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African-American Art History: Reflections on Expanding Pedagogy in 21st Century Liberal Arts Contexts

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This is a timely point in our history to reflect upon how students are learning about African-American art given the current emphasis on diversity initiatives across liberal arts curricula in the United States, public debates surrounding confederate monuments, erasure of WPA murals deemed racially offensive by some, and calls for reparation as a mode of psycho-social recovery from the legacy of enslavement. Instructors now have unprecedented educational resources at hand following decades of deep art historical scholarship and insightful exhibitions.[1] Undergraduate and graduate students have a broad-range of academic opportunities to explore diverse aspects of African-American studies. The question is how these resources can be utilized to teach African-American art history in ways that engage 21st-century learners and, perhaps more importantly, why particular concepts and terminologies should be adopted.

These considerations informed the development of an undergraduate seminar on African-American art taught at a private Christian liberal-arts institution--Belmont University in Nashville--in 2018.[2] Course planning employed the Wiggins and McTighe backwards design model where student learning is structured around assessments directly based upon articulated outcomes; a strategy taught in a year-long Hybrid Course Academy offered by the instructional technology office on my campus.[3] I focused upon expanding pedagogies which target improving critical perception skills and creative thinking as key student learning outcomes. What is shared here is a case study embedded in a self-reflective essay to prompt

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[1] Among the numerous resources available is the African American Art History Initiative at The Getty Institute. http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/research_projects/aaahi.html

[2] This course is an upper-level special topics seminar taught in a 2-year rotation that students may choose to fulfill B.A. and B.F.A. major requirements in the visual arts whether studio, design, art education, or art history. However, the course is open to any student at the Junior or Senior level and roughly a third of the 15-20 students enrolled will be from other degree tracks. Demographics, roughly 80% white and predominantly female, reflects that of the university overall.

[3] Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. "Understanding by Design." *Chapter 1: What Is Backward Design?*, ASCD, 1998. https://educationaltechnology.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/backward-design.pdf
Accessed 7 March 2021.

wider conversations among educators about forward-thinking approaches to teaching the abundant cultural heritage of African-American makers. Examples are introduced to explore how critical perception exercises may be embedded in a survey-style course on African American Art History to meaningfully foster student learning. A revisionist history of African American art's content is not the goal. Instead, I advocate for reconfigurations of *how* those histories are discussed and articulated. Teaching critical perception as a core principle in art historical studies develops a valuable transferable skill. Visual artifacts, whether re-presentations of things or actual physical objects, offer opportunities to think outside the box in ways that allow students to engage in critical practices. Critical thinking skills evolve from the practice of close observation and analysis. Interpreting an image within an image, or considering an object within a collection of similar objects, illuminates its role within the iconographical or iconological whole. Further challenging learners to position the same images or objects within different rhizomatic subsets—what I would argue is a more global ecology of meaning—mirrors perceptual diversity which does not privilege one narrative over another. In other words, the concern lies with the knowledge-making *proces*s rather than arriving at a central truth or singular interpretation of meaning associated with any given image or object.

Why prioritize the development of creativity inherent in critical perception skills? Students today are born into a visually rich environment enhanced by technology, yet evidence suggests an increasing need to teach critical perception, and its educational cognates critical and visual thinking. The ability to critically perceive, and make sense of, the optics of our environments and histories is not innate; guidance is required. Furthermore, in our modern world, where tweets labeling politically inconvenient truths as 'fake news' stand alongside global realities in urgent need of innovative and humane solutions, critical perception is a transferable skill with currency. Fostering other aspects of our humanity such as empathy and flexible reasoning are auxiliary motivations for educators to rank 'thinking' skills over crunching 'content' as an effective method of learning. And, finally, critical perception IS a creative endeavor that is the heart and soul of art history.

Defining Critical Perception

Julia Sienkewicz's 2013 *Winterthur Portfolio* article on "Critical Perception: An Exploration of the Cognitive Gains of Material Culture Pedagogy" recognizes the social and educational importance of critical perception in cognitive development, but points to a perplexing lack of scholarship at the level of higher education

which examines the impact of this pedagogical approach.[4] The author's call to action served as a catalyst for contemplating how subjects like African-American art history, rich in material culture, could be employed to hone critical perception skills.

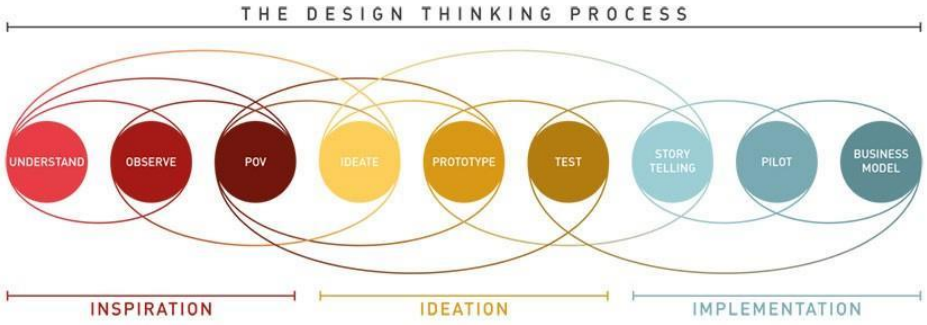
Art historians should, in my opinion, proactively foreground the best practices of their discipline in order to raise the level of awareness about its relevance. This is especially urgent in today's educational climate. Academic disciplines centered on the visual arts are increasingly scrutinized, and often found wanting, in terms of applicability to contemporary culture. Indeed, there is a national trend of downsizing and limiting options in the field which suggests the long-term viability of art history as a major-of-choice is at stake. I am an advocate for an adaptable future-facing brand of art history that performs as an equal partner in any interdisciplinary mashup. For example, a triangulation of expertise from team members with backgrounds in art history, design and technology could collaborate effectively to create experientially-oriented environments for public consumers seeking entertainment, educational, or way-finding options. Such a team would benefit greatly from the research capabilities of an art historian who understands visual and verbal cues and effective strategies of interpretation. This hypothetical partnership illustrates how art historical practices could bring more to the table when not relegated to a service-oriented survey role within studio art, design, or general education curricula. Therefore, highlighting a skill set that is foundational to the practice of art historical inquiry holds the potential to push back against undesirable trends in the field by raising awareness of its cross disciplinary and transferable nature.

