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Spring, 2008

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office hours M 10-11; W 1-2.

AMERICA IN THE ARTS: A CIVILIZATION IN SEARCH OF A CULTURE

“If that’s art, I’m a hottentot [President Harry S. Truman]

“The way our country looks is a reflection—an embodiment—of what we believe in”
[Spiro Kostof, *America by Design*]

America in the Arts is a course that seeks to discover a philosophy behind the arts in the United States by examining the fine, folk, pop, and industrial arts and artifacts of this country for what they reveal about American attitudes and values. It attempts to define what is “American” about American art and design.

Required Book List (available at Douglass bookstore)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*
Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*

University Library Electronic Reserve Reading List

You will find throughout the syllabus extensive readings from a variety of books, including three of my own. Many of the books are so expensive that I couldn’t bring myself to ask you to buy them, especially since I would only be utilizing chunks here and there. Please, immediately, locate the reading list under our course name and title (be careful you have the right course because I have electronic readings for another course as well) and print them out in the order you find them on the list, which conforms to where they appear on our syllabus. As you probably know, this can be done in any of the university computer centers absolutely free—there is not even a cost for paper. Put these readings into a folder or large manila envelope and be certain to have in class with you the readings assigned for a particular day and to have read them in advance of that class meeting. This goes for the two novels as well.

SYLLABUS

Wed. Jan 23 Introduction: What American About American Things?
(one page handout)

Mon. Jan 28 What’s American About American Things? (continued)

Read “What’s American About America?” from
the book *Beer Can by the Highway*, by John Kouwenhoven

Wed. Jan 30 Discussion of Term (Craft) Projects From the Past
Guest, Professor Angus Gillespie—slide show

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Films on quilts and other American crafts

Mon. Feb. 4 Crafts and Craft Projects II

More films and slide shows on quilts, denim art, and traditional,
handmade American artifacts
Read: Samuel Willard, "Two Sermons."

Wed. Feb. 6 The Vernacular vs. the Genteel, the Real vs. the Ideal, the
Useful vs. The Beautiful

Read Alexis De Tocqueville, "In What Spirit the American
Cultivate the Arts," from *Democracy in America*; chapter 1,
"Art in America" and ch. 2, "What is Vernacular?" in
Made in America, by John Kouwenhoven

Mon. Feb. 11 America's Greatest Painter?

Films and discussion on Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart
Benton, once his teacher

Read: Jackson Pollock, "Two Statements"; Adolf Gottlieb and
Mark Rothko, "Letter to the *New York Times*;" Thomas Hart
Benton, "On Regionalism"; and Theodore Roosevelt, "A Layman's
View of an Art Exhibition."

Wed. Feb. 13 America's Most Characteristic Sculptor?

Films and discussion on Alexander Calder

Read: Calder, "What Abstract Art Means to Me."

Mon. Feb. 18 America's Greatest Architect /Artist?

Films and discussion on Frank Lloyd Wright

Read: Frank Lloyd Wright, *From an Autobiography*

Wed. Feb. 20 American Music I

Guest Speaker: Professor Angus Gillespie "Gospel Music." [See course
Ground Rules for discussion of gospel music concerning Saturday night,
February 23 and extra credit project.

(films on John Cage and American Experimental Music)

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Mon. Feb. 25 American Music II

Guest speaker: Professor Erica Romaine, "The American Musical on Stage and Screen

Wed. Feb. 27 Art and Engineering: False Dichotomy?

Read: Michael Aaron Rockland: ch. 1, "Wheel Estate," from *Homes on Wheels*; "Tunnel Vision" from *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike (written with Professor Gillespie)*; "The Accidental Icon," ch. 5 from the forthcoming book *The George Washington Bridge: Poetry in Steel*.

Mon. March 3 Popular Culture: Or Why Study 'Trash'?

Note: At this meeting of the course you must hand in your précis. It will tell me whether you are doing a craft project or a term paper and something about the quality of your project thus far. It is to be handed in in duplicate, with the original and copy stapled together. One copy with my comments will be returned to you on March 10 so that you can work on the project over spring break.

