latinx, Caribbean, and diasporic studies. Readings will tend toward the theoretical—from Sara Ahmed and José Esteban Muñoz to Tina Campt and Ren Ellis Neyra, among many others—but will be accompanied by art historical accounts and each class meeting will be grounded by in-depth discussion of several specific works of art. When resonant, we will take advantage of access to relevant exhibitions, performances, or events at the Clark, Williams College Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, or Bennington College. The course will prioritize student-facilitated discussion, and student work will be focused on producing a substantial research paper (with an option to produce a hybrid research/creative project, developed in conversation with the instructor). Undergraduates welcome with permission of the course instructor.

## **The Printed Image in Early Modern Europe**

Michael Gaudio (2023–24 Clark Visiting Professor)

The technology of mechanically reproducing complex visual images on paper, a development of fifteenth-century Europe, transformed the early modern world no less than the emergence of digital media has transformed our own. Techniques of woodcut, engraving and etching quickly became important media for innovation within the fine arts. At the same time, they became equally important as sources for devotional imagery, for disseminating copies of other artworks, for the expansion of knowledge through scientific illustration, and for the effective broadcasting of political and religious messages during centuries of extraordinary political and religious upheaval. In this seminar we will investigate the cultural history of printed images in Europe from the time of their emergence in the fifteenth century through the mid-eighteenth century, focusing on the changing cultural circumstances of their production and reception. We will consider the work of major printmakers such as Mantegna, Dürer, Goltzius, Rembrandt, Callot, Hogarth, and Piranesi, but also that of many lesser-known (and anonymous) artists.

## **Land, Memory, Materiality: Histories and Futures of Indigenous North American Arts**

Christine DeLucia (Associate Professor of History, Williams College)

This course engages Indigenous North American traditions of expression, remembrance, and representation in both historical and future-facing ways. Drawing upon diverse Native American and First Nations theories and practices, it ranges widely across the continent to consider Indigenous arts and material culture within specific cultural and political contexts. Part of the course is grounded in the Native

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Northeast, including the Indigenous homelands of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Community in which the Graduate Art Program is situated. Other units will focus on continuities and transformations in maker-traditions within and across specific Indigenous nations and communities. The course is especially interested in connections between past and present, and the innovative ways Indigenous artists, makers, and knowledge-keepers have reckoned with what has come before, while also mapping meaningful future pathways. Topics will include repatriation and community-led restorative efforts to bring home ancestors and important heritage items “collected” over the centuries following 1492; concepts and practices of cultural sovereignty, as well as of decolonizing museums; the complex dynamics of collaboration; and Indigenous challenges to Eurocentric approaches to preservation, interpretation, and classification. Class members will develop familiarity with methods and ethics grounded in Native American and Indigenous Studies, and with new scholarship by leading and emerging critics and creators.

## **The Scene of Decapitation in European Art**

Marc Gotlieb (Halvorsen Director, Graduate Program in the History of Art, Williams College)

From Goliath to Medusa, from Judith to Salome, from the invention of the guillotine to the mythology of the executioner under “Oriental despotism,” the “scene” of decapitation has long stood as a central focus of European art and letters. This course examines that scene as an artistic, psychological, and intellectual problematic across painting, sculpture, and other media, from the late middle ages to the end of the nineteenth century. Although part and parcel of the larger spectacle of juridical punishment, the scene of decapitation arguably constitutes its own series, and for this reason has attracted numerous artists and a prestigious literature. Artists include Caravaggio, Artemisia Gentileschi, Théodore Géricault, Gustave Moreau, Henri Regnault, and numerous others. Interdisciplinary readings as well as a large body of art historical literature. Weekly readings, discussion, oral presentation, and research paper on a relevant topic from 1300 to 1900.

## **Islam and the Image**

Murad K. Mumtaz (Assistant Professor of Art, Williams College)

This seminar responds to a recent incident at a US liberal arts university where a professor was sacked for showing images of Prophet Muhammad as part of her section on Islamic art. Why is image-making so hotly contested in Islam? What is the history of figural depictions in this tradition? The seminar explores artworks made for Muslim patrons from the medieval period to the modern era, considering how paintings produced for Muslim audiences can be situated within the frameworks of “Islamic art,” a loaded historiographical term that has been questioned in recent times. The seminar also addresses some of the major problems that continue to haunt art scholarship in the field. For most of its history, the academic study of Islamic art has seldom considered contemporaneous literary voices that shed light on the motivations behind artworks. Furthermore, the historiography, deeply entrenched in its colonial and orientalist roots, has largely isolated images from their supporting texts—a curious oversight in light of the fact that painting in Muslim lands has historically been primarily an art of the book. These biases have affected the way museums have collected, displayed and interpreted paintings. For example, Western museums continue to place figural depictions made for books and albums in “South Asian” collections while textual manuscripts and calligraphic specimens made for the same Muslim audiences—even at times bound in the same albums—are categorized as “Islamic art.” What does this isolation of text from image imply about prevailing views of Islamic art? To better understand the cultural, historical and religious context surrounding artworks students will read primary literature ranging from autobiography to devotional poetry, often written by the very patrons and subjects of the paintings to be discussed.