Developing perceptiveness, in one form or another, is at the center of what most liberal arts, art history, studio and design educators strive to do in today's classroom. Various monikers are applied to this process with critical thinking, design thinking, creative thinking, critical analysis, visual thinking, visual literacy, and even visual intelligence being among the most commonly used. Art historian and lawyer Amy E. Herman uses visual art to train professionals how to perceive and communicate better. Using images to hone what she labels as visual intelligence is a skill that has proven to make doctors, police officers, Navy Seals, FBI investigators, and corporate workers more effective at what they do on a daily basis. I often show clips from her seminar on "The Art of Perception" and assign readings from her book *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life* to prompt discussions about possibilities for applying art historical

[4] Julia A. Sienkewicz. "Critical Perception: An Exploration of the Cognitive Gains of Material Culture Pedagogy," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 47, No. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2013), 117-138.

skills in the real world.[5] Visual Intelligence piques student interest and provides an accessible roadmap for practicing their newfound powers of perception.

While this, and the other strategies listed, may seem to rest more comfortably within the practices of the arts and humanities, they also circulate through the body politic of academia with proprietary claims to certain approaches emerging from business, engineering, technology, and the sciences in support of STEM agendas. For example, 'design thinking' has been adopted as a method of branding business-related approaches to solving human-centered problems and establishing networks geared toward enhanced productivity. In a recent online post on "What is Design Thinking and Why Is It So Popular?," Rikke Dam and Teo Siang wrote, "Design Thinking is not an exclusive property of designers."[6] Note the Business Model outcome in the implementation section of the Interaction Design Foundation's diagram below showing the stages of The Design Thinking Process.[7]



This raises the question of whether it is feasible to broadcast critical perception as a progressive and innovative art history methodology in a similar fashion.

Two issues emerge when considering ways of responding to this query. The first is the label itself; *critical perception* does not resonate in the same way as *design*

[5] Amy E. Herman. *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life,* Boston, New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. See also the TED Talk "A Lesson on Looking" https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_herman_a_lesson_on_looking#t-2668 Accessed March 7, 2021.
[6] Rikke Friis Dam and Teo Yu Siang. "What is Design Thinking and Why Is It So Popular?" *The Interaction Design Foundation*, 2020, https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular. Accessed 7 March 2021.
[7] Ibid.

thinking. Perception evokes a sense of being passive and static whereas thinking suggests action and change. You would be forgiven for viewing the nomenclature of critical perception as lacking cachet and clarity in comparison to more hip terminologies circulating in the contemporary academy. Since creativity lies at the core of concerns across the arts spectrum, research on this subject is a good starting point for reconsidering the term critical perception as a descriptor for the active connection-making that occurs. Economist Jonathan Feinstein's book on *The Nature of Creative Development* states "creativity and innovation are generated through an unfolding process of development" that is organic rather than arriving as a flash of inspiration.[8] He links creativity with knowledge representation and advocates for active-learning encounters as a means of guiding students through the process of generating insights and connections. Feinstein defines "creativity as creating novel conceptual combinations" within a field and presents a model of how this can be developed in an educational setting.[9]

> The field is defined as an explicit knowledge structure that starts from a simple initial state, then develops through the series of creative contributions made by successive individuals who enter the field. New elements are added by combining preexisting elements in new combinations. The heart of the model is a rational, optimizing model of individual creative development. Individuals have initial "seed" learning, then gain intuitive signals about potentially fruitful new combinations of elements or sub-topics in the field; their signals guide them as they choose further elements to learn and then a new element to attempt to make, basing their choices on expected value calculations. When an individual is successful in his project, the new element he creates is added to the field. The field thus grows over time.[10]

Critical perception overlays nicely with the way Feinstein conceptualizes the process of defining a field, positioning elements within it that are combined and reordered to create innovative new juxtapositions allowing individuals to move beyond their original base of knowledge by following their interests. Although Feinstein's end product is more quantitative and computational in terms of tracing patterns and predictors through data simulations, he acknowledges the sociological dimensions of creativity in establishing cultural values and embraces

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[8] Jonathan S. Feinstein. http://www.jonathanfeinstein.com/ Accessed 7 March 2021.

[9] Jonathan S. Feinstein, "The Creative Development of Fields: Learning, Creativity, Paths, Implications," *Journal of the Knowledge Economy,* Volume 8, No. 1. (2017), 23-62. This article is published open access at Springerlink.com.

[10] Ibid.

interdisciplinary approaches. Visual art figures fairly prominently in the syllabus for his course on The Practice and Management of Creativity and Innovation at Yale and in published articles. Piet Mondrian, Alexander Calder, Ansel Adams, and exercises from *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain,* serve as examples.[11] He even links principles of representation in cave paintings to the painter's psychological orientation toward nature.

The striking similarities between critical perception and Feinstein's field model informed my thinking about how to effectively develop lesson plans that advanced student learning, particularly as a creative temporal process focused on building new and innovative connections. Students in the African-American Art course were able to move beyond their initial 'seed' knowledge, which Feinstein defines as what individuals bring to the table, and more through various perceptual scenarios. Art objects were consistently positioned in the middle of an interpretative field to which everyone had collective access. Each member of the class felt empowered by a process that was interactive, dynamic, and collaborative in ways that expanded their worldview beyond individual intuition and subjectivity. In short, students engaged in an act of creativity that unfolded over time and no one sat on the sidelines as a passive learner. The viability of newly proposed ideas was tested in a group forum to determine how best to expand the interpretative field. This is where 'value calculations' were factored into the process of expanding the field of knowledge and interpretation. Group assessment and feedback exercises further contributed to conceptual growth and perceptual evolution. Before moving on to the next point, a cautionary note related to the section on values should be mentioned. Students must feel their classrooms afford them a safe space for honest dialogue. Given the thin line between criticism and critique, taking advantage of the increasing number of diversity workshops occurring on campuses across the country is, in my estimation, worthwhile. Educators are mentors and role models who must own the responsibility for acquiring as deep of an understanding as possible when it comes to how sensitive issues and triggers can be productively navigated.