Wed. March 5 Popular Culture II

Film: "Style Wars"

Mon. March 10 Popular Culture III: When Popular Culture Becomes Fine Art/ Graffiti as Art"

Films: "Jean-Michel Basquiat"
"Drawing the Line: A Portrait of Keith Haring"

Wed. March 12 American Folk Art

Guest speaker: Professor Angus Gillespie

Mon. March 24 Architecture and Idealism

Read: Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (note: this is a very long novel, which is why we are taking it up immediately after spring break. Be sure to have finished reading it by March 24. Although we will not yet have discussed it, the midterm quiz will include it.

Note: Midterm Quiz this day. This will be multiple choice, based on the first half of the semester. **No makeups; you must take the exam on this day.** Be on time as we will have the quiz at the beginning of the hour.

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- Wed. March 26 *The Fountainhead* (continued)
- Mon. March 31 Gender and the Arts
- Film: “Right out of History: Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party”
- Read: Henry James, “Excerpts from *The American Scene*; and Michael Rockland, “The Masculine Bias of the Vernacular”
- Wed. April 2 Gender and the Arts II
- Film: “Georgia O’Keefe”
- Read: from John Kouwenhoven’s *Made in America*, Ch. 3, “Two Traditions in Conflict” and ch. 4, “The Practical And the Aesthetic”
- Mon. April 7 Gender and the Arts III
- Films “Beatrice Wood, Mama of Dada”
- “Not for Sale: Feminist Art in the U.S.A. in the 1970s”
- Wed. April 9 Photography and Art
- Films: “Ansel Adams”
- “Dorothea Lange”
- Mon, April 14 Is Pop Art Popular Culture or Fine Art? The Post Modernist Idea
- Films about the works of Andy Warhol
- Wed. April 16 Pop Art II
- Films about the works of Claes Oldenberg and Roy Lichtenstein
- Mon. April 21 Nature and Art in America
- Read: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Thoughts on Art”; Henry David Thoreau, thoughts on architecture from his journal; William Cullen Bryant, “To Cole, The Painter, Departing for Europe.”

Note: On this day you are to hand in the take home examination found on a subsequent page. These will be graded and handed back at the brief final examination if

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not before. The take home could, instead, have been the main part of the final, but I decided I'd prefer a thoughtful take home rather than a quick scribble.

Wed. April 23

America vs. Europe

Read Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, Preface and Ch. I-XII and Ch. L. This is not one of Hawthorne's better works. Normally I do like abridge a novel, but the chapters I've left out do not illuminate the differing attitudes towards art and artists on both sides of the Atlantic are essentially an Italian travelogue.

Mon. April 28

Presentation of Projects. (Craft and Term Papers) **Short papers accompanying the craft projects are to be handed in the day of your presentation—the 28th, 30th, or May 5—2-3 pages in length. All term papers are to be handed in on April 28. One-third of the class will make a presentation (alphabetical order) on each of these three days. Craft project presentations should be 5-10 minutes; term paper presentations, no more than 5 minutes. In the case of term papers you will basically tell us what your paper is about and the argument you advanced.**

Wed. April 30

Presentation of Projects (Craft and Term Papers) (continued)

Mon. May 5

Presentation of Projects (Craft and Term Papers) (continued)

GROUND RULES

Grading in the course will be based on the following:

- 1) Getting your précis in properly and on time on Monday, March 3 It will not be accepted at any other time. Precis are not graded but the absence of one on March 3 will negatively affect you term grade
- 2) Your midterm quiz on March 24, multiple choice questions based on first half of the semester.
- 3) Your take home essay examination due in class on April 21. Lateness will affect your grade negatively, whatever the excuse.
- 4) Your term paper or craft project. It will constitute the most important portion of your term grade. Your oral presentation the final days of class will be part of your project grade.

