

# Lecture 1: Art in Prison: Theory & Practice

## Introduction to Socially Engaged Art

In this lecture, we review a brief history of art (mostly Western) to acknowledge the social role art has played throughout time.

While these days, art is viewed in museums, art galleries, books, internet, etc. this has not always been the case. In the past, art was more integrated into society as it was part of architecture, in palaces and churches, in important public buildings and even, earlier, in caves.

Also in the past, it was not uncommon to think about fine art as having something to do with beauty or truth. This is an idea that is rarely considered or discussed today because we realize that both (beauty and truth) are social and cultural constructs. That means they change depending on culture and time period and often reflect opinions of those in power.

# Lecture 1: Art in Prison: Theory & Practice

## Introduction to Socially Engaged Art

Let's do a quick introduction into this social aspect of art, including essentially important reasons for its existence:

1. Spiritual
2. Ritual
3. Political
4. Aesthetic

There are some art theorists who would argue all these reasons are actually social.

As you read through this lecture make note of the dates of the artworks. I have mostly tried to put them in chronological order as we do this quick review.

Art has always served a social function in societies, from the cave paintings, to ancient Egypt, Early Christian art, into the Renaissance and even today. Pretty much since the dawn of civilizations in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys (7,000 BCE) art has functioned to support those in power. It functioned to establish and maintain the social order. Notice how this relief sculpture from Mesopotamia shows a ruler defeating a lion. Certain animals have been deemed powerful by humans and we see them showing up in various ways in art. Sometimes as in the Cave Art, they are honored as part of an initiation ritual. In many works representing gods, goddesses or rulers with aspects of powerful animals or defeating powerful animals means they also have these powers.

*(Note Dates of Artworks)*



Cave Painting, Lascaux, France, 15,000-10,000 BCE



Ruler killing a lion. (Mesopotamia) 4000 BCE

Many different civilizations developed in Mesopotamia and there was much fighting including wars of conquest.

Powerful rulers were worshiped as gods and many myths and stories were written about their conquests and artworks made to visually testify to their power.

Much of the artwork was made to reinforce the power of these rulers.



Head of an Akkadian ruler, from Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik), Iraq, ca. 2250–2200 BCE. Copper, 1' 2 3/8" high. Iraq Museum, Baghdad.



Made around 880 BCE in what we now call Iraq. This one is from the citadel of Sargon II, a really powerful king. This is at the Met. Go see it.

**Egyptian** artwork is generally very stiff and what we call 'stylized.' This means rather than attempting to create a portrait of the pharaoh and his queen, they are made according to a convention.

This way all pharaohs will look the same, wear the same clothes and headdress, have the same beard, stand with one foot forward, hands clenched, etc.

Ordinarily, it is quite hierarchical, meaning the most important person (in this case the pharaoh) is either larger or placed in a higher position.

All this artwork was commissioned by and/or for the pharaoh. It showed his power and abilities.

**Fowling scene, from the tomb of Nebamun, Thebes, Egypt, Dynasty XVIII, ca. 1400–1350 BCE. Fresco on dry plaster, approx. 2' 8" high. British Museum, London.**



Menkaure and Khamerernebt (?), from Gizeh, Egypt, Dynasty IV, ca. 2490–2472 BCE. Graywacke, approx. 4' 6 1/2" high.

Go to the Met to see Egyptian too.

## Archaic to Classical style in Greek Art

Much Greek art is based on Greek history and myths.

The Greek gods and goddesses were imagined in human form with human weaknesses and god-like strengths. Only the gods and goddess had immortality.

All artwork was commissioned by the Greek (and then Roman) rulers.

In this Roman portrait of Augustus as a general, he has himself represented with Cupid (a god) to reinforce the belief he is the brother of Cupid. Hence, he is a god.

Some people may say Classical Greek sculpture is 'realistic.' But the word we use is 'idealistic' because all figures are young, muscular, an ideal of perfection. Not what most real people look like.



*Apoxomenos*, ( this is a sculpture of an Olympic Athlete), also considered a god. Greece, ca. 320 BCE



*Portrait of Augustus as general*, from Prima Porta, Italy, copy of a bronze original of ca. 20 BCE. Marble, 6' 8" high. Vatican Museums, Rome.

## Early Christian to Renaissance (300-1500)

The period between 1450 and 1650 was a time of revolutionary cultural change. Religious change, the growth of empires, educational developments, social mobility, theater, art, the printing press and medical advances reshaped the history of the West. In Western Culture (that's ours), our current tradition in art came from Renaissance taste and trends. During this time, artists still worked for the Catholic Church as they were the main patrons.