In addition to the call for repackaging the term critical perception as a creative practice, the second challenge is how to arrive at a singular definition of a concept that embraces ambiguity, multiplicity, and mutability. This is no easy task. For the sake of argument here, critical perception is acknowledged as a core art historical

[11] Jonathan Feinstein, "The Practice and Management of Creativity and Innovation," (Schedule, Yale University School of Management, 2014). https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52a75b0ae4b0bf6beb153af6/t/530fbab4e4b04fb5b2cfd858/1393539764826/assign-creativity.pdf

and creative practice that warrants further study, application, and discussion as an effective and relevant learning strategy in the 21st century. Two points from Sienkewicz's article are worth bearing in mind when moving toward a working definition of critical perception. First, it is distinctive from the analytical critique most often associated with the visual and performing arts known as critical viewing because it inclusively considers the "embodied experience of the viewer within a larger material environment" whether physiological or psychological.[12] Second, critical perception is not limited to matters of sight, but extends into the complex and dynamic nature of human-object interactions within the larger scope of a material environment that is either real or imagined and, in many instances, mediated through technology. In other words, we perceive through multiple sensory data. Charles Baudelaire's nineteenth-century concept of the flâneur and Guy Debord's mid-twentieth century version of psychogeography recognized relationships between the viewer and their physical environments as a means of unleashing one's creative imagination. The Tate Modern defines psychogeography as an art term "describing the effect of a geographic location on the emotions and behaviors of people."[13] Critical perception enables a similar activation of the imagination by encouraging people to insert themselves into diverse scenarios as a means of embodying unfamiliar spatial and perceptual orientations through time and place. Psychogeography and critical perception are distinctive in terms of locale with the former centering upon physical urban environments and the later upon images and objects, yet as creative and conceptual practices they share much in common.

Studies in the field of material culture emphasize object-centered learning without regard for boundaries between fine art and vernacular crafts. This is particularly advantageous for the study of objects crafted by enslaved makers who introduced Africanisms into colonial culture from the moment of arrival. A human-made object, or its re-presentation, can be situated relationally within a broader ecology that shifts and changes over time. In order to successfully engage in this way of knowing, it is important to contemplate *how* we attain levels of understanding as much as *what* it is we discover from our quest. Consider for a moment why the best ideas tend to lead to more questions. Questions push us further along the pathway of discovery while answers tend to make us feel like we have arrived. Analysis and interpretation of images engages in questions of who, what, when, where, and how, while critical perception also asks open-ended 'what if' questions. Conceptual frameworks employed to explore the latter involve

[12] Sienkewicz, 118.

[13] "Psychogeography-Art Terms," https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/psychogeography

disposition as a means of finding ways of helping students position themselves (embodied experience) within the realm of plausible scenarios (material ecologies). Learners who seek the satisfaction of knowing what something means from a singular perspective are often frustrated by the complexities and nuances they encounter through this process of looking/thinking/repositioning. Those who persevere and are able to shift their perspectives tend to gain satisfaction and confidence from recognizing they have progressed as creative thinkers.

From an instructional point of view, my articulation of ideas and models began well in advance of teaching the course on African-American Art and is ongoing. I gathered various tools together that I knew to be effective, or concepts I had read about and wanted to try out in a classroom setting. My toolbox contained aspects of, and variations on, slow-looking, psychogeography, constructivist learning theory and, of course, critical perception as a means of evoking innovative associations and expanding upon ways of knowing. Creative links lead to a growth mindset that is conceptually and perceptually equipped for innovation. There are very sound reasons for fostering creativity in all areas of art in particular, and in education in general. Perhaps Sir Ken Robinson summed it up best in his 2006 TED talk *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* when he stated "that creativity now is as important in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status."[14] At last count this TED talk had been viewed well over 58 million times, proof that Robinson hit a high note heard around the world on the subject of rethinking creativity and education. Creativity, in Robinson's view, is the process of having original ideas that hold value; a defining dimension of human intelligence. Aspects of intelligence referenced in this TED talk used phrases like "thinking kinesthetically" and "interaction of different disciplinary ways of seeing things" which reside at the core of art historical methodologies. Prior to hearing Robinson speak on this topic, I had not thought about the fact that the modern educational enterprise is still tethered to the needs and demands of nineteenth-century industrialization. This realization resulted in an 'of course it is time for a paradigm shift' kind of moment.

Image + Imaginings

Translating these thoughts and ideas into action in the course on African-American Art was an incremental process. Over a week-long period of class

[14] Sir Ken Robinson, "Do schools kill creativity?" TEDTalk filmed 2006, https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity?language=en

meetings, we examined an eighteenth-century watercolor, *The Old Plantation,* attributed to John Rose.[15]

Figure 1: *The Old Plantation,* attributed to John Rose, ca. 1785-1795. Watercolor on laid paper. 29.7 cm x 45.4 cm (11 11/16 in x 17 7/8 in.) Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Williamsburg, Virginia.

The first step was to introduce students to the practice of close looking, then assign individual research/discovery tasks before moving toward collaborative comparisons as a means of testing various hypotheses. This was followed by a series of 'what if' explorations from diverse gendered, racial, political, social, or economic viewpoints. Below is an overview of how this unfolded in the course under consideration.

