

The Subjective Eye

*Essays in Culture, Religion, and Gender
in Honor of Margaret R. Miles*

edited by
Richard Valantasis

in collaboration with
Deborah J. Haynes
James D. Smith III
Janet F. Carlson

Pickwick Publications

An imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
193 West 8th Avenue • Eugene OR 97401

THE SUBJECTIVE EYE

Essays in Culture, Religion, and Gender in Honor of Margaret R. Miles
Princeton Theological Monograph Series 59

Copyright © 2006 Richard Valantasis. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf & Stock, 199 W. 8th Ave., Eugene, OR 97401.

ISBN: 1-59752-519-7

Cataloging-in-Publication data:

The subjective eye : essays in culture, religion, and gender in honor of Margaret R. Miles / edited by Richard Valantasis, in collaboration with Deborah J. Haynes, James D. Smith III, and Janet E. Carlson.

Eugene, Ore. : Pickwick Publications, 2006
Princeton Theological Monograph Series 59

xxx + 356 p. : 23 cm.

ISBN 1-59752-519-7

1. Church history—primitive and early church, 30-600. 2. Mediterranean region—Church history. 3. Christian art and symbolism. 4. Christian martyrs. 5. Women—religious aspects. 6. Women and religion. 7. Aesthetics. I. Miles, Margaret R. (Margaret Ruth), 1937. II. Valantasis, Richard. III. Haynes, Deborah J. IV. Smith, James D. III. V. Carlson, Janet. VI. Title. VII. Series.

BV150 S78 2006

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Toward a Pedagogy for Comparative Visual Studies

Deborah J. Haynes

Introduction

THIS essay concerns what Ernest Boyer called "the scholarship of teaching."¹ The issues I address have broad roots in discussions about pedagogy in arts education, particularly as it relates to the study of religion. Consideration of the nature of education in the visual arts is ongoing, but I see now a reemphasis on the question of what a dynamic and holistic arts education should be. For many years, my scholarly work has focused on the interrelationships of art and religion: first, making art that grew out of a broadly religious impulse; then studying world religions, theology, and art history; and now teaching what I call "comparative visual studies" to art history and studio art students. I believe that responsible pedagogy in the arts includes a global and comparative approach to visual studies and that the integration of art history and the study of religion with the practice of art is crucial to this approach.

The purpose of the essay is to articulate, first, what comparative visual studies means; second, to describe its methodology; and third, to describe briefly two new course initiatives that seek to embody these methods. The essay thus moves from the general and theoretical toward the specific. Before getting into these discussions, however, it will be useful to consider a fundamental question.

¹ Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 23–25.

What do students most need to learn right now, at the outset of the twenty-first century? I am convinced that aspiring artists must learn to deal with moral, religious, and metaphysical ideas. This conviction was born of my own artistic work, nearly thirty years of contemplative practice, and sustained study of the world's religious and cultural traditions. I believe that, in addition to rigorous technical training, young artists need to develop a relationship to tradition. Many people, including artists, express deeply felt cynicism and nihilism about the world in which we live. Such attitudes can only be challenged by developing a more comprehensive perspective on the present and by developing alternative visions of the future. Training for aspiring artists in observation, contemplation, and visualization can have a profound affect on their intellectual and spiritual development. An important foundation for artistic creativity involves the cultivation of such skills.

In addition, students need thorough training in visual literacy, which will prepare them for analyzing contemporary culture. Much has been written about the rapidly changing media culture that dominates our lives today, but education in the arts and technology is just beginning to address this issue. Comparative visual studies offers one avenue for helping students understand, analyze, and criticize the impact of our consumer-based media culture.

What is Comparative Visual Studies?