*Christ as the Good Shepherd*, mosaic from the entrance wall of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy, ca. 425.



The Last Supper, Leonardo da Vinci, 1500

All Christian Art was commissioned by the Church. Images were carefully directed to educate and indoctrinate a largely illiterate population to particular Christian stories.



During the Renaissance the Church was still a major patron of the arts. Which accounts for artworks such as this image of the *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo, painted on the ceiling of the Pope's chapel in Rome. In this particular instance though, the Pope, who commissioned the work, wanted a different image for the ceiling. Michelangelo chose a series of stories all from the Old Testament and was allowed to paint his choices. This was somewhat new. That the artist was able to choose subject matter and themes.

MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI, *Creation of Adam* (detail), ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Rome, Italy, 1511–1512. Fresco, approx. 9' 2" x 18' 8".



Also, a new merchant class was emerging so that artworks became more secular. And because we were witnessing the development of science, the artworks became more naturalistic, based on observation of the natural world. So we see more secular commissions, such as this portrait of the wife of Francisco del Giocondo by Leonardo, painted in a highly representational (represents the world) style.

LEONARDO DA VINCI, *Mona Lisa*, ca. 1503–1505. Oil on wood, approx. 2' 6" x 1' 9". Louvre, Paris.



Wealthy art patrons appreciated the naturalism with which many artists like Titian could render their subjects. This painting, entitled “Venus of Urbino” is a painting for the Duke of Urbino’s private quarters. Venus was included in the title to make the subject matter more acceptable. Venus being the goddess of love and beauty in ancient Rome. Paintings like this one became a model for images of women in art for hundreds of years.

TITIAN, Venus of Urbino, 1538. Oil on canvas, approx. 4’ x 5’ 6”. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

It would have been considered inappropriate for a patron to have a nude painting commissioned. However, by labeling it ‘Venus’ the Roman goddess of beauty, it became acceptable. Now, it’s considered a mythic story, not a nude woman. Does this sound like a tactic we might see in advertising or politics today?

## GENDER, EXOTICISM AND COLONIALISM

In this group of paintings by Ingres, you will all recognize the pose of the prominent female figure. It is similar to the Renaissance painting of the 'Venus of Urbino.' The difference we see is that instead of masking the intent by titling it a 'Venus', Ingres provides direct ways for the viewer to engage in voyeurism and fantasy. French Male viewers can be transported to the Orient (see the hookah, fabrics, fan, the black attendants), including cultural practices of the bath and harem.



The Turkish Bath, Ingres, 1862



JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES, Grande Odalisque, 1814. Oil on canvas, approx. 2' 11" x 5' 4". Louvre, Paris.



Odalisque with Slave, Ingres, 1858

## AFTER THE RENAISSANCE

Renaissance ideas and styles influenced art in the West until the middle of the 1800's.

Most artwork was still being commissioned by the Church, rulers or wealthy patrons. Regular people could not afford to commission art and artists could only survive if they did artwork these wealthy patrons wanted.

So, we see a lot of Christian subjects and portraits of the rich and powerful.

This painting of Louis XIV is a good example of how art served the purposes of the patron (that's the person who pays). Louis XIV wanted to show how wealthy he was with all the expensive things. We also see the hall of mirrors from Versailles in the left corner. Louis was particularly proud of his legs. 😊



HYACINTHE RIGAUD, Louis XIV, 1701. Oil on canvas, approx. 9' 2" x 6' 3". Louvre, Paris.



Napoleon commissioned many portraits all depicting him in different heroic and powerful positions. Some, like these above show the opulence of his reign as well as details that align him with a Roman general from the past. He has himself painted as an omnipotent ruler—rather than a mere mortal.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne*, 1806, oil on canvas, 259 x 162 cm (Musée de l'Armée, Hôtel des Invalides, Paris). And second one is by Jacques Louis David.



This painting was considered a 'history' painting because it was based on a actual event. However, David painted it in a studio in France. He was never in the Alps and never witnessed the event. He wanted to make Napoleon appear very heroic.

Renaissance style is still preferred by patrons of art.

*Napoleon on Horseback at the St Bernard Pass* by Jacques-Louis David, 1801-05.