Step 1: Active Looking
(Activity: Expand 'Seed' Knowledge By Close Observation & Slow Looking)

[15] Jerome S. Handler. "The Old Plantation Painting at Colonial Williamsburg: New Findings and Some Observations." *African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter*, vol. 13, no. 4, December 2010, pp. 1-10. *scholarworks.umass.edu/org*, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1457&context=adan Accessed 7 March 2021.

Students individually recorded the number of people, activities, buildings, and objects in the image in a mind-mapping format then shared their observations as a group to compile a more comprehensive inventory. This was followed by a discussion of how different elements were arranged (i.e. significance of the placement, static versus fluid forms, relative scale of the items, use of color), what assumptions they made about the landscape and architecture, season of the year, social interactions of the figures, the manner of dress, hair styling, body adornment, and the event depicted. Several points appeared on every list, however there were also observations unique to individuals due to differences in the initial 'seed' knowledge they brought to the process.

Step 2: Informed Imaginings
(Activity: Research & Comparison)
Students were assigned homework to guide the discussion of the image during the next class session which included locating a minimum of three sources, one of which had to be primary. The latter required an explanation and example to familiarize students with the difference between secondary and original source material. They were asked to consider the authenticity of the source and the authoritative voice of the writings before composing questions designed to explore meaningful interpretations of the image. Students were encouraged to think about questions that would prompt discussion and bring new insights whether or not they had answers at hand. In other words, open-ended questions based on curiosity were welcomed. The focus in this step was on 'what' and 'why' formatted as a think/pair/share exercise. In order to remind students of the actual scale of the object, a printed 8"x12" printed image was circulated during this portion of the exercise. Guiding questions included, but were not limited to, the following. If it is not signed, how was the date range of 1785-90 and the attribution determined? What if the patron was one of the people depicted rather than the absent plantation owner? If the African-Americans owned the land, what aspects of the scene would likely change? Why are size, medium, technique, and materials used to make the object important clues in understanding its representation of African-American lifestyle and what assumptions about 'value' and 'originality' come to mind? If this image was included in a museum display, what supplemental images and objects would best highlight different aspects of its meaning? The final step in this process was to position the image/object in the center of a whiteboard that served as the virtual 'field' of knowledge in Feinstein's model; essentially a blank canvas. Each pair/group was asked to identify two to three big ideas for further research and transfer them onto the field of the whiteboard for discussion and editing. All groups collaborated on synthesizing related ideas, refining language, and reaching a consensus about which held the greatest potential for generating alternative points of view.

Step 3: Critical Perception
(Activity: Creative Connecting)
An entire class period was devoted to this final step because of the complexity of the issues under consideration. *The Old Plantation* image was explored through inquiries designed to acknowledge as many different 'embodied experiences' as possible. Role playing was used to allow students to position themselves as viewers of this image from the perspective of the planter/artist or enslaved people of diverse ages and gender whose lifestyles are depicted. One chose to be a contemporary historian of visual and material culture who develops educational programs for young museum visitors. Others switched gender roles. The smaller enrollment of a seminar-style course allowed each student to present their findings.

Students researched and reported on the social, economic, and technological aspects of cloth weaving and clothing construction in the 1800s to consider who the makers were and how they became skilled in their craft. Were any of the figures portrayed likely skilled in a craft and, if so, how did this square with the history of enslaved labor? Are the buildings depicted for shelter or work or both and how is the architecture similar to or different from other regions? Each member of the class looked into the history of a coarsely-woven unbleached or brown-colored cotton or wool-cotton blend fabric known as Negro Cloth, and compared that knowledge with descriptions in runaway slave ads in the 1800s, a primary source found in the historical newspaper databases of the library.[16] Comparisons were drawn between the durable but uncomfortable Negro Cloth and traditional African clothing. Students were asked to think about the physical and psychological impact of being clothed in these garments and how cloth denoted social status on both continents. Africanisms enacted through body movement and portrayed in headdresses and architecture were discussed. I also participated, not as an instructor, but as a peer discussant drawing from previous experiences. My contribution referenced the archeological cloth remains unearthed in the African Burial Ground in New Amsterdam, now lower Manhattan, as an opportunity to speculate about the availability of luxury goods and why they would not be portrayed in images like *The Old Plantation*. I also linked the materiality and commercialization of dyes and color pigments,

[16] Slave Cloth or Plantation Cloth were alternative designations for Negro Cloth. It was mentioned in the Negro Act of 1735 as the cheap fabric that slaves were allowed to wear, but it was also produced in southern textile mills for prisoners as well. http://www.inesdoujak.net/negro-cloth/

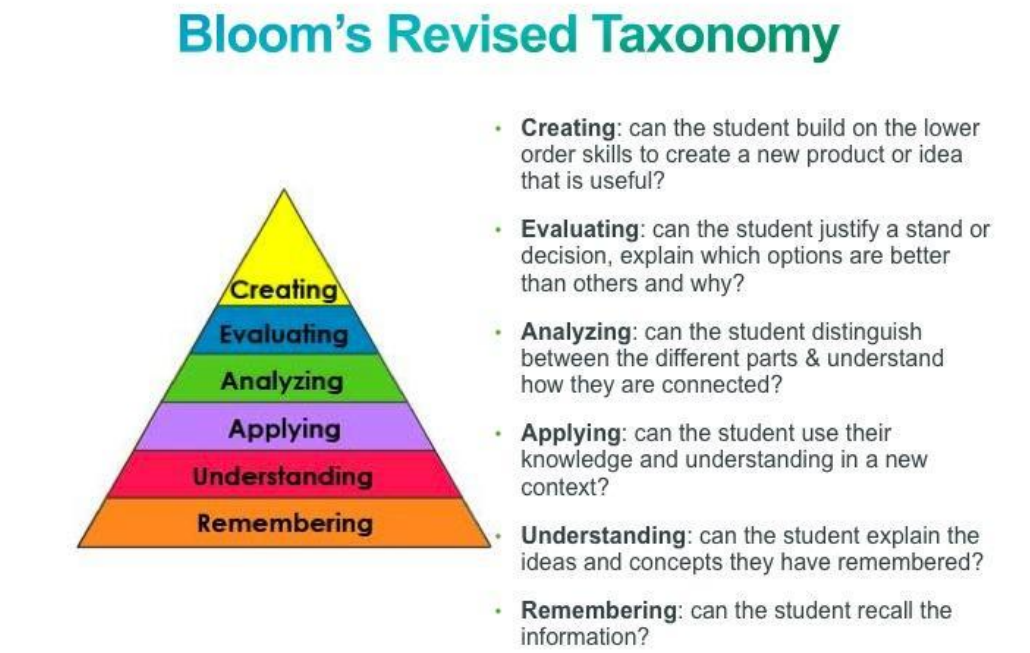
including indigo from South Carolina plantations, to the triangular trade routes of slavery and other endeavors of colonial imperialism.