Recently an analysis of what is being taught in art schools appeared in the journal *Art News*.² This magazine is addressed to a wide public audience that is interested in the visual arts. There are many challenges to education in the arts today, including the impact of new technologies and the emergence of quite diverse art forms that did not exist fifty years ago. Today's students and artists must therefore be trained to communicate clearly about their work and to relate that creative work to both the contemporary world and historical traditions. As Tony Jones, Dean of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago has said, "Artists today require so much more world knowledge, cultural knowledge than we've ever seen before."³

I share with Dutch art historian Kitty Zijlmans a sense of the importance of introducing art history in a global perspective, rather than in a narrow national European or American context. There are at least three reasons for such study.⁴ First, within contemporary art, we see an increasingly global

² Gail Gregg, "What Are They Teaching Art Students These Days?," *Art News* (April 2003) 106-9.

³ Gregg, "What Are They Teaching," 107.

⁴ Kitty Zijlmans, "The 'Art History' of non-Western Cultures," lecture given at Edinburgh

orientation. The various large international exhibitions from *Documenta* to the *Venice Biennale* have provided important contexts for looking at the art of diverse peoples. But what about the art that is produced locally, in regions from central Australia to the Middle East, from the Southwest to the Pacific Northwest coast? Our curiosity can be the guide in exploring and finding out about this art. Second, many people already have easy access to the entire world, if not through travel, then through the technologies of mass communication from television to the Internet. If we have the resources, we can travel, learn others' languages, and see their art. Yet, I realize that this "if" is huge, for the privileges of race, ethnicity, and class often define the ability to travel. Third, the populations of many countries, including the United States, are increasingly multicultural, and this is reflected in the art that is exhibited in galleries. In June 2003, for instance, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, Colorado, hosted its biennial exhibition. The show featured twenty artists from diverse cultural backgrounds—including Hispanic, African American, and Asian American artists—all of whom are, first of all, Americans living in Colorado.

Comparative visual studies builds on this rationale for a global art history. But just what do each of the terms in this title mean?

There are certainly many reasons for using a *comparative* methodology. Jonathan Z. Smith, an historian of religions, has written vividly about the cognitive importance of comparison: "The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence. Whether revealed in the logical grouping of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other like activities—comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought. Without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason."⁵ In short, comparison allows us to speak about and ultimately to understand what we see.

Yet comparing examples of art from different visual traditions is also problematic, for too often scholars settle for emphasizing similarities and not acknowledging differences. I have come to understand this through my own experience of focusing more on similarities between Russian Orthodox icons and Himalayan Buddhist *thangkas* during my initial years of studying them, and less on important cultural differences.

Analyzing the similarity, unity, and universality of images across cultures has provided powerful insight for generations of students, but learning

College of Art, conference titled "Framing Art History: Reflections on the Discipline," March 13–15, 2003.

⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, SJLA 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1976) 240.

to respect and understand difference has become even more important in contemporary society under the impact of globalization. More than anything else, offering students the opportunity to compare the art of unique cultural traditions helps them to develop both perceptual and analytical skills.

Comparative *visual* studies considers how we see the world and how we see images and representations of the world. It focuses on the interpretation of what we see, looking beyond the confines of traditional Eurocentric art history and beyond traditional approaches to studying world art.

It may be distinguished from *visual culture* studies, which also is comparative and often cross-cultural. Visual culture studies is a hybrid and complex inter-disciplinary enterprise that formed at the convergence of a variety of disciplines and methodologies.⁶ Visual culture itself is an ever-moving and constantly changing entity and process, especially as artists and non-artists alike grapple with the evolution of new technologies. As Nicholas Mirzoeff put it, "Visual culture is the study of the hypervisuality of contemporary everyday life and its genealogies."⁷ The term does not usually imply either a particular national culture, or distinctions between high and low, elite and popular, historical and contemporary cultures.

By contrast, visual studies seeks neither to define "culture," which is one of the most complex words in the English language,⁸ nor does it focus so explicitly on contemporary life. Visual studies examines the interrelationships of artist-creator, object, and viewer within specific contexts. To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, the questions we ask produce the field of inquiry, not some *a priori* body of materials that determine what questions can be asked.⁹ Comparative visual studies examines visual phenomena, as well as the way particular art forms address the body, mind, and spirit of the viewer within particular cultural contexts, but "culture" in all of its intricacies is not the primary focus.

