

ART AND THE WRITTEN WORD

The five exercises described in this article were selected from a larger number that I developed for teaching a course in art history at the New School of Liberal Arts at Brooklyn College. They present an opportunity to develop a unique understanding of the relationship between art and the written word. Their interdisciplinary nature reflects the spirit of the New School of Liberal Arts, where each course is used as an opportunity for teaching writing.

The results of these exercises are not judged by standards of academic excellence. Both the art and the writing are used to encourage the students to seek new experiences. The Quipu exercise can help the students overcome the inhibitions of autobiography, the sketching assignments might be included in journal keeping, and the hand study can inspire a reverence for life; exercises with clay can help the writing teacher to explain how words are expressed or emphasized through gesture.

I encourage students to write poetry because I think poetry fosters creative images. Words, like clay, are a medium in which to express thoughts and feelings. We who have the opportunity can develop image-making ability in our students.

By examining ideas that have motivated creative expressions from earliest times, the students develop a sense of perspective. Emphasis is placed on discovering what a point of view really is. All creative work is directed toward this end. Most assignments require both a three dimensional and a written exposition. My goal is not the formal essay; it is to allow for a depth of creative experience. Thus my approach complements, rather than replaces, more traditional methods of teaching writing.

Ruth Thaler is a former Professor of Art History at the New School of Liberal Arts, Brooklyn College, CUNY. She is a practicing sculptor, ceramist, and horticulturist, and has practiced art therapy for many years.

QUIPU: A MNEMONIC DEVICE—A NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

This first assignment challenges students to “write without words.” The Quipu was used by the pre-literate Incas to record events, inventories, and intervals of personal histories. Colorful knotted strings were tied together, each color and each knot conveying a significant message. The rosary beads of the Catholic religion are a modern example of this kind of memory aid.

In this assignment the students are asked to make Quipu that represent their personal histories. They are encouraged to use abstract symbols. There are no restrictions on their choice of media.

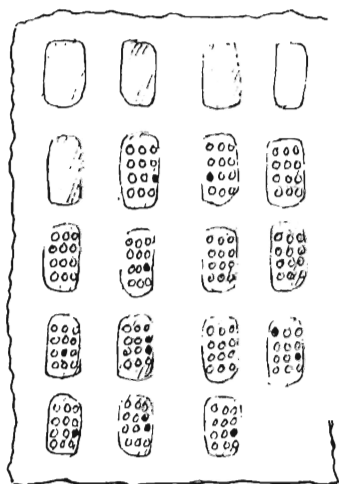
This exercise is an opening, a way to point out differences of perception that occur within the class. These differences are then translated to the wider arc of the ancient world where the Quipu-quality, or hidden message of pre-literate people’s art is revealed. Though these visual records are often compelling in a rather seminal way, they point to the limitations inherent in non-verbal communication. Not until each student has explained his own Quipu can the others be certain of its message.

Quipu can be used as the first step toward the writing of autobiography. Here is a graphic example of how all events in a person’s life are related not only sequentially, but also culturally and emotionally. The things that appear important can, through the use of Quipu, be placed in unique perspective. From the instruction “show me your history,” it is an easy step to “write me your history.”

1. “My Quipu is made of rope. The beginning is colored red to represent my birth. There is a black rope braided with a natural colored rope to represent the dark, troubled childhood I experienced. There is a large red knot tied near the middle. This is my tour of duty in Vietnam. After that the color becomes neutral; life was less traumatic. There are ‘loose ends’ that represent the unknown future.” (This Quipu is six feet long, the same length as its maker.)



2. "Each rectangle represents one year of my life. The dots occur after the fifth year, when time and events began to hold meaning. The black and red dots are placed where I have experienced moments of change or insight.") This Quipu is a piece of tan fabric twelve by sixteen inches. There are nineteen light-brown rectangles printed on it. Each rectangle except the first five has twelve white dots placed at even intervals. Scattered among these are twelve dots that are colored either red or black.



SKETCHING: THE TRANSLATION OF VISION INTO GESTURE, THE DISCOVERY OF A POINT OF VIEW

Sketching is an exercise that develops both observation and understanding. The quality of the lines is as important as the accuracy of the student's interpretation of what he is drawing. The lines reveal tension, interpretation, and concentration. I assign weekly sketching problems, insisting that a soft lead pencil be the only tool. Often students will use a ruler when drawing architectural details. The lines that result from this are cold and lifeless, bearing the character of the machine that made the ruler. They are easily recognized. I stress the importance of the sense of pulse and breath that exists in the freely drawn line. These unconscious rhythms of nature lend life to our creative actions.