Since the course was being taught in Nashville (Music City USA) the material culture of musical instruments afforded enticing opportunities to combine embodied experience with material ecologies. Drawings of instruments John Stedman observed slaves playing during his 1776 travels to Suriname were compared to those in Rose's watercolor. YouTube videos of a traditional African akonting, similar to the instrument depicted in the watercolor, and an African American musician playing a gourd banjo while singing Appalachian folk ballads were even more effective because the comparison engaged sight and sound. Students were asked to share verbal or written reflections identifying what bodies of knowledge were marginalized, or fell into intellectual blind spots, with each twist of perspective and shift of disposition within a defined field. An impromptu reaction from one student was "Wow, every time I think I know something about a topic we discuss in this class I find out I didn't know anything!" which I marked up as a successful learning outcome.

The steps described in some detail above allowed for an unfolding of knowledge building and encouraged creative assimilations of diverse points of view. Beginning with characteristic art historical methods of critical viewing analysis, interpretation, and contextualization strategies led to active-looking exercises that generated conversations about the number of figures depicted, the activities in which they are engaged, the setting, costumes, and elements of style. Basic research skills led to discoveries about the attribution to John Rose, a Beaufort South Carolina plantation owner, and the provenance of the object. But none of this necessarily connected the dots around critical perception skill building. Therefore, the focus of a third step was to explore 'dispositions' through other lines of inquiry that took students outside familiar comfort zones.

Students were further challenged to create a new point of view in order to move toward a higher ordering thinking on Bloom's Taxonomy.[17]

[17] Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, Retrieved from O'Donnell, Laurie. "The Nature of Learning CSSC." *Laurie O'Donnell Learning & Technology Futures*, 11 March 2020, http://laurieodonnell.co.uk/books/the-nature-of-learning-cssc/ Accessed 7 March 2021.



They were tasked with extrapolating from what they had learned through investigating a singular object and applying those insights to the broader context of African-American art and culture. Half the class assumed a worldview filtered through European Catholicism and the other half from an African-derived polytheism and ancestor worship found in the practice of the Haitian folk-religion known as Vodou. The goal was to reach at least a rudimentary understanding of complex ideations of suspicion and fear of the Other, thus creating a new point of view and exploring the conditions under which such sentiments might arise. Faith-based dispositions represented both new and unexpected approaches to perception for students and required more facilitation of discussion. Students were less facile in their ability to grasp the abstraction at hand because of insufficient preliminary 'seed' knowledge and lack of time needed to lay the foundations of those fields. Furthermore, this abstract application of knowledge did not excite their curiosity and imagination like the discoveries grounded in material objects. On the whole, this was the least successful component of the exercises geared toward developing critical perception skills. Nonetheless, I would opt to reconfigure the approach in future coursework rather than abandon what I consider a culminating step in the learning process. Case studies and assigned readings are, I believe, a viable means to generate improved outcomes. One particularly rich resource from which to draw learning materials is Robert Farris

Thompson's wide-ranging scholarship on Africanisms in American Culture and the wealth of related studies it spawned.[18] A lesson plan for future iterations of this unit might focus upon shapes in the form of a cross. The polyvalent cross features prominently as a sacred symbol in African and European cultures making it a particularly relevant focal point for assuming alternative dispositions and exploring diverse faith-based perspectives. For example, a cross in the Kongo cosmogram marks the spot where an individual taking an oath stands at the intersection of pathways that communicate between worlds while Roman Catholics respond to this sacred symbol with gestures of reverence and prayer. Vodou, a syncretic amalgam of various religious traditions, which arrived in the New World with slaves from West Africa, incorporates the cross form along with dance rituals. The 'sign of the cross' will, I would argue, provide students with a tangible case study to trace and contemplate cultural diasporas and assimilation through belief systems.

Reflecting upon these outcomes and student feedback prompted a few considerations to work through. Embarking upon a weeklong exploration of a single image/object—in essence generating a 15-images-in-15-weeks course—is not a sustainable semester-long teaching model. Although the image/object is part of a much broader whole that may be characterized as a cluster, constellation, or ecology which transitions and realigns over the course of its historical existence, a visual arts history should be more image rich. On the other hand, learning strategies are most effective when students are given multiple opportunities to practice and apply what they are learning. I opted for a middle ground that utilized online resources and in-class active learning assignments of shorter duration. However, I was careful to establish connections by making the process transparent each time new content was introduced. A worksheet derived from an online teaching resource was used by students to record and track their progress with Column A centered on the image and Column B focused on changes of perception influenced by assigned readings and in-class discussions.

A	B
List what you see (objects, people, colors). Work with a partner and see if you can get a minimum of ten things on your list	Compare your list of objects to those mentioned in the interpretative reading provided. What can you add to your list from this observation?

[18] Robert Farris Thompson. *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. New York: Random House (1983).

Write down some hypotheses or inferences you make about what you see in the painting. Come up with three or more.	Compare your inferences to those described in the reading. What additional insights did you gain from this background reading?