Nevertheless it is important to remember that, as Karel van Kooij notes, "waves of culture" may be a more appropriate phrase to use than "areas of

⁶ See, for instance, discussions in John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997) 1–4; and Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Both books contain extensive bibliographies. An excellent resource on the arena of visual studies is James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003). His discussions of visual studies and visual literacy are superb, and we share many fundamental values about how visual studies might be developed in art programs and art schools.

⁷ *College Art Association News* 28 (July 2003) 7.

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 87–93.

⁹ Gayatri Spivak, quoted by Irit Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998) 16.

culture."¹⁰ For instance, we could discuss the influence of Islam across the European continent, as well as in Africa and Asia. This term, "wave of culture" acknowledges that there are no fixed artistic definitions, and that links are forged and broken between constantly changing areas and cultures. I have wondered, for example, if there was early contact among Buddhists from the Himalayas, traveling the Silk Road on horseback with *thangka* strapped to their saddles, and Russian priests, iconographers, and holy people who might have traveled that same route, carrying their icons. The fact that the traditional training of both icon writers and *thangka* painters has so much in common has led me to ponder these possibilities.

In the wider scheme, cultures are not autonomous, but instead are mutually connected and at certain points can be compared with each other.¹¹ We must therefore reexamine traditional art historical assumptions that there is a fixed hierarchy within the arts, a model where most of the world is seen as subordinate to the European West, and where certain art forms such as painting have priority. Such an approach provides fruitful opportunities for students to think about the interrelationships of geography and history, religion and art.

Comparative visual studies can be based on a number of methodologies and disciplinary perspectives, including those derived from art history, art theory, the study of religion, and anthropology of art, as well as studio practice. It can be based on particular themes such as color, cultural myths, or symbolic systems or on careful study of the affinities and differences between the arts of diverse cultures. My comparisons are explicitly based upon the affinities, analogies, and differences between the artistic practices of quite disparate traditions. From this point of view, individual disciplines and their analytical methods become tools to be used, with care and conscious understanding.

Another aspect of comparative visual studies is the reintegration of studio practice and the study of art history. We need to ask what kind of knowledge comes from looking and what comes from making. Can visual literacy be authentic if the body and mind, eye and hand, are not connected? Motor and sensory-based training developed through drawing, for instance, can greatly help a student to see. Understanding the cultural significance of color is greatly aided by studying not only the European color theories of Goethe, Johannes Itten, and others, but also by experience and experimentation with Tibetan color theories such as that of the fifteenth-century scholar Bo-dong

¹⁰ Noted in Zijlmans "Art History." Van Kooij is an art historian at Leiden University.

¹¹ Zijlmans, "Art History."

Pan-chen. Such knowledge is best developed pragmatically, through studio exercises.

My point here is to try to reveal the starting point and assumptions that may guide work in comparative visual studies. Hopefully, this will help to create space for a dialogue about other possible approaches and concepts of art, art's histories, and practices.

Methodology

It is probably easier to describe what comparative visual studies is and could be than to define a specific methodology for teachers and students to use in their study. I am reminded of Mary Daly's cautions against what she calls "methodolatry," an idolatry of method that can cripple creativity and seem to offer easy answers about how to approach challenging material.¹² I have learned much from the work and writing of Margaret R. Miles in this arena, especially about how to understand images and their power to create and inform the self and how images teach and inculcate culturally specific values. Much of what follows is modeled on her published work.

I would identify five key factors in a methodology for comparative visual studies:

- 1) developing a "hermeneutics of generosity" combined with a "hermeneutics of suspicion"
- 2) cultivating a practice that Miles calls "reading for life"
- 3) consistently linking texts and images to their social and historical context
- 4) selecting and developing a personal repertoire of images
- 5) incorporating contemplative practice as a key pedagogical element.

Developing a Complex Hermeneutics

Usually, hermeneutics is based on the assumption that interpretation and understanding develop through a circular process. The nature of this hermeneutical circle has been variously described by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and others. Understanding evolves through a back-and-forth movement between reader and text, between parts of a text and the whole text, between viewer and image, between the past and present. It involves awareness of both the presuppositions of the text or image and its author or creator, as well as the

¹² See Mary Daly's definition of methodolatry in *Webster's First New Intergalactic Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon, 1987) 82.

presuppositions of the reader, viewer, and critic. Interpretation should also take account of the historicity of both text and reader, image and viewer.