## Things begin to change.



Just a few years after the painting of Napoleon was completed, Goya, a Spaniard, created this painting to depict an event that occurred during the Peninsular War when French forces rounded up Spanish civilians and executed them. This painting was commissioned by the provisional Spanish government. It has become a very famous anti-war painting.

It is considered one of the most important “anti-war” paintings in the history of art. Goya did not paint it for any particular patron but because he was horrified at what the French did to the Spanish peasants.

FRANCISCO GOYA, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814. Oil on canvas, approx. 8' 8" x 11' 3". Museo del Prado, Madrid.



This larger than life-sized uncommissioned painting was based on a real event in which 147 people were set adrift in a raft after the sinking of a French naval ship. All but 15 died. This painting depicts the moment the survivors see a ship in the distance. Géricault painted it to emphasize the horror these people experienced because the captain left them for dead. It was a type of social protest.

THÉODORE GÉRICAUT, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818–1819. Oil on canvas, approx. 16' x 23'. Louvre, Paris.

# The Disasters of War

Goya created 82 etchings on the Disasters of War. Disillusioned by man's inhumanity to man, these prints did not glorify either side. And they were not published until 35 years after his death. We can see a shift beginning as artists started making art that reflected social and political realities, as opposed to those supported by people in power.



*Grande hazaña. con muertos*

Plate 39 from The Disasters of War (Los Desastres de la Guerra)



Plate 15 from The Disasters of War (Los Desastres de la Guerra)

# Protest Slavery

**This** painting was based on a poem that described a slave ship caught in a typhoon, and on the true story of the slave ship Zong whose captain, in 1781, had thrown overboard sick and dying slaves so that he could collect insurance money available only for slaves “lost at sea.”

At this time the U.S. still had slavery but England did not. Turner was British.



J.M. W. Turner, *Slave Ship, (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* 1840, Oil on canvas, 35  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 48  $\frac{1}{4}$



Detail to the left. Notice the arms, legs and sharks in the water.

## ARTISTS OF COLOR

Throughout the history of Western Art there are few mentions of women artists or people of color. Almost all artists are white men. And for the most part, their work represents the ideas and prejudices of white men. In American, post-Civil War, Henry Ossawa Tanner is regarded as one of the most talented African-American artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He studied at the Philadelphia academy but moved to Paris in 1891 living there for the rest of his life.

His painting, *The Banjo Lesson*, depicts a rural black man and boy unified by the theme of music. His strong but sensitive black male figure is teaching the young boy. It is tender and shows black people in ways they had not been depicted by other white artists.



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893. Oil on canvas

So, earlier I highlighted how most artwork was commissioned by a particular patron. As a result, the patron (person who paid) had control over both subject matter and style.

As we moved into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century many changes were taking place so that artists were less obviously influenced by wealthy patrons.

As a result this is the time when the Modernist styles of Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and others emerged.—all movements created by artists.

These movements are part of, **Modernism**.

This Modernist Art is defined as a rejection of Renaissance Tradition as there is less interest in a natural representation of the world. Artists are more interested in emotional and formal issues.



ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER, *Street, Dresden*, 1908 (dated 1907). Oil on canvas, 4' 11 1/4" x 6' 6 7/8". Museum of Modern Art, New York (purchase).



VINCENT VAN GOGH, *Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, approx. 2' 5" x 3' 1/4". Museum of Modern Art, New York (acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest).



GEORGES BRAQUE, *The Portuguese*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 3' 10 1/8" x 2' 8".

## Protest War

Pablo Picasso is most known for developing Cubism with Georges Braque. In 1936 he was asked to represent Spain at the Paris Worlds Fair 1937. He chose this cubist depiction of a real event and it has gone down in history as another of the most famous anti-war paintings.

Even though official theme of the Exposition was a celebration of modern technology, Picasso painted a political painting. In 1936, a civil war began in Spain between the democratic Republican government and fascist forces, led by General Francisco Franco, attempting to overthrow them. Picasso's painting is based on the events of April 27, 1937, when Hitler's powerful German air force, acting in support of Franco, bombed the village of Guernica in northern Spain, a city of no strategic military value. It was history's first aerial saturation bombing of a civilian population. 1/3 of the people were killed or wounded.



Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937, Oil on Canvas,  
11'5 1/2 " x 25'5 3/4 "

## THEN IN AMERICA

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wealthy patrons were still commissioning art. But there were also artists who felt their work should reflect the realities of life around them. One group called themselves the Ash Can School. They depicted scenes of everyday life in the immigrant neighborhoods of NYC. You might imagine that these subjects were not considered appropriate for wealthy patrons.