Sketching is a way of describing experience without using words, but it is a step nearer to the written word than the Quipu. It awakens in us a consciousness of how we exclaim "I see!" when we recognize that we understand.

In the first assignment I ask the students to draw the doorway they pass through each day when entering or leaving their homes. This is an attempt to awaken the sense of separation, the change of focus, that transpires when one moves from inner, intimate surroundings to outer, social space. We talk about doorways and find other words for them such as gate, barrier, arch, portal, or threshold. We discuss the different images created by these words. I encourage the students to write about their doorways, to describe

them, and to discover what the doorways say about the rest of the building. I ask if the “promise” the doorway suggests is consistent with the images encountered inside. I ask that they take the idea of *threshold*, whose root means to cross-over, and relate it to other experiences they have had.

The assignments that follow require the students to sketch, in turn, each room of their home. I ask them to study each room from only one point of view, to establish a sense of physical perspective. Here they learn that perspective is a point of view. We consider how important it is to discover where you are before trying to establish where other things are. From this comes a comprehension of what it means to have a point of view, whether it be a place to stand or to take a stand.

The final sketching assignment asks for a self-portrait and a written self-description. The students are encouraged to describe themselves beyond their physical appearance. I ask them to write about what they are really like. It isn't easy to draw oneself, but the attempt seems to lessen the resistance to writing about oneself.

THE PALEOLITHIC HAND: ANCIENT GESTURE ON THE WALL OF TIME

Among all the images left by Paleolithic artists in caves, the hand is unique and provocative. Unlike the other majestic forms found there, the hands are not painted. They are merely outlines, silhouettes made by blowing pigment over the hand onto the wall. Why they were made, we can only conjecture. We know hands are a special link in the long chain of human history. We know also that the opposed thumb is a physiological phenomenon that allows us to grasp, to understand, and to shape our world.

Documentary movies and slides made about the Paleolithic art in the ancient caves of France and Spain acquaint the students with some of the earliest human records. Readings are assigned that describe the discovery and nature of the caves. The singular nature of the hand image is the main focus of class discussion during which we compile lists of possible reasons for its presence. With these in mind, the students are asked to write a poem.

Here, again, I stress the importance of perspective. Just as in the sketching exercises, they must first discover where they are before writing. A variety of possible points of view are suggested: a Paleolithic artist, a participant in the society, a modern person. I explain how the content of the poem can be reflected in the style. I give no directions about form, rhythm, phrasing, or rhyming. I do, however, encourage them to “compress” their thoughts and let their words touch tightly together. My goal is to overcome the self-conscious inhibitions of untried poets. The image of the hand is a vehicle well suited to this end. Here the intellect and

the emotions join and create a new understanding not only of the hand, but of human history. An example of student poetry follows.

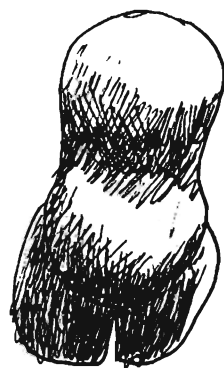
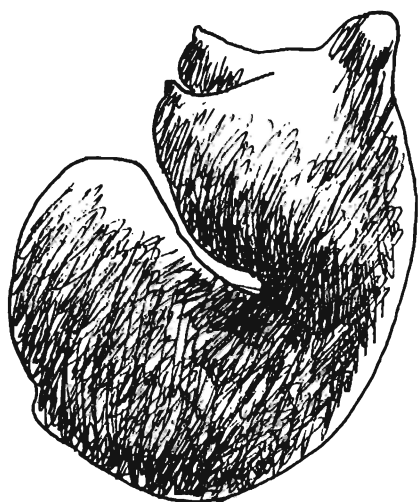
The Shadow of the Hand By Joseph McClean

Consciously I leave the shadow of my hand upon the wall.
I feel the sense of power in its presence.
I see it.
Others will see it.
It is more than just a sketch,
It is me! I have become part of the cave wall.
My sign shall endure.
Others will see it.
Yes, others will see me after I am no more.
I have great power to endure.
My shadow lives.
It has become part of the great force
That creates and controls all things.
My enemies shall fall because
My shadow lives.
I shall have immortality because
My shadow lives
In the depths of my cave.