But a more complex hermeneutics would combine both generous and critical or suspicious interpretations. In traditional textual interpretation, as Miles has pointed out, a hermeneutics of generosity would lead to trying to understand critically the meaning of ideas presented in a text, but without particular attention to the author's political commitments, institutional loyalties, or assumptions about gender and other markers of difference.¹³ Such a hermeneutics of generosity would not attempt to articulate either the complex relationship of language use to implicit and explicit power structures or issues of racism, sexism, or gender asymmetry in a text. By contrast, a hermeneutics of suspicion would address these issues directly. Keeping in mind how a hermeneutics of suspicion may be tempered by a hermeneutics of generosity leads to more nuanced interpretation and understanding.

Reading for Life

Clearly, reading refers to textual practices and to literature, but we might well talk about images as texts to be read or about their intertextual qualities. Traditionally, reading and viewing or watching are considered to be passive activities, while writing and speaking are more active and effective ways to learn. However, in her 1997 book, *Reading for Life*, Miles used the metaphor of reading to offer a comprehensive methodology for approaching texts of all kinds, including visual images and works of art. To read "for life" is to train the habit of attentive listening and critical evaluation that we need in all dimensions of life.¹⁴

There are a number of characteristics of or ingredients in reading for life. We learn to identify the serious, gathering pictures of the world, including warnings, detailed information, and instruction about how to proceed in our daily lives. We practice (re)imagining the self, learning that each of us has a responsibility in relation to the crises and critical issues of our time. We learn to read and to view generously, trying to hear what the author or artist is trying to communicate. We acknowledge that being interconnected with all of life requires active moral responsibility, and we begin to understand that reading is practice for living responsibly. We encounter and perceive great beauty, which is connected to generosity of spirit and responsibility. As Miles wrote so eloquently in her 1996 DuBose lectures, "If perceptions

¹³ Margaret R. Miles, "Theological Education in a Religious Diverse World," *IbEd* 23 (1987).

¹⁴ Miles, *Reading for Life: Beauty, Pluralism, and Responsibility* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

of beauty really do produce spontaneous generosity which, in turn, augment responsibility, it is crucial to know how these effects might be generated and stimulated.¹⁵ *How we read and how we look affect how we live.*

Linking Texts and Images to Their Context

Many forms of analysis and criticism now take for granted that civil, economic, and social life, history, geography, and a variety of other factors form a matrix that must be taken into account when studying cultural artifacts. This is essential in comparative visual studies if students are to have more than a rudimentary ability to identify works of art from diverse cultural contexts.

Images always convey particular meanings to particular viewers and are as significant as verbal language in conveying senses of self, relationship, and community. We must understand, however, that the visual experience of historical viewers differed from that of people today in several ways. The understanding of and theories about vision were different. In the past, images were often experienced in the context of worship and piety. There has also been a tremendous increase in the quantity and impact of visual images. In interpreting images, whether historical or contemporary, we need to look at their reception and not only at the intentions of patrons, commissioners, or artists.

A key element in understanding particular cultural contexts is religious and cultural pluralism. Whether dealing with individual and cultural differences, differences among religious traditions, differences between historical and contemporary arts, or differences among artistic practices, we should oscillate between acknowledgment of particularity and unity, between differentiation from and identity with "the other," in whatever guise we encounter otherness. Such ideas have profound implications for both our public and private lives.

In addition, some images are used in devotional practice, while others are more aptly described as promoting contemporary media spectatorship. In both studying about and creating artworks, students learn that all images can be manipulated. Images inform, socialize, and attract or repel us. Although the meanings of images change dramatically over time, their power over us does not. It therefore behooves us to help students develop sophisticated methods for interpreting images that take into account when, where, and why they were made.