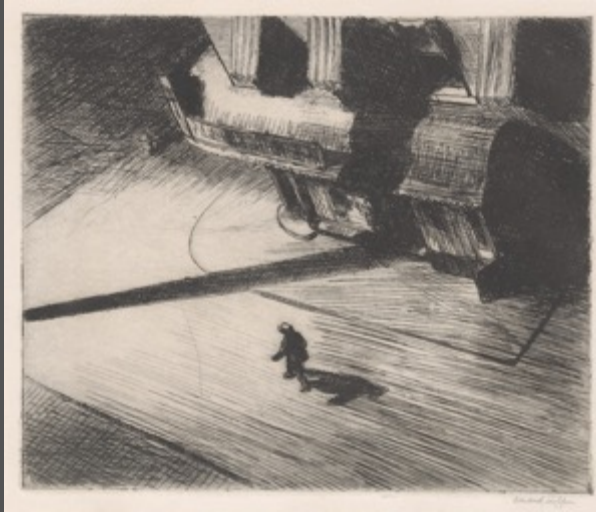


## SOCIAL REALISM

Another group of artists popular before World War II in the U.S. were also working in Urban areas.

The Social Realist political movement and artistic explorations flourished primarily during the 1920s and 1930s, a time of global economic depression, heightened racial conflict, the rise of fascist regimes internationally, and great optimism after both the Mexican and Russian revolutions. Social Realists created figurative and realistic images of the "masses," a term that encompassed the lower and working classes, labor unionists, and the politically disenfranchised.

These artists were motivated by contemporary social problems to make work bringing attention to these social issues.



This is an etching, (a drawing on metal that gets printed) of a real location in Manhattan that Hopper has made seem mysterious and even threatening. The viewer is placed in the position of a voyeur, watching this solitary man walk down the empty street. Much of his work addressed the loneliness of city life.

EDWARD HOPPER, *Night Shadows*, 1921, Etching, 7x8", Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Lawrence, an African American artist created 60 small paintings addressing issues surrounding the great migration of Negroes from the South to the North (Harlem) between 1910 and 1940s. In this one, blacks and whites are separated at the library by a simple barrier.

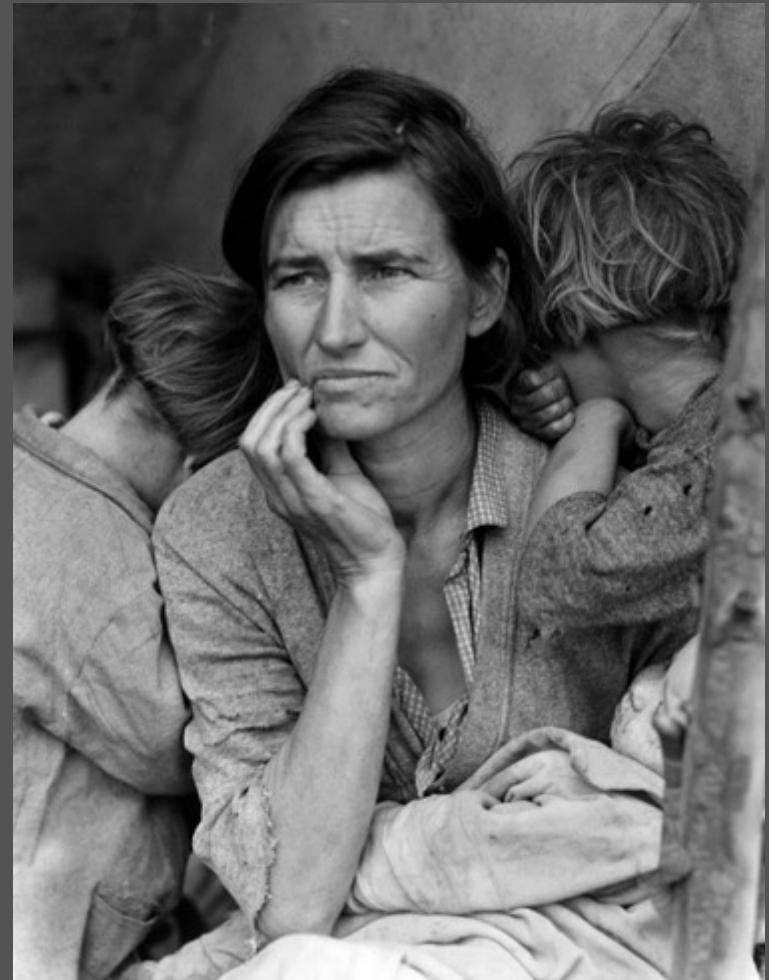
JACOB LAWRENCE, *No. 49 from The Migration of the Negro*, 1940–1941. Tempera on masonite, 1' 6" x 1'. The Phillips Collection, Washington.

