Incorporating DEI Into Visual Arts

Arts and humanities textbooks contain beautiful images, but the art canon taught in community and technical colleges remains mostly Western. This poses a challenge to instructors who wish to teach courses from a non-Western or global perspective, and who aim to infuse Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) objectives into their curriculum.

Instructors using a textbook have the option to include additional content that represents pluralism. Some instructors bypass textbooks altogether, opting for Open Educational Resources (OERs), which can provide instructors with limitless content they can use to incorporate DEI into a course and to teach from cross-cultural perspectives.

Portraiture is a shared theme in world arts and cultures. I teach Portraiture with images and context from ten different cultures across time and place. Most of the portraits selected for this unit are from the Western art canon. However, a portrait from the Islamic Mughal period sets the tone for deeper observation, visual analysis, vocabulary, and cultural understanding of portraits. I chose Islamic portraiture because textbooks glorify the Taj Mahal, yet provide no context for interpreting Islamic art, such as its elements and principles, and more importantly, artistic limitations. The image of the Taj Mahal becomes a visual "dangling modifier" magnifying its distance from the Western tradition and roiled in exoticism, the antithesis to DEI objectives. I explain below how cross-cultural portraits are given a "face" and "voice" at the DEI table of representation and inclusiveness.

Class Plan

I suggest three hours of class time for parts I and II; part III is homework.

I. The instructor introduces the topic with the visual illustrations (face) and explanations (voice) of the portraits.

What is portraiture? Portraiture is an image that records, captures, and/or interprets a person's individuality. Portraits have not always captured the true physical features of their subjects. Portraits were initially created for religious purposes and to depict power. Portraits prior to the 19th century were for the wealthy and were created to mark a milestone in one's life, such as marriage. Average citizens were usually not depicted in portraiture. This was not changed until the modern era and the invention of the photograph. It was not until the Renaissance that portraiture began to depict a person's true individual features.

II. Images ("faces") and explanations ("voices").

- **The Venus of Willendorf** (Paleolithic period). The 4-inch sculpture represents the goddess of fertility.

- **Cave Paintings at Lascaux** (Neolithic period). The cave paintings of large animals represent renewal and abundance after winter.

- **Portrait of Amenhotep** (Ancient Egypt period). Akhenaton, originally named Amenhotep IV, was a pharaoh of Ancient Egypt in the 18th Dynasty and ruled from 1367-1350 BCE. The portrait is a literal, stylized depiction of ancient Egyptians' belief that power was given by gods to the pharaohs, who then became gods. The sun-like disk is created to represent the Sun god, Ra. The beams from this disk fall directly into Amenhotep's hands, which symbolizes his power derived directly from the gods.

- **An ancient silver tetradrachm Greek coin featuring Eukratides** (Ancient Greece period). It represents portraiture of an individual to depict his power and status symbol.
- The Bust of Cicero. 1st century BCE (Roman Empire). Roman portraiture, like this Bust of Cicero, slowly began to resemble the actual likeness of the individual. We do not see the widespread capture of individual features until the Renaissance.

- **Leonardo da Vinci, Mona Lisa**, 1503-05 (Renaissance period). In the Renaissance, portraiture finally began to represent a person through accurate representation of their individual features. Portraits of men during this period were created to symbolize their intellect and wealth. Portraits of women were created to show their beauty and wealth. Also during this time, we begin to see portraits of people involved in historical, mythological, or religious works. The Mona Lisa is a well-known commissioned portrait painting that was created during the Renaissance.

- **Maurice-Quentin de la Tour's 1755 pastel of Madame Pompadour** (Enlightenment period). Enlightenment was an 18th century movement that focused on the human intellect. This portrait is a painting of the mistress of King Louis XV. She is depicted as cultured and intellectual. The guitar in the background represents her love for music. Together, the entire setting suggests a love of and time for the finer things in life, "the indulgences and luxuries" that most people during that time could not afford as commoners.

- **Frederich George Weitsch's portrait of Alexander von Humboldt**, 1806 (Romanticism period). Romanticism is a dramatic change from the Enlightenment. Romanticism focuses on emotions and imagination. Romanticism promoted the new idea that we can have a romantic and sometimes spiritual connection to the natural world. The Romantic approach to the natural world includes the careful focus on one natural specimen at a time, love for each and every element of nature, and a naturalistic approach to nature. Measuring devices and instruments emphasize accuracy, precision, and methodology, conveying the idea that logic (science/intellect of the Enlightenment period) is not a separate endeavor from the natural world.

- **Portrait of Shah Jahan on Horseback** (Mughal period). Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal tomb for his wife. His portrait falls within the realm of Islamic art. One of the principles of Islamic art is that images of living things cannot be depicted. Fear of idol worship is the main concern for the restrictions on images; free-standing sculpture is extremely rare. The Hadith states artists cannot breathe life into images and on the Day of Judgement, the artist's soul will be tormented by the images. Only God, Musawwir (artist) – an epithet of God, one of Allah's 99 names – can create art. Medieval and other Muslim artists found various ways to circumvent this restriction of representing figures: Sensitive figures such as the Prophet Muhammad and others likely to be "idol worshipped" (such as kings) are shown with a fiery halo, hiding face, head, or whole body, or are shown in profile only; flat, lacking depth and dimensionality. As two-dimensional objects, they also do not cast any shadow. They appear to be floating in space. From about 1500, faces are often shown veiled. In manuscripts, prophets have their face covered by a veil and all humans have a stroke drawn over their neck, symbolizing the severing of the soul, and clarifying the fact that it is not alive. Recognizable portraiture in Islamic art was rare until the Mughal tradition began in the late 15th century, and portraits of the ruler became popular in court circles in Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey.

- **Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe Screen Print,** 1967 (Modern period). Andy Warhol is a well-known modern artist who used portraiture to depict pop culture. In Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe, he expresses the ubiquitous and instantaneous nature of mass media. The focus is no longer on the subject in the portrait, but on the artist and their innovations with line, color, composition, and light. Portraiture during the Modern Era is also used as a form of commentary on society as a whole.

III. Students answer a set of questions through open-forum class discussion, writing individual short answers as well as group answers.

1. Create a list of elements and principles of art for each portrait.

2. Write three to five sentences on the cultural, historical, and artistic values (i.e., style, period, timeline) observed in each of the portraits.

3. Compare, contrast, and connect the Mughal miniature portrait to any one other portrait. Explain why this portrait is "permissible" despite it falling under the category of Islamic art, which prohibits the representation of living things? How do artists reconcile religious doctrines and artistic expressions in this Islamic art miniature? Explain how this portrait fits within the larger aesthetic, thematic tradition of portraiture common in the Western tradition?

4. Create a compare, contrast, and connect (PowerPoint, Prezi, or similar) presentation on five portraitures not studied in this unit that represent different world cultures. For extra credit, students can add a recent "selfie" portraiture with an explanation of how portraiture has evolved and advanced with access to technology.

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