¹⁵ Miles, "Reading for Life: Hermeneutics of Generosity and Suspicion," (The William Porcher DuBose Lectures) *STR* 41 (1997) 51.

Developing a Repertoire of Images

Elsewhere I have written about a formative experience in a graduate art history seminar at Harvard University.¹⁶ Professor Oleg Grabar urged us to learn about monuments of world art. It did not matter what our particular cultural or historical interests were. To paraphrase his exhortation: "Choose ten monuments from around the world . . . and learn everything there is to know about them." Over the subsequent years, I have developed a repertoire of images from various times and cultures that I use in my teaching and creative work. These monuments serve as points of reference, touchstones for interpreting the present and for thinking about the power of art in the future.

But it is not enough simply to urge students to learn in depth about individual works of art. How does one train oneself and one's students to choose and use images? We must become aware of the messages we receive from images, question images presented in the media, and develop an understanding of how representation functions.

Images have the power to provoke repression, but as Miles has shown, there is also the productive role of feeling, emotion, and the body in our responses to works of art. In *Carnal Knowing*, she most vividly articulated her view that an accurate understanding of the power of representation must include a social theory of the subject; that is, a theory of how socialization, subjectification, and sexualization are developed using both verbal and visual languages.¹⁷ Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Miles argued that a repression hypothesis is inadequate for understanding either the power of images or the construction of women's subjectivity. Productive forces of attraction and regulated desire also help individuals to create a self. As Miles put it, "Formation by attraction, or the creation and direction of an individual's desire, is effective, economical, and problematic because particular forms of socialization appear to be chosen and pursued rather than imposed as external requirements."¹⁸ Using Foucault's categories of weak and strong power, she emphasized that whereas weak power uses threats and physical force, strong power stimulates and attracts the individual. Images function most effectively to attract and thereby regulate our desire, and scholars must be attentive to this process. This is one of the major reasons for helping students select and develop a repertoire of images to aid in visualizing personal and social transformation.

¹⁶ Deborah J. Haynes, *Art Lessons: Meditations on the Creative Life* (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 2003) 11–12.

¹⁷ Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

Incorporating Contemplative Practice

Up to this point I have been describing, albeit briefly, a methodology that scholars and teachers in many disciplines would find congenial. In turning to contemplative practice as a pedagogical method, I move into less familiar territory; therefore, the following discussion is more thorough. Contemplative skills include:

- 1) *mindfulness*: bringing a careful ongoing awareness to the present moment
- 2) *the ability to detach from normal modes of cognition and perception*: to suspend ordinary trains of thought, and to sustain mindful attention
- 3) *concentration*: being able to let go of distracting thought and to become absorbed
- 4) *equanimity*: mental and emotional evenness in place of normal reactivity; and
- 5) *energy and zest*: in this and all endeavors.¹⁹

In general, we can cultivate such capacities through silence, prayer, meditation, and a variety of spiritual practices. In my teaching, I explore how to integrate such practices into the classroom.

Before turning to more concrete discussion of how particular course initiatives have evolved, however, I want to describe two ways of understanding contemplative practice as a pedagogical method. The first concerns how we educate the person—body, mind, and spirit. The second concerns our epistemology.

At the beginning of our new century and new millennium, and at this time of global crises and war, I am inclined to ask big questions. To paraphrase colleague Peter London, who teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, Massachusetts: What would a human being be like, if deep mindfulness were cultivated? What would an education in and through art look like, if it were concerned with the whole human being?²⁰

The body is a highly intelligent system. "Its pattern recognition is uncanny," as London has written, "its awareness is constant, its manufacturing agility without peer, its ability to surmise from the scantiest of evidence

¹⁹ This description comes from Daniel Goleman, "The Contemplative Mind: Reinventing the News," available at www.contemplativemind.org/goleman.html.

