

# Lecture 1: Art in Prison: Theory & Practice

## Introduction to Socially Engaged Art

This class is designed to introduce students to an area of contemporary art often called, Socially Engaged Art (Social Art Practice, Social Practice, etc.) and the circumstances surrounding Prisons in America.

After investigating each individually, we analyze how Socially Engaged Art is being used in prisons to provide therapy and life enhancement to those incarcerated while providing advocacy, bringing attention to injustices within the system.

This lecture gives a really brief review of the history of Western Art so students can differentiate traditional object-based artworks from this new direction that we are examining, Social Practices in Art.

Readings are designed to support and expand the lecture.

Art has always served a social function in societies, from the cave paintings, to ancient Egypt, Early Christian art and into the Renaissance.

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.

In Western Culture (that's ours), our 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. But, also, a new merchant class was emerging so that artworks became more secular. And because we were witnessing the development of science, which influenced the artworks as they became more naturalistic.

*(Note Dates of Artworks)*



Ruler killing a lion. (Mesopotamia) 4000 BCE



The Last Supper, da Vinci, 1500



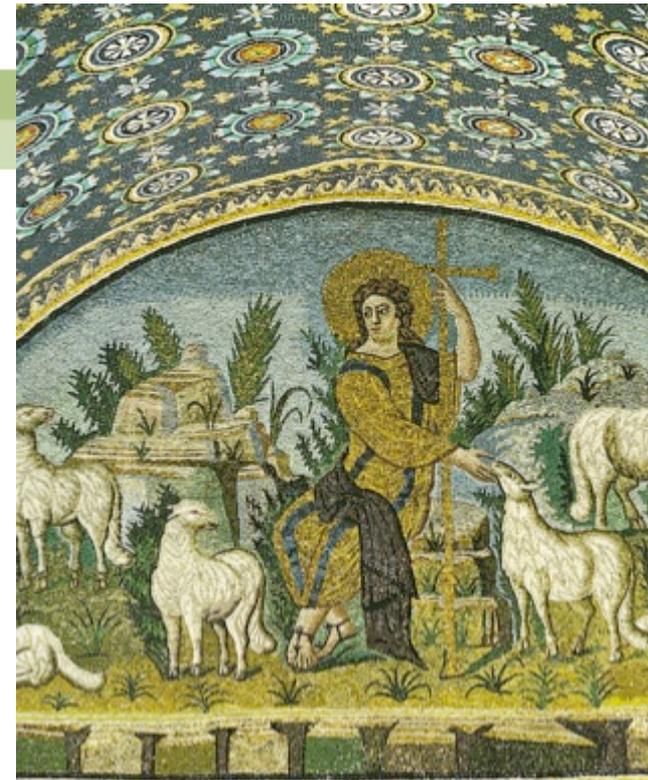
A portrait of the pharaoh hunting. Notice the pharaoh is the largest figure. The image depicts him successfully catching the exotic bird.

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.



**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.**

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.



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

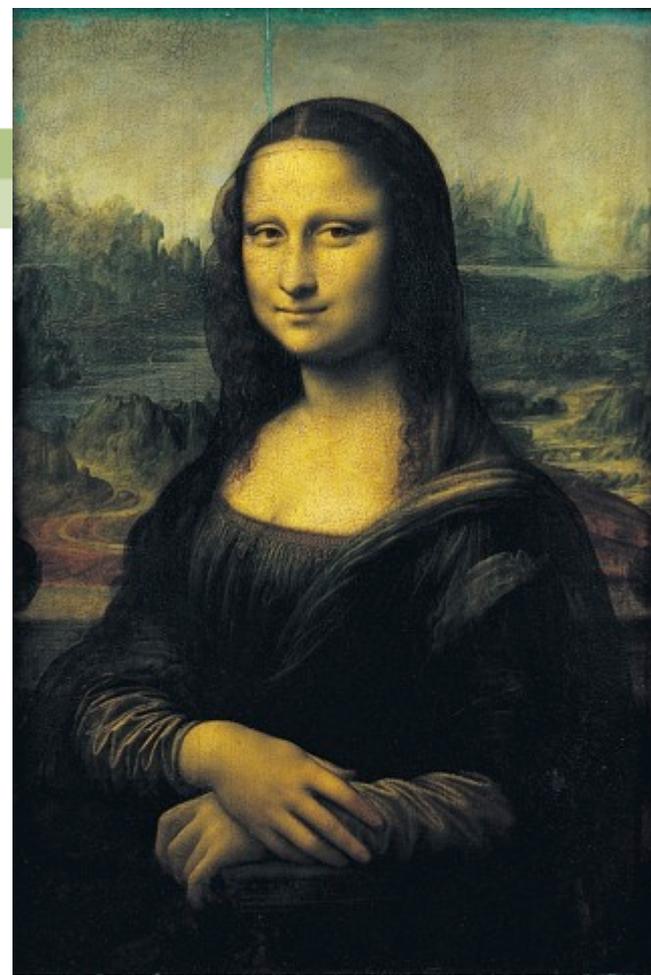
Christ as the Good Shepherd, mosaic from the entrance wall of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy, ca. 425.