Figure 2: Student Worksheet

Three worksheet assignments were scheduled throughout the semester in order to reinforce the process of looking, thinking, and reflecting. Each was a low-stakes activity with points applied to student participation scores rather than a grade category designed to assess content knowledge. Similar to slow-looking practices, students tended to spend additional time searching for visual details to top up their lists and appeared to enjoy the freedom to speculate about possible narratives without the pressure of being graded. Each active-looking exercise was prefaced by a guiding question. On one occasion, Theodor Kaufmann's 1876 painting *On To Liberty* was viewed, analyzed and read against brief articles on Civil War contraband based upon Warren Hill's excellent Lessons in Looking: Contraband in Painting.[19] The essential question was, "What did the Civil War mean for freed people?" Critical perceptions relating to the image shifted once students came to understand the meaning and history of contraband, a word they recognized but only vaguely understood in terms of its implications regarding the human condition. Recognition of the realities surrounding conflicts arising from living with and within a system that sanctioned enslavement was enhanced through this exercise. Initially questions were asked about why only one figure is wearing shoes, why a couple of the women were carrying twigs in their hands and whether or not it was significant that clothing was drab with the exception of three brightly colored wraps and two necklaces in blue in red. Follow-up comments made after reflecting on the readings conveyed a shift. Students focused less on detail and moved toward a deeper conceptual understanding of the liminal space freedmen occupied even in Union territory. Anecdotally, it was evident in the group-share conversation that the exercise elicited empathetic responses regarding perceived injustices and acts of discrimination inflicted upon enslaved and manumitted African-Americans.

[19] Students also read an essay contextualizing the history of contraband from the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, "Background Essay on Civil War "Contraband"," *HERB: Resources for Teachers*, https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/529 Accessed March 7, 2021.

A third learning model was incorporated into the African-American Art course; one I call "Make it tangible!." After reading Barbara Mooney's article "Looking for History's Huts" students were asked to consider contemporary interpretations of Drayton Hall and how, until recently, the architecture of the mansion dominated the historical narrative and negated the experiences of its black residents.[20] Next, a class visit to The Belmont Mansion, an antebellum house museum located in the center of campus, was arranged. Students were provided with a detailed synopsis of the assignment (Appendix I) and a prompt to select a material object in the collection to re-interpret from a different, and more inclusive, historical perspective.

In *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation,* Shari Tishman demonstrates the "wide educational benefits" of a "museum-originated practice" of close observation of actual works of art. Tishman "contends that patient, immersive attention to content can produce active cognitive opportunities for meaning-making and critical thinking that may not be possible through high-speed means of information delivery."[21] Again, taking advantage of local resources is a highly engaging way for students to learn and they were encouraged to return to the Mansion for tours with different docents to compare the narratives used to tell the story of the house, its contents, and its occupants. They also met with the Executive Director of the Belmont Mansion, Mark Brown, to acquire additional information about their selected object and explore possible alternative interpretations. The enslaved butler garnered the most interest from students, perhaps due to the opulent staging of the dining rooms and the tour guide's focus upon service à la française versus à la russe table settings with lavish multi-course meals. Students recognized the current historical narrative presented to visitors is through the lens of the elite. However, their curiosity was piqued by the role of the anonymous butler. How, they asked, could a presumably illiterate person consigned to the historical record by his position within the household and not a name, possibly learn to manage elaborate meal services in accord with the complexities of fashionable etiquette and the protocols of polite society? Speculations about his personal life, both pre and post emancipation, demonstrated a concern and regard for the untold human dimension underlying the display of material wealth. Expressions of indignation about the butler's historical invisibility and nameless status represented a satisfying outcome for this experientially-oriented learning assignment which resulted in feedback to the

[20] Barbara Burlison Mooney. "Looking for History's Huts." *Winterthur Portfolio* 39, no. 1 (2004): 43-70.
[21] Shari Tishman. *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation.* Routledge, 2018.

Mansion staff about how public tours might become more historically inclusive. Through the process of applied critical perspective, students discovered a new understanding of the treasure-trove of monogrammed French porcelain, Rococo Belter chairs, the fine silverware and wine glasses required for sixteen-course meals on display by "seeing" this material wealth through the eyes of the enslaved servers.

It was also our good fortune to benefit from the collections at Fisk University, a historically black college located in Nashville. Through site visits and archival work, students were able to connect to the legacy of the artist Aaron Douglas who taught there for twenty-nine years, served as the chair of the department of art, and painted murals on the walls of campus buildings. As Sharif Bey's research into Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff, another artist-educator, , has shown, "the limitations of traditional classroom instruction disallowed their teaching content which focused upon and empowered African Americans to sustain themselves as mainstream artists in the United States," especially in the segregated South.[22] Douglas adopted an expanded pedagogy that took advantage of an extensive network of Black and White artists, administrators, and philanthropists and exposed students to new trajectories for social, professional, aesthetic, and philosophical growth so they could adapt and assert themselves in a racially integrated society.[23] Awareness of Douglas as a teacher and artist transformed how students in the African-American Art course understood the modernisms of the 1920s and 1930s New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. This set of exercises raised awareness of specific circumstances related to discrimination in the realm of fine art and the inventive efforts devised by artists of color to overcome obstacles. Douglas's work as a graphic artist also afforded an opportunity to extend the conversation beyond fine art. Students discussed why African-American contributions in design fields are largely unrecognized in historical narratives and considered how the situation of the last century compares to today's public discourse. Aside from what they had just learned about Aaron Douglas, none of the graphic design majors could name a single influential African-American past or present working in the field, nor could they account for that gap of knowledge.[24] For most students in the class, across all majors,

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[22] SharifBey, "Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff: African American Art Education, Gallery Work, and Expanded Pedagogy." *Studies in Art Education* 52, no. 2 (2011): 112-26.

[23] Bey, 124.

