Humanities Through the Ages: A series

Honors 499 Project

by
Victoria Meldrum

advised by
Dr. Cheryl Bove

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 19, 2008
Spring 2008
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Bove, who patiently guided me through a sea of literature and art. Good luck with your next adventure!

To my family and friends for their suggestions and support.

And to Mrs. Hiensley, who ignited my passion for art.

Thank you!
ARTIST’S STATEMENT

My project, Humanities Through the Ages: A series, is a 3-panel mural representing the expanse of literature and art covered in the Honors College humanities sequence. Each one of the panels includes characters and themes from Honors 201 – The Ancient World; Honors 202 – The Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment; and Honors 203 – The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

The first panel is “Immortality.” The common theme in the work of ancient times is the ideal of immortality. The desire to have your name remembered with honor was glorified through Homer’s Odyssey and Iliad, Virgil’s Aeneid, myths about heroic deities, and artwork. The ancients also developed a sense of the world through astronomy and philosophy. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle defied the mythology system and established the foundation for reasoning and logic.

I included Socrates’s hierarchy of the self (reasoning governs appetite and desire), the Parthenon and Pantheon, Roman Cyprus and pine trees from the Via Appia, the cliff of the Acropolis, Poseidon harassing Odysseus’s crew, the balance of moderation versus excess and deprivation, the gifts of the muses (writing tablet > epic poetry and sacred poetry; scroll > history; rose crown > love poetry; tragic mask > tragedy; comedic mask > comedy; compass > astronomy; flute > music; and lyre > dance), the Allegory of the Cave, and Achilles carrying his shield.

I love the rhythm of the panel, which causes the eye to travel in a Z-shape from the top left down to the bottom right. The panel has great visual dominance and uses the rule of thirds. As far as composition, I am very happy, but I would have like to have done more with the texture of the painting while the paint was still wet to create more light play. Also, a cat literally walked through the sky and Achilles has a lazy eye.

The second panel is “Mortality.” The common theme in the work of the middle times is the realization of mortality. Between wars and plagues, death was a constant figure looming over daily life—and often considered an escape. Christianity exploded and became corrupt. Europeans rediscovered the arts and nurtured a cradle of new ideas and expression (Shakespeare, Michelangelo, etc.). A new mantra took hold—Seize the day.

I included King Arthur’s dragon, Beowulf’s ship, the architectural wonder of the Notre Dame, lovers under the influence of sonnets and carpe diem, the layers of Dante’s hell opening, a skull representing the bloodshed of the Crusades, and a broken Rosary representing the unwieldy Catholic empire.

I love the texture and content of this panel, but I wish I had the talent to include characters from each level of Dante’s hell. If I had arranged my time differently, I would
have attempted this detail and given that area of the painting more prominence when I first sketched it. There is a good use of color and balance of content.

The third panel is “Existence.” The common theme in the work of contemporary times is the question of existence. Where does life begin and why does it exist? How do lives intertwine? Does my life have more worth than another’s? What is my responsibility to society? The World Wars and rejection of religion created a much more critical and cynical society, which expressed itself through experimentation and rebellion.

I included London’s Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral under attack during the World Wars, a globe and books representing the awareness of a new global society, Blake’s chimney sweepers hoping for Death’s sweet escape, Blake’s tyger “burning bright,” Henry and Cato’s tapestry scene, Frankenstein’s monster with classic clothing but modern green skin, Whitman’s soothing forests, Darwin’s evolutionary and revolutionary finches, and flowers from Eieseley’s “How the Flowers Changed the World.”

This panel is complete chaos, which actually reflects my opinion of the times. This was the panel I struggled with the most because I couldn’t decide if the scene should be indoors or outside, and what the dominant image should be. Once I established the theme of existence, it was a lot easier to determine the content, but I still should have arranged it more logically. I think the London under attack could have been the focus, especially because I am proud of my rendition of those buildings.

If I had to start over, I would have tried to simplify my content ahead of time so each panel had a definite main character who worked together with the other panels, and then integrated as many other characters later on. I wish I had started painting much earlier and finished before the end of the semester, but my other classes got in the way. I also would have made sure my work area was cat-proof.

As a whole, this series challenged my artistic talents—I haven’t taken an art class since 10th grade! This series also required me to look through all my old notes, handouts, and books from the honors sequence, which I took during my freshman and sophomore years. My favorite character of the entire work is the dragon, which is a composite of all dragon-verses-knight drawings I could find and the Herot dragon in downtown Muncie. I also love my “tyger tyger burning bright” because he looked like a hot mess and then suddenly looked really cool (It was the stripes). I definitely feel like a stronger artist because of this project.