²⁰ Peter London, "Towards a Holistic Paradigm of Art Education," lecture given at School of the Visual Arts, New York City, October 2001.

unrivaled. It can improvise, heal itself . . . and so on."²¹ The body constantly monitors itself, interprets critical information, and acts autonomously on its own behalf. If we are sensitive, we observe these processes. But mostly they are opaque to us. A holistic education will attend to, and cultivate, the body's multiple intelligences. There are many sophisticated systems—from yoga and *tai-chi* to *qigong*, dance, and mindfulness-based stress reduction in American medicine—that seek to educate us about the body. All of these traditions begin by quieting the noisy mind and twitching body so that more subtle energies can be experienced.

The artful mind is a holistic mind, as London has observed. A sense of wonder and awe, a rich intuition and imagination, access to dreams, fantasies, and the unconscious: all of these are states of mind familiar to and cultivated by artists and creative people in general. But our formal educational systems have largely expunged them from the curricula. Certainly in the United States, with recent emphasis on teaching to standardized tests, the importance of teaching the whole person is not recognized.

In our fast media-saturated culture, we need to encourage students to feel wonder and awe and to fantasize and dream. We need to call upon these innate capacities within each person, to acknowledge their importance, alongside instrumental reason and cognition, and alongside the tendency to watch television passively and manipulate digital media. If we do not teach a student how to access and discipline the creative imagination, then it will languish, subject to the seductions and ever-increasing speed of ubiquitous media images.

So, how do we nurture mindfulness, in both daily life and education? Especially, how can we evoke and nurture matters of the spirit in art education?²² We must raise the perennial questions, as Paul Gauguin did in his famous 1897 painting, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* In contemporary vernacular language, we might ask, what is of ultimate value? How shall we get where we want to go, as individuals and as a people? How will we know when we have arrived? Are we nearing the end of life as we know it on the earth? To engage students with such questions is to engage in the deepest kind of educational mission. The visual arts can provide a powerful means for exploring these questions.

When all aspects of the human being are in concert, natural human behavior *is* artistic behavior. This seemingly radical proposition can be evidenced in many different forms of creativity, from cultures of all times and around the globe. The integration of body, mind, and spirit is implicit in the

²¹ London, "Towards a Holistic Paradigm."

²² This is a paraphrase of Peter London's questions, which are also my own.

training of artisans, artists, and architects and in the art produced in many cultures—in Russian Orthodox icons and Himalayan Buddhist *thangkas*; in aboriginal Australian rock carving and painting; in Haida and Tlinglit totem poles of the Pacific Northwest; in the sandpaintings and rituals of Navaho healers and shamans; in traditional Shaker architecture and artifacts; in Zen gardens such as Ryoanji in Kyoto; and in Celtic and Islamic manuscript traditions. Thus, I teach students about these arts.

Because of the strong church-state separation in public education in the U.S., it is difficult to bring religion into one's pedagogy. Obviously, this differs from the situation in many other countries and in seminaries and other educational institutions with a religious foundation. But in a secular context, two approaches have been effective. One is called "mindfulness-based stress reduction training," which is mainly offered in medical schools and has been widely publicized by Jon Kabat-Zinn; the other is called "contemplative practice as a pedagogical method," which is pertinent to my own disciplines and location in a public secular university.

Let me approach this question of contemplation as a pedagogical method from another angle, with the help of Arthur Zajonc, professor of physics at Amherst College in Massachusetts. Zajonc's radical agenda includes reframing our methods of inquiry to include the insights of contemplative practice.²³ Certainly, there is an important place for discussing religious pluralism outside of the classroom, but it is rare to speak about bringing the contemplative and spiritual back into the classroom. How this is done is obviously very important, and Zajonc suggests that we begin by considering our models of knowledge and cognition.

For instance, the modern conception of cognition is based on analytical and critical reasoning. Most of our knowledge is based on this conception of analytic, critical and rational thought, or valid inference. But there is another dimension of cognition, based on what he calls "the synthetic capacity for perceptive judgment."²⁴ We need to put more emphasis on direct perception and perceptive judgment, so that there is a balance among ways of knowing. Feminist philosophers and psychologists have written extensively and with great nuance about epistemologies and theories of knowledge. For instance, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge differ from one another; and each constitutes a particular mode of knowing.²⁵

²³ Arthur Zajonc, "Spirituality in Higher Education, Overcoming the Divide," *Liberal Education* (Winter 2002) 50–58.