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.

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



The Renaissance also witnessed more secular commissions, such as this portrait of the wife of Francisco del Giocondo by Leonardo.

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.

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



In the 1800's Napoleon commissioned the artist Jacques Louis David to paint several portraits all depicting him in heroic postures.

Renaissance style is still preferred by patrons of art.



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.

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.

So, earlier I wanted to highlight how much artwork was commissioned by a particular patron. As a result, the patron had much 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 Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and others emerged. All movements created by artists.

These movements are called, **Modernism**.

This is Modernist Art defined as a rejection of Renaissance Tradition. Note: less interest in a natural representation of the world.



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).



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).



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

Then, during WWI a movement emerged that forever changed the way art is made and thought about.

The Dada movement evolved as a response to the horror of the war. The artists believed that the 'reason' and 'logic' of bourgeois capitalist society led people to war. So, Dada artists embraced chaos and irrationality as a rejection of bourgeois nationalist ideas.

Because art and culture conformed to these ideas, they rejected them too.

Artwork became a type of protest. And the work of Marcel Duchamp, an important Dada artist, rejected traditional art and embraced a new form of art that was more about ideas.

For him the purpose of art was to make people think.

**Watch this 3 minute video to learn more about Duchamp's "Fountain."**

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/wwI-dada/dada1/v/marcel-duchamp-fountain-1917>



MARCEL DUCHAMP, Fountain, (second version), 1950 (original version produced 1917). Ready-made glazed sanitary china with black paint, 12" high. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (purchased with proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art).

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 led 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.

**While most artists continued making artwork within the Modernist tradition many were motivated by contemporary social problems to make work bringing attention to these social issues.**

**As was discussed in our reading, socially motivated art is often a response to particularly difficult times.**

**The next historic evolution of socially motivated art occurred in the late 1960s.**



In the 1920's in America, African American artists and writers celebrated the history and accomplishments of those of African-American decent. This Mural by Aaron Douglas depicts Noah as a black man.

AARON DOUGLAS,  
Noah's Ark, ca. 1927. Oil on masonite, 4' x 3'. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee.



**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.**

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

# Performance Art



Two social events framed the Performance Art movement.

1. Social protests where people used their bodies in physical action.
2. An interest in making art that was not a commodity. It could not be bought or sold.

Yoko Ono, Cut Piece & Marina Abramovic, O



In the 1950s and 60s in the US a number of social protests took to the streets protesting injustices. The Civil Rights Movement was the most obvious. Protestors, using non-violent means, used their bodies to create disruption in social situations.

*Civil Rights Protest March, University of Washington.*



The 1960s was a decade of social protests around the western world. Artists were looking for more politically engaged ways of working with art.

**The Situationist International** emerged from a fusion of several artistic groups. The result was a group that sought to redefine revolutionary action.

The Situationists believed the cultural shift from individual expression to those mediated through various commodities (TV, Magazines, Movies, etc.) seriously damaged human life. So they constructed events designed to reawaken authentic desire through the liberation of everyday life.

While heavily influenced by avant-garde artistic movements and Marxist theory, the Situationist International renounced artistic bohemianism and traditional Marxist-Leninist parties, proposing instead a critique of capitalism that weighted heavily in favor of the spontaneous realization of the revolutionary potential of everyday life. (1957-1972)



In the 1970s the Art workers Coalition protested the war in Vietnam with a **Demonstration in MOMA (Museum of Modern Art)**—they displayed copies of the poster in front of *Guernica*

# THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

- Working without the pressure of success.
- Not having to be in shows with men.
- Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.
- Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.
- Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine.
- Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.
- Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.
- Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.
- Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.
- Having more time to work when your mate dumps you for someone younger.
- Being included in revised versions of art history.
- Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.
- Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD  
 532 LAGUARDIA PLACE, 2307 NY, NY 10012  
 www.guerrillagirls.com

In the 1980s, women artists protested the disparity between male and female artists. By using posters and other inexpensive means, the Guerrilla Girls posted billboards in Humorous protest.



The GUERRILLA GIRLS, *The Advantages of Being A Woman Artist*, 1988. Poster.

## Final Notes:

I hope this short review has given you some ways for comparing traditional art in history (painting, sculpture) with some of the historic referents for Social Art.

The next lecture will include more contemporary Social Artists.

If you look at the left side of the website you will see names, links and a video of some of the contemporary artists we will discuss. You will need to know some of them to complete your first Analysis Paper.