[24] Feminist and revisionist histories of art have moved the needle significantly since the 1970s by building a robust body of scholarship that has expanded and diversified the canon. Similar methodologies hold the potential for foregrounding the story of African-American design histories.

Japanese design accounted for their understanding of cultural diversity in design history attesting to the global dissemination of anime through social media and digital platforms as influencers of perception.

Creating relatable real-world scenarios for students to practice critical perception as a learning strategy is key to the cognitive transformation most teachers hope to witness in their classrooms. Critical perception is the formative foundation upon which life-long learners develop, adopt, and adapt insights and attitudes toward unfamiliar, and sometimes controversial, issues while increasing their ability to identify gaps and limitations in the information at hand. The empathy component promotes an understanding of motives that may differ from their own, yet hones their ability to discriminate amongst different kinds of arguments and recognize what is and is not relevant and value based.

Practicing critical perception approaches in and out of the classroom develops the ability to articulate and justify a particular disposition or set of behaviors. In a previous iteration of the course, I designed a module around helping students recognize a range of racial stereotypes drawn from examples in Guy C. McElroy's *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940.* Select representations of African-Americans as jovial musicians, idle laborers, sexually voracious, disenfranchised people relegated to the margins of white society or, caricatured as grinning watermelon-eaters in advertisements and lampooned by white actors in blackface Minstrel shows were among the negative racial types discussed. However, understanding the socio-political contexts in which these stereotypes flourished proved somewhat challenging to capture in meaningful ways for students. Despite best efforts to engage students in an interactive and Socratic approach, questions were often met with limited or somewhat superficial responses. In the redesigned curriculum, the instructional approach shifted from illustrated PowerPoint lectures on the history of stereotypical image-making toward active learning exercises drawn from online teaching resources developed for Picturing United States History,[25] the Khan Academy's Seeing America,[26] or Art21,[27] among others.[28] Allowing the voice of contemporary artists like Kara Walker to speak to the past, push back against stereotypes, and redress historical

[25] "Picturing US History," https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/ Accessed March 7, 2021.

[26] The Khan Academy, "Arts and Humanities: The Seeing America Project," https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/seeing-america-sh Accessed March 7, 2021.

[27] "Art21," https://art21.org/ Accessed March 7, 2021.

[28] Related sites include the Smithsonian "Blackface: The Birth of An American Stereotype," https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/blackface-birth-american-stereotype Accessed March 7, 2021 and "Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans," https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans Accessed March 7, 2021.

erasures by exploring works such as Darkytown Rebellion[29] or Calliope[30] through her perspective proved infinitely more relatable for students. Unpacking the topic of stereotypes remains relevant. The approach is modified. Now conversations abound. Affirmation came in the form of hallway chatter following the class on Kara Walker where students were saying the time passed too quickly and they wished the class was longer! Viewing stereotypes through the lens of critical perception shifted toward a more organic sense of the embeddedness of these practices, not as fragmented and fixed historical moments, but as a cultural phenomenon which morphs through time. Movement is inevitable. Objects may be static but associated meanings from diverse perspectives are not. Neither are the counter narratives that must be included to complete the historical framework.

In celebration of the 2016 grand opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a group called Teaching for Change, which is dedicated to building social justice starting in the classroom, introduced a lesson titled "Expanding the Narrative: Meet and Greet the Harlem Renaissance." Participants assumed historical identities and, after learning about their person's assigned biography, wrote a monologue with an opening sentence "If I were alive today, this is how I would be challenging the current injustices in the world."[31] A similar strategy is pertinent to a course on African-American Art and is pairable with reports from students on contemporary artists who directly challenge the history of stereotypical image making through a post-colonial lens. Two particularly strong subjects emerged; Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) and Kara Walker's site-specific installation *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) of a thirty-five foot sugar coated sphinx-like 'mammy' figure in an abandoned Domino Sugar plant in Brooklyn.[32] Students prepared for the in-class discussion of these works of art by reading Richard Siegesmund's commentary "On the Persistence of Memory: The Legacy of Visual African-American Stereotypes" about how contemporary artists frame meaning and mount

[29] Khan Academy, "Kara Walker: Darkytown Rebellion," https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/global-contemporary-apah/21st-century-apah/a/kara-walker-darkytown-rebellion Accessed March 7, 2021.
[30] Art21, "Sending Out A Signal: Kara Walker & JasonMoran," Extended Play October 31, 2018, https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/kara-walker-jason-moran-sending-out-a-signal-short/ Accessed March 7, 2021.
[31] Teaching for Change, "Building Social Justice Starting In The Classroom," https://www.teachingforchange.org/ Accessed March 7, 2021.
[32] Alexxa Gotthardt, 2017. "How Betye Saar Transformed Aunt Jemima into a Symbol of Black Power." Artsy. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-betye-saar-transformed-aunt-jemima-symbol-black-power. Accessed March 7, 2021.

poignant responses to visual injustices of the past.[33] Responses to Siegesmund's observations were empathetic and insightful as individually each student shared similar accounts of discomfort about racially condescending or inappropriate imagery. Coincidentally, the conversation segued to address recent debates in the media about the removal of confederate statues from public spaces in Nashville, including the portrait bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest from the Tennessee State Capitol. In other words, students found personal and topical connections to relate to historical and artistic expressions of ideas.