²⁴ Zajonc, "Spirituality in Higher Education," 55.

²⁵ See Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) for one important articulation of these categories.

Contemplation can also be a way of knowing. A contemplative methodology has several features. First, experience should be granted central significance, and should not be explained away in terms of other so-called primary qualities. Second, we must recognize that cognition is always participatory and that we cannot eliminate the subject who knows. Third, direct perception should be considered an ultimate goal of cognition. This requires that we cultivate faculties that make us capable of genuine seeing. These first three points apply both to sense-based experience and to spiritual experience and insight. Developing insight is a valid goal for the art student who practices contemplative seeing, or what some art historians have begun to call "beholding." True education should be less about teaching information or data, and more about shaping and extending the faculties of knowing.²⁶ The artist Paul Cezanne knew this and insisted that nature is the true teacher: "Literature expresses itself by abstractions, whereas painting by means of drawing and color gives concrete shape to sensations and perceptions. . . . Get to the heart of what is before you and continue to express yourself as logically as possible."²⁷ We are, in most of our lives, disconnected from nature. Through cultivating our perception and attending to the natural world, we can align ourselves with the world. This will have an enormous impact on our imagination and creativity. Finally, action can then be based on moral judgments that are grounded in an empathetic connection to the world in which we live. This basis for action is very different from a cost-benefit analysis or calculating the utility of someone or something.²⁸

Where are the contemplative role models in our culture? In the arts traditions that students may study. The courses I have developed have little to do with preaching particular religious dogmas or faith traditions. Rather, to paraphrase Zajonc, I seek to help students extend their powers of attention, compassion, and skillful action. In our media- and image-saturated culture, there are only a few places for developing contemplative qualities, all of which need silence and quiet time and space. The religious sanctuary, artist's studio, and scholar's study are three such locations. I believe that it is necessary to restore a balance between manipulating data and information and fostering creative action in the world. My teaching focuses on how contemplative practice is central to the cultivation of aesthetic and moral imagination.

²⁶ Zajonc, "Spirituality in Higher Education," 57.

²⁷ Paul Cezanne, in a letter to Emile Bernard, May 1904, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 20.

²⁸ Zajonc, "Spirituality in Higher Education," 56.

New Course Initiatives in Comparative Visual Studies

Over the past few years, I have developed two new courses that take seriously the methodology I have been discussing and that further define a pedagogy for comparative visual studies. Comparative study demands both a complex hermeneutics, including analysis, criticism, and even a healthy suspicion, as well as a generous point of view that is open to the cultures of others. My courses emphasize how the traditions we study are applicable to students' own creativity and creative work. I encourage students to develop a repertoire of images that can become points of reference for understanding not only the history and culture of the past, but also their own lives.

The first course, "The Art of Contemplation," is primarily focused on two historical traditions, Russian Orthodox icons and Himalayan Buddhist *thangkas*. The second course, "The Contemplative Artist," is more oriented to studio practice, and involves study of a broader range of cultural traditions. In all cases, the art to be studied is created in a contemplative and ritual mode and/or for a contemplative audience.

In general, both courses focus on four major dimensions of the art that is studied. First, the role of and training of the artist. For example, examination of the roles and practices of *thangka* painters and icon writers emphasizes four aspects: anonymity of the artist, long training, a sense of spiritual mission and calling that informs the work, and contemplative practices such as prayer and meditation. We study the relevance of such models of the artist and ask if and how they may be reappropriated in our time. Second, aesthetic issues related to the object, such as iconography, use of color, and materials. Both icons and *thangkas* use complex iconography; and I work with students to begin to understand their visual languages and representational strategies in these traditions. Third, the audience or viewer for which the work was intended. How do ritual practices in Russian Orthodox churches differ from rituals in Tibetan temples? How are contemporary practices in both contexts changing under the pressures of commercialization? Fourth, the context of the work, including art history, religion, and social history. For example, what do we know about when and how icons and *thangkas* were first made? As they explore these questions and ideas, students work in small groups over the course of the semester to share resources, conduct research, and develop oral presentations.