This series was created with acrylic paint in an expressionist style.
EXPERIENCE JOURNAL

November 2007
After visiting the Ball State Art Museum and the Indianapolis Museum of Art, I have decided to create my piece using the expressionistic style—vivid colors, bold geometric shapes, emphasis in black; conveying deep emotion. Works using expressionism include The Scream, View of Toledo, and Café Terrace at Night.

December 2007
I buy supplies for my project—three 24 x 24 inch canvases, acrylic paint, brushes, and a sketchbook. Yes, the supplies DO fit in my car. I plan to make practice paintings before tackling my final piece and begin doodling to bring back my art skills after six years of idleness.

January 2008
I sketch random shapes and research which figures and symbols should appear in my work. I use the Indianapolis Museum of Art web site among other art museum web sites to see how others have depicted the topics I am covering.

February 2
I block out my canvasses in thirds. As a design major, I know that the rule of thirds maps out where the eye will go and where my dominant elements should lie. The canvasses appear to have a tic-tac-toe grid. My main elements will appear where these lines intersect.

February 11
After meeting with Dr. Bove, I determine the content for each panel. Honors 201 will express “Immortality” and feature Achilles, the ideal Greek man. The panel will also include Odysseus vs. Neptune, Plato/Socrates’ hierarchy of the soul, Aristotle’s balance of virtue and vice, the Allegory of the Cave, the Parthenon, and a triumph through Rome with the Pantheon.

Honors 202 will express “Mortality” and feature a skull with possibly floral and religious accents. The panel will also include Dante’s hell with Dido, a procession of Canterbury Tales characters, King Lear and/or Hamlet, lovers in poetry (To My Coy Mistress, Gather Ye Rosebuds while Ye May, Momento More, Shakespeare sonnets), King Arthur’s knights, St. George’s dragon, a floral motif with red rose cycle, and possibly the Crusades.

Honors 203 will express “Existence” and feature London during the Blitz (with St. Paul’s burning) fading into a scene of Woodsworthian nature. The panel will also include
Blake’s chimney sweep and tyger, Krapp’s Last Tape as a cassette player, characters from a Hemmingway short story, Frankenstein’s monster, and Darwin’s pigeons.

I will sketch out the three panels and have them reviewed by Dr. Bove before I begin painting the final pieces.

March 11-13
I attempt to sketch on the beach, which seems like a romantic, Whitman-esque idea, but the wind made this difficult to carry out. I wanted to find a young, athletic man to sketch as my model for Achilles, but I seem to only find scrawny teenagers and paunchy old men—definitely not a paragon of Greek form. I decide to move indoors and sketch elements I want to use in my final piece.

March 29-30
After attempting to map out my project, I get restless and move to my actual canvasses. I block them out in 3x3 squares so I can find the optical center for each panel. I draw the main illustrations (Achilles for “Immortality”, skull for “Mortality”, and a cracked globe for “Existence”). I then start sketching in the other elements in loose detail to see placement and proportion. I want the three panels to look like one piece when placed next to each other, but I also want each panel to work independently. This means I need a continuing horizon line and a couple of repeating features. I will have a sea that “connects” panel 201 and panel 202 and a line of trees that transitions panel 202 and panel 203.

As far as my Achillean model is concerned, I ask my roommate’s boyfriend to model in classic poses. I keep him fully clothed to avoid house controversy and opt to research the bare figure through statues of David and Achilles. Based on my findings, I deduce that Achilles will be naked, which presents another challenge—how do I draw a penis without seeming lewd? The Greeks and Romans had little shame when it came to nudity, so I feel I should embrace the chance to include nudity into my work and not tiptoe around it with a well-placed shield, tree, or fig leaf.

April 5-6
I have the first two panels laid out fairly well (I will add detail after I paint because there is no sense in drawing detail into something I will paint over), but I am unhappy with my last panel (Hon 203 or “Existence”). I end up erasing most of it and starting over. The vision of the first two panels came to me quickly, but the third panel is a muddy, melted swirl in my mind. A swirling, abstract vortex cannot encompass the characters and stories I learned about in Honors 203, so I deem this vision to be insufficient.