## SOCIAL REALISM\_PHOTOGRAPHY 1940s-50s

The Depression, the FAP (Federal Art Project), the two world wars and America's pervasive Protestant ethic had instilled in young artists a commitment to social relevance--or usefulness.

The trauma of the depression forced a reappraisal among American artists of their cultural identity. First through themes of Social Protest but then came the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and the Federal Art Project (the Work program developed to put artists to work)--gave an opportunity for Social Realism to flourish.

**Dorothea Lange** (May 26, 1895 – October 11, 1965) was an influential American documentary photographer and photojournalist, best known for her Depression-era work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Lange's photographs humanized the consequences of the Great Depression and influenced the development of documentary photography.



**Doratheia Lang, *Migrant Mother*, 1936**  
Gelatin silver print, printed c. 1960-1962  
9 1/2 × 7 1/2 in

Two world wars before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century created many changes in world power. Art too, continued to change. Social revolutions in Russia and Mexico let to artwork that supported the working class..



Orozco, a Mexican Artist, created public murals that would highlight the history of Central America including evils of Capitalism and the greed and power that comes with it.

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO, *Epic of American Civilization: Hispano-America* (panel 16), Baker Memorial Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, ca. 1932–1934. Fresco.



In Russia, during the Revolution (1917), artists who were part of the Constructivist movement rejected art as aesthetic object and put their energies to create utilitarian objects they thought would create a better world.

This is a photograph of Vladimir Tatlin with Monument to the Third International, 1919–1920. It is a scale model of what he imagined to be a new form of architecture.

## ART FOR THE MASSES\_ PUBLIC MURALS

Diego Rivera documented the history of Mexico in a mural on the main staircase of the National Palace of Mexico City. The staircase leads to the second floor of the courtyard which still houses the main offices of government entities of Mexico. Anyone can view this complex mural as it is in a public building, not a museum.

Mexico is a country that has experienced various revolutions throughout its history and the mural tells the story of them all, even the indigenous beginnings.

Diego Rivera (1907-1957) was influenced by the Mexican Revolution and the Russian Revolution. Previously painting in many Modernist styles, he became interested in creating art for the masses. He felt a Realist style worked best and his subjects were the history of the Mexican people (before Colonialism), Mexican heritage and myths, and the power of the working class.



*Diego Rivera, The history of Mexico, 1929-1935, fresco on walls, (see stairwell above)*

## NON WESTERN ART

This entire lecture has focused on Western Art. If we were to look at Non-Western art, like this mask from Africa, we realize that much Non-Western art has always been integrated into society as ritual or sacred object. This is just one example.

Much of this work is part of a community ritual. See next slide. Not thought of as art the way we might think of it.

Ngady Amwaash mask,  
Kuba, Democratic Republic  
of Congo, late 19th or early  
20th century. Peabody  
Museum, Harvard  
University, Cambridge.





Mwashambo (kneeling) and Bwom (standing) maskers in a royal ceremony among the Kuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, late 20th century.

## Final Notes:

This brief introduction to the history of Western Art has been specifically designed to highlight the artworks as they function within social structures of their time. It seems important because we notice that at a point, sometime around the time of the Enlightenment, artists begin to take more ownership for their subject matter and then, eventually, their styles.

You may have noticed I mentioned several times that throughout cultures previous to the 1800s, patrons (rulers, the Church and wealthy people) dictated subject matter and style in art. When artists began making their own choices, they risked the ability sell the work. But, some (not many at this time) did it anyway.

I wanted to set this foundation because the artwork we are discussing in this class stands very far away from this tradition. Even the most conscious social commentary we witnessed in this lecture, is not considered Social Practice art by today's definition.

The next lecture will pick up where this one leaves off and include more contemporary Social Practice Artists, including reinforcing the definition of the term you are already being introduced to in the reading.

So, don't get confused. This lecture sets a foundation. It is more traditional in that sense. Many of these artworks would be seen in any *Introduction to Art* or *Art History* course.