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## **Afro-Cosmopolitans 1935–1955**

Kobena Mercer (2022–23 Clark Visiting Professor)

Black modernism became a transnational formation during the 1940s in an era of anticolonial upheaval that witnessed the demise of the imperial world order. Reframing the midcentury period, which is often seen as a mere transition from Social Realism to Abstract Expressionism, we delve into the aesthetic innovations of African American, Caribbean, and African artists whose critical positionality on the politics of race aligned with the intellectual outlook of the Black Radical Tradition expressed by such thinkers as W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright. As we track the choices by which Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett and others challenged the category of “folk art” in the Depression era, we explore how the vernacular Africanisms that Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham discovered in West Indian religions resonated with the cross-cultural concerns of Wifredo Lam in Cuba and Edna Manley in Jamaica. With Pierre Verger’s photographs of Afro-Brazilian rituals adding to our scope of inquiry, the seminar seeks to assemble a synthesis of interpretive approaches toward a deeper understanding of the abstraction produced by Ernest Mancoba in South Africa and by Aubrey Williams in post-war London.

## **Circa 1850: Artistic Currents and Cross-Currents**

Anne Leonard (Manton Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, Clark Art Institute)

Although the history of nineteenth-century European art has often been narrated as a succession of “isms,” the notion of discrete artistic movements following one upon the other is of course highly misleading. Despite common perceptions of Realism as the prevailing force at mid-century, many contradictory impulses were simultaneously at work. The Romantic strain in visual art continued, though sometimes in sublimated form, and historicizing and avant-garde perspectives alike jockeyed for influence in art criticism, sales rooms, and exhibition venues. Abetting this collision of styles was a proliferation of new media in visual culture more broadly. Focusing on European and American examples from the middle decades of the nineteenth century, this course addresses the emergence of new tendencies in art and the persistence or revival of old ones. We will explore a variety of topics, including the invention of photography and its impact on other image-making techniques; the opening of Japan and the vogue for Japonisme; medieval nostalgia in the face of rampant Haussmannization; and the role of tradition in vanguard art. On the American side, we will consider printmaking and photography as tools of documentation and self-fashioning during the Civil War era. This course will take place in the Manton Study Center for Works on Paper. Each session will engage directly with works from the Clark’s collection, to be discussed and analyzed in conjunction with critical and theoretical readings.

## **Contours of Abstraction in Modern and Contemporary Art**

Mari Rodriguez Binnie (Assistant Professor of Art, Williams College)

Abstraction, be it gestural or geometrical, was a protagonist of global modernisms and continues to be a powerful visual language in contemporary art. The term “abstraction” may first appear straightforward, but its associations are quite complex: in varying historical contexts, abstraction has signaled formalist rupture, revolutionary politics, appropriation, as well as racial, feminist, and queer critique. We will delve deeply into abstraction in global modern and contemporary art through myriad primary documents and theoretical frameworks so as to revise and expand its canonical contours and cartographies.

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## **Interspecies Beings: Demigods and Monsters in Art and Culture, Ancient to Modern**

Guy M. Hedreen (Amos Lawrence Professor of Art, Williams College)

Horse-men, cat-women, bull-men, mermaids, snake-people: interspecies creatures are everywhere in ancient Greek and Roman art and poetry. Embodied in satyrs, sphinxes, centaurs, nymphs, and other part-human, part-animal beings is an alternative evolutionary and cultural history. In it, humans and animals live as one. There is no distinction between nature and culture. Male and female are equal. The industrial revolution never happens. This course traces the history of interspecies beings from their origin in ancient Greek art and poetry until today. Three points are important: 1) the relationship between the imagery and ancient political theory about “primitive” life; 2) evolving conceptions of biology and the environment, and 3) the role played by interspecies beings in the conceptualization of what is possible in art. The first half of the course examines the origins and character of interspecies beings in works of ancient art such as the Parthenon, and in ancient writers including Hesiod and Ovid. We examine relevant religious practices, materialist conceptions of nature, and biological theories of speciation, in Empedokles, On nature, Euripides’ Bakchai, Plato’s Phaidros, and Lucretius’ De rerum natura. The second half of the course investigates the survival of classical monsters in the work of early-modern artists such as Botticelli, Michelangelo, Titian, and Dürer, and the rediscovery of ancient materialist theory. We consider the role played by interspecies beings in the formation of late modernism in art and literature. Key texts include Rousseau and Hobbes, Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, Mallarmé’s “L’Après midi d’une faun,” and Stoppard’s Arcadia. Problems include the relationship between nymphs and sex-workers in Manet, the meaning of the Minotaur in Picasso, and the interest in interspecies beings in the work of women surrealists such as Leonora Carrington. We conclude with contemporary popular culture such as the Hunger Games.