Each course has a number of objectives: to introduce students to specific examples of contemplative art in their cultural and historical settings; to help them develop a vocabulary for visual analysis that is applicable to cross-cultural study; to help them learn to express themselves more fluently and powerfully in writing and in oral presentation; to offer opportunities to conduct

research, using personal observation and experience, library resources, and the Web; and to encourage students to integrate and express their understanding in studio art projects. Each of these objectives would be considered fairly standard in many art history and visual culture studies courses.

A sixth objective—to introduce students to contemplative practice—is probably less familiar to most teachers. My courses offer students the opportunity to be part of an innovative national movement to integrate contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation and yoga into academic study, an initiative that has been sponsored by a number of foundations and organizations.²⁹ During most class meetings during a semester, some time is devoted to contemplative practice and tools of internal exploration and mindfulness.

From Hindu and Buddhist forms of yoga we learn that the difference between outer sight and inner vision depends upon sustained development of the powers of imagination and visualization. In these yogic traditions, imagination (*kalpana*) is generally understood as one of the perceptual and mental processes that must be overcome in traversing the stages of practice. Like sense perception and memory, the spontaneous drifting of imagination must be stilled before other visualization techniques can be learned. In short, imagination, as it is often understood within the European and American contexts, is a deterrent to deeper awareness. By contrast, yogic inner vision is a highly trained ability to call forth visual images in the imagination. The goal of teaching art students yoga and meditation techniques, especially breath awareness, is to cultivate such powers of visualization and creativity. The actual practices vary, from sitting on a chair and following the breath, to the body scan exercise developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his medical collaborators, to standing, walking, and various eye exercises.

As noted above, "The Art of Contemplation" focuses on interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study of visual art from two traditions: Russian Orthodoxy and Himalayan Buddhism. In considering the models of the Orthodox icon writer and the Buddhist *thangka* painter, my goal is neither to compare nor to extol them uncritically. These traditions provide inspiration and insight for artists who are seeking an alternative to the materialist and commercial values that drive the contemporary art world. After reading about and discussing the historical contexts for these traditions, we examine how they are relevant to our broadly pluralistic context.

The second course, "The Contemplative Artist," uses similar questions and issues, but focuses on a broader range of cultural traditions, as I mentioned earlier. In addition to *thangkas* and icons, we study Celtic and Islamic manu-

²⁹ More information on this program, which was developed by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, The Fetzer Institute, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies, is available at www.contemplativemind.org.

scripts, Hindu *darsan* (specifically *Devi puja*), and Navaho sandpaintings. I specifically select artistic practices from several religious traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Native American. During the course we use a case-study approach in examining specific examples of these artistic traditions. The course is organized around three themes: Contemplating the word: writing and the book; Contemplating the symbolic image: sacred painting; and Contemplating ritual: performance and place. Unlike the more historical focus of “The Art of Contemplation,” this course encourages students to explore what they are learning in their own studio practice and artwork, with exercises such as artist books, drawing and painting, and installation and performance.

Feedback on the courses thus far has been extremely positive. Students have written to me that the incorporation of contemplative practice in the courses has changed their approach to their school work and their lives more generally, as these three brief comments demonstrate.

The contemplative practice portion of this class is extremely helpful. The extra dynamic it adds keeps me attentive and eager to learn more.

I think the practice is useful and relevant. It gives me a chance to slow down and take in what I am doing in a setting that is usually chaotic.

I believe strongly that it [contemplative practice] is an important thing for young people to learn and an important foundation for artists.

Concluding Comment

This essay describes my vantage point as a professor who is concerned about what students are learning and what they most need to learn. Alongside traditional discipline-based scholarship and creative work, attention to the scholarship of teaching is crucial. In our contemporary media culture—a culture that transcends national and international boundaries—I think that little is as important as cultivating skills of perception, visualization, and interpretation. And no discipline trains us better in this arena than comparative visual studies when it is informed by a deep contemplative sensibility.