Alois Riegl (1858-1905), an Austrian art historian who is considered a founder of art history as a discipline, stated that historical structure is not inherent in the material evidence of the past, but that there are historically specific conceptual frameworks for organizing our perception of the social and cultural world.[34] But how do we measure the extent to which this is happening in our curriculum? Early indicators from the African-American Art midterm essay exams and rubric-based assessments of in-class behaviors ranging from 'seldom observed' to 'frequently observed' were positive. Admittedly, more robust measures are needed to support deeper analyses of outcomes. As part of its LEAP (Liberal Education and America's Promise) initiative, the AAC&U (Association of American Colleges & Universities) made formative and summative VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics accessible online.[35] These team-built rubrics assist in assessing a number of outcomes including Inquiry and Analysis, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Written Communication, Oral Communication, Quantitative Literacy, Information Literacy, Reading, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Civic Knowledge and Engagement—Local and Global, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, Ethical Reasoning and Action, Global Learning, Foundations and Skills for Lifelong Learning, and Integrative Learning. While there is no VALUE rubric specifically for Critical Perception, I found the Creative Thinking version could be modified with elements from Problem Solving, and Integrative Learning to approximate the requisite measures. A plethora of on-trend rubrics are available to educators, but none are as well researched and validated as those offered through AAC&U. Their VALUE rubrics are widely adopted, easily adaptable, and continuously evaluated. And, the measures are developed by peer educators across a range of disciplines to capture data about process instead of content.

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[33] Richard Siegesmund. "On the Persistence of Memory: The Legacy of Visual African-American Stereotypes." *Studies in Art Education* 48, no. 3 (2007): 323-28.

[34] Michele Lamprakos, "Riegl's 'Modern Cult of Monuments' and The Problem of Value." Change Over Time 4, no. 2 (2014): 418–35. doi:10.1353/COT.2014.0011.

[35] Terrel Rhodes. *Assessing Outcomes and Improving Achievement: Tips and Tools for Using Rubrics.* Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2010.

At this point, I would like to share some concluding thoughts and analogies. My takeaway from this experience is that an art historical curriculum resonates with students better when critical perception is foregrounded, allowing interdisciplinary strands of creative thinking to coalesce around meaningful 'dispositions' or vantage points derived from object-based explorations (especially ones that promote a sense of empathy and multiple ways of connecting to the human condition). The goal is not arriving at a destination as quickly as possible, but experiencing the journey and being plugged into what happens along the way. For many, myself included, this represents a different psychology of teaching than we experienced as students. A vivid ecological theory of perception was expounded by American psychologist James Gibson during World War II when he was assigned the task of developing training films for pilots.[36] Gibson's theory of optic flow patterns was based on the idea that a fixed point towards which the pilot is moving appears motionless while the rest of the visual environment flows over and around the viewer.[37] Likewise, acquiring the skill of critical perception creates a mobile thinker who releases fixed subjectivities in order to move the decentered self through a flowing array of new realizations. Within this frame, art can be treated as time's visible surface.

Lastly, critical perception is also about illumination. I am reminded of the bull's eye lens surrounded by the concentric rings of glass designed by the Frenchman Augustin Jean Fresnel (1788–1827). His innovation created a beam of light that was five times brighter than anything produced by a traditional convex lens and had a twenty-four-mile range of visibility from a lighthouse. The Fresnel lens is an object of beauty as well as a technological marvel. I had an opportunity to see one in person at the Whaling Museum on Nantucket while writing this article. There was an interactive display that allowed visitors to press a switch and experience the prismatic illumination issuing from the refracted lens. Here was an object that in both form and function replicated the potential of creative thinking to illuminate our understanding of the world in which we live.[38]

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[36] James J. Gibson. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1979).

[37] Gibson also coined the term "affordances" which is increasingly used in design research to understand the relationship between end users and the products of designing and implicitly reflects upon related aspects of critical perception in art history. Udo Kannengiesser and John S. Gero. "A Process Framework of Affordances in Design." *Design Issues* 28, no. 1 (2012): 50-62.

[38] Special thanks to the Belmont University students in my classes who willingly participate in my teaching experiments and offer constructive feedback, and to Dr. Patricia A. Johnston (Rev. J. Gerard Mears, S. J. Chair in Fine Arts at Holy Cross) and Dr. Julia A. Sienkewicz (Assistant Professor of Art History, Roanoke College and Vice President for Committees, Board of Directors, CAA) for their review comments and encouragement in writing this essay.

APPENDIX I

"Belmont Mansion: Re-Envisioning Memories & Heritage through Objects of Material Culture"

We are all products of our histories and the stories we are told about our pasts. We will focus on one particular site, the Belmont Mansion, literally a part of the historical fabric of our campus community, to discover how, why, and by whom narratives are told. Adelicia and Joseph Acklen built the Italian Villa house in 1853 as a summer residence and retreat from life on the family's Louisiana plantations https://www.belmontmansion.com/. In December of 1864 the Union Army occupied the house and grounds; a pivotal point in the history of the mansion. By the end of the 19th century, the house and contents were sold at auction and the property converted into the first of several educational institutions. In 1972, The Belmont Mansion Association was formed to repair, restore, research, and furnish the mansion with original and period objects of fine and decorative art and material culture. Thousands of people visit the mansion annually and experience the historical site through an interpretative lens connecting the histories of the antebellum south, Tennessee, the Civil War, architecture, fine art, decorative arts, landscape design, and the horticultural arts.

You are asked to assume the role of a 'museum educator' to investigate and propose alternative approaches to interpreting the Belmont Mansion collections. This assignment requires research and critical thinking into comparative histories to identify different perspectives about interpretation and interpreters, messages conveyed verbally on guided tours, or through text panels and labels. The outcome is a written proposal explaining how you would create an interactive encounter to enhance the visitor experience. The objective is to be inclusive and representative in ways that allow visitors with diverse points of view to feel connected to authentic historical narratives and move beyond the current interpretative approaches. You may recall, a similar initiative is being used to re-envision the historical interpretation of the 17th-19th century artifacts and collections at Drayton Hall located near Charleston, South Carolina. Visit their online site http://www.draytonhall.org/the-estate/archaeology-collections/ to get inspiration for thinking about the untold stories of enslaved African-Americans on the Drayton Hall plantation as a counterpoint to its history of privilege.

The class will visit the Belmont Mansion for a private tour to gain insight into how the mansion and its collections are currently interpreted and you will propose

an alternative or re-envisioned interpretation geared toward engaging the diverse perspectives of 21st century visitors.