FERTILITY FIGURE TO BRING FORTH AND TO NURTURE

This exercise begins with a visual experience of photographs and facsimiles of ancient fertility figures. These small figurines bespeak intimate human experience. They vary in size from one inch to the length of the human hand, and they differ in proportion from the voluminous "Venus of Willendorf" to the elegantly thin forms found in Mesopotamia. This variation suggests a relationship between artistic expression and societal needs. The difference between sexuality and fertility, a difficult distinction for the young, becomes a primary problem when I ask each of them to create a fertility figure for today's society. Each person is given a handful of wet clay out of which a figure is to be formed. The only tool is the hand. The only help I offer comes if a technical problem develops; i.e. the clays dries too fast, or students need instructions in how to add on a piece of clay so that it won't fall off when it dries. After the figurines are formed they are sketched three times, from three different points of view. This creates in many a new understanding of the three dimensional world in which we live.

Finally, students are asked to write about their figurines. I suggest that a poem on this subject might reflect the mystery of the life force. It could contain words that sustain sound and cause the mind to image in a special



way. Words like *vast* or *source* that suspend the image and allow feelings to arise might be used for inspiration. I ask for poetry because, to me, it suggests a freer form of expression, and it challenges the imagination in much the same way as clay.

Epistula Feminae Antiquae By Maura G. Whelan

Woman:

Only you can know the mystery of leading humanity from
womb to breast,
the mystery of growth, of nurture, of holding life in your belly—

Mother:

In jealousy man oppresses you,
In this way he enslaves you, by forcing that wondrous journey
from womb to breast
to become continuous,
tormenting,
murderous...

Childbearer:

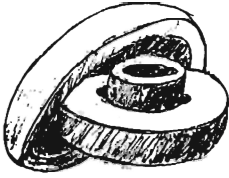
You shall not share the fruits of your mind with them.
You shall neither invade their art nor defile their temple—
Your lips shall not be gates to wisdom, concealing words
both pearl-like and divine—
but only soft, curvaceous cherries, tacit symbols of your
abundant fertility—
by which you remain enthralled.

Yet, Sad Lady:

You both love and hate these children, who, through
their existence bind you into endless servitude.
You can't help adoring that last boy who burst forth from
your own flesh.
But please; do not be deceived by the infant's smile
He is not helpless; nay, he is master;
It is he who shall tomorrow oppress your daughters.

THE VESSEL: A DEDICATION

During the semester the students are instructed in how to create pottery using many different methods. For the final assignment, students select one method and make a pot in dedication to a personality from the ancient world. This pot is to be designed to contain the mythical "elixir of life" that flowed from the four holy rivers of paradise. To whoever drank of it, the elixir brought immortality. The class considers how bowls and cups have



1. A small container, two inches in diameter with a hidden, secret vessel inside to hold the magic elixir.



2. A tall, thin vial with a tiny cup set into its spout from which to drink the elixir of life.



3. A thin saucer, shallow and unadorned to contain the elixir.



4. A strangely shaped form, three inches high with a handle and three tiny holes in its body but none in its spout.

been used through history, even to the present day, as trophies or rewards. I show examples of pottery used in this way, and I indicate that pottery was the first portable surface that man discovered he could write upon.

The clay pieces created in this exercise vary in size and elaboration from simple, saucer shapes to large sculptured vessels. Some of the works are surprisingly abstract, disguising their function completely.

When the containers are completed, I ask students to write their dedications. These are read to the class while the pottery is shown. With this assignment I try to join all the experiences of the course. Through the idea of the “elixir” comes the concern with mortality and the fragile nature of our lives. The choice of someone on whom to bestow immortality forces the student to examine history from a new perspective. I ask that the ancient person so rewarded be someone whose continued life would benefit our present world. To find such a person is not always possible. An example of one fruitless search can be found in the second poem below.

Dedication to Lao Tzu By David Bolnick

Many layers thick of heavy bronze plate
Splintered by the mightiest warrior's lance.
Ten thousand men die under strength unmatched,
Yet, Achilles falls like a feather to merciless time
Scarring with his sword but a scratch in vast timeless space.

Dead the crab lies on the barren beach
Stubborn to roll out with the ebbing tide.
The starfish flows with the waters, thriving.

Stand up against the mightiest force
And you are sure to perish beneath its cold edge.
Flow with the mightiest force and you may claim it as your own.
True immortality is for the man
Who heeds these words and touches his lips to this cup.

To Them That Knew and Told By Noel Beckford

In thine hands behold
The fountain of youth
The immortal drink
The elixir of life.
The truth revealed by the first of the fold,
The most uncouth,
The first of the link.
In those hands is the power to create,
To change
To deviate.

Use what is given, he cries through the ages
To ease the pain, the suffering, the strife.
But his pleas go unheeded, and slowly
 It drips
 The elixir of life. . .

Sometimes I ask students to wrap their pots and let the wrappings add another dimension to their presentations. Any creative action that can extend the comprehension of who we are builds vocabulary. With such forms and with words, we signal our inner meanings.