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- 5) The multiple choice exam at the final based on the second half of the semester
- 6) Attendance. I might also mention that, quite apart from attendance counting towards your grade, you cannot possibly do well on the two objective quizzes unless you attend class regularly. With each absence you will likely miss something that will be on that quiz.
- 7) Extra credit. Those attending the gospel concert on Saturday evening, February 23, to be discussed by Professor Gillespie in class on February 20, can earn extra credit. Try to set aside that evening now and plan to attend. You can certainly attend with classmates or a friend or friends outside of our class.. It is free and open to everyone. If you attend, be sure that your attendance is registered and give me, the next time we meet, on Monday, February 25, a 1-2 page reaction to the gospel concert. This can be written in a personal, first person style.
- 8) Class participation.

TAKE HOME EXAMINATION

I would like you to write a 5-6 page paper on the theme which follows, double spaced on regular size paper, handing in your paper as indicated earlier on Monday, April 21, in class, please—not acceptable as an e-mail attachment. A late penalty will be exacted for each day you may be late. Given the nature of the exercise, you could begin to take notes for your response virtually from the first day of the class.

Theme: It has often been stated that America has problems peculiar to it in the arts. What are these problems, how have they developed historically, what prognosis do you see for them in the future, and how do they relate to America's larger problems of self-definition?

Illustrate this rather general question with specific readings, artifacts, lectures, and themes developed in class discussion. Give your essay **a title** expressive of your argument or point of view. Don't just recapitulate what we have done in class. Rather, organize your thoughts into a coherent, intelligent, attractive, hopefully entertaining essay which has a thesis or central argument. Though the question is general, your answer should not be.

Go through several drafts in this and any other writing you do. Make sure you have not only written as well as you can but you've gotten rid of typos and misspellings. Number your pages And do not worry about, "How does he wish me to respond to this question?" There will be as great a variety of potential responses as there are people in our class.

TERM PROJECTS

You may either do a term paper or a crafts project. A term paper would be at least a 10 page examination of the “Americanness” of some art form—for example” modern dance, painting, square dancing; folk arts, crafts of various kinds, movies, folk music or blue grass, patchwork quilts, jazz, the American musical, etc. The paper should be typed, double spaced, and contain appropriate end notes and bibliography. I would suggest an illustration or two. You must hand in on **March 3** a précis describing the term paper topic you have chosen and any early hypothesis you may have arrived at.

If you elect to create a crafts project you will also hand in your précis on **March 3**. Again, late preces will not be considered. Preces are to be no longer than one page, typed, double spaced, and in duplicate, the two pages stapled together. Do not waste money and resources on silly plastic folders. I will return one copy of your precis on March 10 with my comments, retaining one copy for my records. The reason for the précis: I want your term project to indeed be a term project which you have launched no later than March 3.

More about the crafts project (the paper project is self-evident): in the past, projects in this course have included patchwork quilts, musical instruments, choreographing a ballet on the theme of the course, building a doll house, making a movie, building a loom and weaving something on it, hooked rugs, making a sampler, reproducing a classic American piece of furniture, making a shipshead, making a cigar store Indian, denim art. The possibilities are endless. The only requirement is that you make something typically American that expresses American ideas and values. In your little paper accompanying the project (2-3 pages maximum) tell me how you chose your project, how you made it, and what ideas it expresses. Make something useful you would be proud to keep and pass on to future generations. This may be your first family heirloom. By the way: do not purchase a kit. You are to not only execute but design the project from scratch.

I am giving you the option of a term paper or crafts project because some of you will prefer one, some the other. It’s your call. I do not favor one kind of project over the other. I came upon the option of a crafts project after teaching this course several times and becoming convinced that too many of us have never made anything. School has dazzled us with “great books” and “great art,” which is fine, but it has had a tendency to convince us of our utter unworthiness to make something of value ourselves. Many of us think of ourselves as klutzes. This is an opportunity to disabuse yourself of this conviction.

Do not be alarmed if you are unable to quite finish your project within the confines of our course. I would rather you took on something challenging and only got it mostly done than that you take on something of a minor nature that would mean little to you in the future. I know you will finish a project in which you have invested so much of yourself.