## **Facing Portraiture**

Dina Murokh (Assistant Director, Graduate Program in the History of Art, Williams College)

What constitutes a portrait? How do portraits act in the world? What histories do they hold, and what stories can they tell? This seminar will explore how artists, sitters, viewers, and historians have approached this genre and to what ends. We will interrogate the possibilities and limits of portraiture; examine how portraiture encodes forms of difference through ideological claims to power, likeness, and self-possession; and explore how technological developments inform portraiture’s shifting private and public uses. Attending to historical and cultural specificity—with particular though not exclusive attention to the post-1800 period and the United States—we will also excavate the genre’s legacy by exploring its contemporary presence, asking what concerns shape conceptions of portraiture in contexts such as the National Portrait Gallery’s triennial Outwin Competition and popular discourse. Bridging past and present, and in conversation with objects held in the collections of the Clark, WCMA, and the Chapin Library, we will work toward our own definition of portraiture and, in so doing, discover and complicate the relationship between personhood, identity, and representation. *Students are welcome to develop final projects on relevant topics and materials outside the temporal and geographic contexts addressed in class.*

## **Art and Conservation: An Inquiry into History, Methods, and Materials**

Williamstown Art Conservation Center (WACC)

In this course students will learn to recognize the materials present in cultural heritage collections, understand the history of artist’s methods and techniques, and hone their observation and examination skills when working with material culture. Students will form a basis in art conservation and condition assessment vocabulary and will exercise handling and examination skills for a variety of materials and

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artworks present during each session. Those who are planning careers involving work with cultural materials will explore cultural heritage through the lens of the art conservator and form a broader awareness of the ethics and procedures of conservation and preservation. An understanding of the vulnerabilities and condition issues of cultural materials and how to care for them will be developed as an impactful, practical resource for future careers in cultural heritage. A multi-disciplinary group of teachers from the staff at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center (WACC) will conduct lectures, practicums, discussions on conservation research literature and visits to nearby art institutions.

## **Museums: History and Practice**

Michael Conforti (Director Emeritus, Clark Art Institute)

Art museums express the cultural, aesthetic, and social ideals of their period of formation and many of those ideals remain embedded in the values and practices of institutions today. Comparing institutions past and present internationally, seminar participants will envision the art museum's future while addressing programmatic and organizational challenges at this moment of participatory civic engagement and social, political unrest. With growing skepticism of institutional collecting practices and authoritative narratives, art museums, especially those in the United States, face internal and external pressure to "decolonize" as they attempt to alter their canon through acquisition, deaccessioning, and repatriation initiatives. There is pressure, as well, to embrace a more active role in climate and social justice movements. It is a time also marked by calls for compensation transparency, participatory decision making, staff and trustee diversity, and greater scrutiny of funders. The seminar will consider this environment against past and current norms of governance, management and curatorial policies and practices. We will examine the traditional role of architecture and installation in interpretation and experience, prevailing and proposed guidelines in the accessioning and deaccessioning of works of art and both internal and external attitudes towards the repatriation and restitution of cultural property. Studying museums ranging in size and type from the "encyclopedia" to newly established contemporary arts institutions and alternative spaces, seminar participants will hear how museum leaders are dealing with challenges to current practice through weekly zoom sessions. Through the work of the seminar, participants will consider how future museums might strive to balance the institution's traditional scholarly and artistic role with new civic and social responsibilities, mindful of financial stability in a market-driven, metric-conscious, not-for-profit environment, doing so while addressing, in proposed program and practice, the demands on museums emanating from a more ethically insistent internal and external world.

## **Expository Writing** (required in first-year spring)

Ezra D. Feldman (Lecturer in English and Science and Technology Studies, Williams College)

This writing seminar will afford intensive full group discussions of writing skills and substantial one-on-one writing consultations. Group discussions will center on three kinds of texts: Writing about writing, published writing related to the discipline of Art History, and student writing in progress. In six group discussions we will improve our vocabulary and method for discussing writing; we will learn to build better and more sophisticated sentences, paragraphs, and arguments; and we will practice anticipatory reading and writing in order to strengthen our control of both voice and structure. Each discussion will be supported with examples and exercises, and our watchword in all cases will be "revision." In one-on-one consultations (3–4 per person), the instructor will offer tailored critiques of each student's work, setting aside time as needed to troubleshoot sentences, paragraphs, or arguments together.