I decide I need more research of contemporary-era paintings. I know this is the time when Impressionism and Abstract styles came into popularity, so I will have a lot of different techniques to study, as well as presentation of content.
April 9
Dr. Bove and I review my work before I start painting. She and I discuss the problem panel and she suggests more iconic buildings to include in my scene of London. We agree that London is pivotal in the literature and artwork of the 1800s-1900s. Though the near-burning of St. Paul’s Cathedral is symbolic of the destruction of the World Wars, it is not a more obvious symbol.

I borrow a book of London architecture and recall that Westminster Palace/Abbey (Big Ben) is a pretty much THE icon of London. To guide me with other areas of the panel, I will replicate the tapestry described in *Henry and Cato*.

Dr. Bove also suggests I get an extension on my project. We agree it will be due May 19th instead of May 1st. This gives me time to work on my other course projects for graduation with the luxury to give each project a little more attention.

Late April – Early May
I juggle my various assignments and sneak in some time to review my notes and scenes from the actual literature I’m depicting. This includes research for *the Iliad*, Dante’s *Inferno*, *Henry and Cato*, and architecture for London (*London from the Thames*).

May 5-18
After drawing in the rest of my content (and going through graduation), I decide which colors I am going to use. I want to have realistic colors for the most part, so I choose a scheme of neutrals, greens, and blues. The 201 panel has predominately the sandy browns and fluid blues of the rocky Mediterranean terrain and the ever-important sea. The 202 panel has dark, dusty colors to represent the Dark Ages, which were indeed some of the most depressing times. The 203 panel has much lighter colors—some rather fantastical—to represent the chaos of contemporary works.

My challenges include mixing enough paint to cover an entire section—This is further complicated because I needed to go quickly so the application wouldn’t be streaky, but I had to be slow enough to not leave hideous white borders around every object. I am more successful in some areas than others...

I use a variety of techniques to achieve my effects. I use acrylic paints as if they are watercolors. For more opaque tones, I added white or a metallic paint so the color would have a solidness to it. The skull in the 201 panel is a thin layer of yellow tint over heavy pencil. The result is crisp, delicate, and creepy. The layers of hell are textured by applying a thick layer of water over still-wet paint, then blotting it with a textured piece of material (this could really be fabric, paper, skin, or, in this case, toilet paper).

My greatest challenge is a frisky kitten. He is kind enough to walk through my wet artwork. Thankfully, most of his prints were able to be disguised by clouds. I now understand the importance of art in spite of tragedy.

The end.
PROJECT PROPOSAL

1. My project will help me reflect on the topics and works covered through the entire humanities sequence. To determine which ideas and characters should be included in my piece, I will need to look through my old notes and reread important literature.

I want to do this project because I enjoy painting and want to review what I’ve learned in Hon 201, 202, and 203.

2. I will create and submit my project in the Spring 2008 semester.

3. I am creating a large, three-paneled painting showing a progression of the humanities sequence.

4. My objective is to paint a scene visually expressing the key ideals from each stage of the humanities sequence. The audience, future honors students, will view the painting as a “cheat sheet” for important characters.

5. I will have a three-panel “mural” expressing the humanities sequence. The first panel will contain characters from works such as the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Allegory of the Cave, etc. The panel will reflect on what I’ve learned in Hon 201. The second panel, following Hon 202, will include Beowulf, King Lear, Dante’s Inferno, Canterbury Tales, etc. The Hon 203 panel will include more current authors like Bronte, Woodsworth, Eiseley, and Beckett.

The paintings will be ideally 30 in x 30 in and 90 in x 30 in when put together. This is limited to the art supplies I have available and what fits in the backseat of
my car. I will use acrylic paints in a variety of colors and I will have a series of sketches and test paintings before I actually attempt my final work.

6. My project, because it reviews a major sequence of the honors curriculum, should be extremely helpful to newer honors students and facilitate discussion among groups. Why did I include some characters and not others? Why is a certain character in the shadows or appear to be perturbed? My final work will hopefully make learning fun. Yes, I said it. Consider this work an advertisement for the highlights of the humanities sequence.
WORKS CITED

PANEL 1: IMMORTALITY
Notes on Dr. Daphne Rolle’s Honors 201 class. 2004.

PANEL 2: MORTALITY
Notes on Dr. Cheryl Bove’s Honors 202 class. 2005.

PANEL 3: EXISTENCE
Notes on Dr. Cheryl Bove’s Honors 203 class. 2005.