Making  Objects Speak

Wisdom Paper: Writing About Objects

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"Making objects speak" to students about an aspect of the past while also giving them practice in "listening" to what objects have to say is a complex task, and I wouldn't claim to have accumulated infallible wisdom on how best to carry it out. But I hope that some of my experiences may be of use to colleagues who are thinking of creating tours of their own.

My tour deals with the Renaissance, and one advantage that I had to start with was that I had a very clear idea of the message that I wanted the tour to convey—that the Renaissance did not just revive the traditions of classical antiquity but adapted and reinterpreted them in accordance with traditions that had grown up in the intervening period of the Middle Ages. That makes no difference to the fact that the Renaissance was a huge cultural shift—but it was a shift, not a break. It seemed to me that this message would fit well into any Western or world history survey, or even into an upper-level course, since it is basic to understanding the changes that the Renaissance wrought in European civilization.

The locale for the tour is the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which has no lack of objects that convey this message. On the contrary, my difficulty was to cut the number of objects down to a manageable amount. I had a regrettable tendency to fall in love with an object, lavish time and effort on researching it and writing it up, and then find that for one reason or another it was unusable. To get to the Renaissance galleries, for instance, students have to pass close by Jacques-Louis David's super-famous *Death of Socrates*, which shows the Greek thinker absent-mindedly grabbing for the cup from a jailer without even glancing at him, while he makes an inspiring speech to his disciples. That's not at all how Plato describes the moment: his Socrates looks directly at the jailer with a kindly though penetrating eye, in the course of a gently humorous leave-taking from his friends. But David's version, with its message of ideas outlasting government repression, is much more suitable than Plato's for a painting that was made two years before the outbreak of the French Revolution. How could I not let students take a look at this spectacular example of the persistent Renaissance tradition of adapting ancient lore to present needs? Well, given that the tour couldn't last more than 45 minutes and the *Death of Socrates* wasn't actually a Renaissance object, in the end I was forced to rush the students past Socrates without saying a word about him.

Then there was Gerhard Emmoser's celestial globe, made for Emperor Rudolph II in 1579. It's engraved with the constellations of the northern and southern hemispheres, and as it revolves, an image of the sun revolves slightly slower along a slit in the globe,

thereby reproducing the actual sun's yearly movement through the stars; the whole complex device is borne on the wings of a Pegasus. I was overjoyed when I found the globe on the Met's website. What a striking combination of ancient Greek and Roman tradition (the winged horse as a symbol of knowledge of the cosmos) with recent European skills and knowledge far beyond that of the ancients (clockwork and southern constellations)! I read up on clockwork, on devices to model the universe, on the lore of Pegasus and Renaissance Hermeticism with which it was connected, and wrote a script. I did all this in between visits to the Met, and when I next went there all agog to finally look at the actual globe, I found that owing to wear and tear and the angle of lighting in the showcase, the images of constellations on it are invisible, so there is no way that students can see for themselves how the globe works. So after all that enthusiastic effort, I had to ditch the globe. But at least I know a lot more about clockwork, devices to model the universe, the lore of Pegasus, and Renaissance Hermeticism than I ever knew before.

Perhaps I would have included the *Death of Socrates* after all, if colleagues hadn't argued that I should make students take a look at the classicizing architecture of the Met itself as an example of the persistence of Renaissance traditions. That would enable me to start the tour right away, rather having students have to make the long trip from the museum entrance to the Renaissance galleries. So Socrates was muscled aside by Richard Morris Hunt's Beaux-Arts masterpiece, the Met's Great Hall—a splendid structure and good for sketching. But colleagues who took the tour detected a practical problem with the Great Hall. How would students be able to concentrate on the tour intro and do any sketching, when the space is nearly always thronged with noisy crowds of visitors? The colleagues also came up with a solution: I must move the tour beginning to the Great Hall balcony. That worked, I hope, like a charm. Students can begin the tour in a quiet but spectacular spot, with an unimpeded vista of Roman architectural elements, combined in an un-Roman way to serve the un-Roman purpose of a public art gallery.

Another practical problem with the tour, which probably is common to all tours where you're asking students to look at artifacts from Culture A in order to understand how those artifacts use and adapt material from Culture B, is how to make that point when you can't actually show them artifacts from Culture B. For example, another object on the tour, the birth tray of Lorenzo de' Medici, shows an allegorical figure of Fame based on Roman depictions of the goddess of victory. In the course of a 45-minute tour, I can't send students scooting off to the Greek and Roman Art galleries to look at a statue of the goddess, even if there is one there. Nor can I tell students to hop on a plane to Rome to take a look at the Baths of Caracalla, from which many architectural elements of the Great Hall are borrowed. On the other hand, the whole MOS idea is to get students to study by looking, so I hate to just tell them "The lady on this birth tray, with a short upper garment and a long skirt, with wings growing out of her shoulders, and standing on a globe, looks just like Roman depictions of the goddess of victory, which often showed her, guess what, with a short upper garment and a long skirt, with wings growing out of her shoulders, and standing on a globe."

The only way round this problem, it seemed to me, was to make students take with them as part of their tour materials photos of the Roman victory goddess, Caracalla's baths, and other relevant ancient objects. But that would load students with a nuisance bunch of papers that they must fiddle with along with their notebooks, iPods, and pencils. A colleague who took the tour suggested that I put everything that students would need into a single booklet to print out from the MOS website and carry on a clipboard—directions to and around the museum, instructions and blank pages for sketching and note-taking activities, and photos of ancient objects. In that case, all they would need to carry would be the booklet, a pencil, and an iPod. Some colleagues are unsure if the tour booklet idea will work, but there are strong arguments for it—not just

the need to show students ancient objects, but also the difficulty of remembering directions round the museum and instructions for activities unless they're written down. And I'm hoping that at 12 pages, several of them blank for sketching and note taking, the booklet won't be too unwieldy.

For me to claim to guide students in gaining insights about works of art by looking at them takes a lot of chutzpah, considering how often I failed to notice features that were staring me in the face. It was my wife who pointed out to me that the statue-like figure of Fame on the birth tray also resembles the Statue of Liberty, giving me a nice easy way to explain about allegorical figures. And I was just as oblivious about one of the Met's finest Renaissance treasures, the Gubbio Studiolo. This private study room of a fifteenth-century duke of Urbino is filled with wood-inlay images displaying him as a Renaissance man of both action and contemplation, and I ask students to spend about a quarter of the tour there. But I never noticed one of the main features of the studiolo, which is key to understanding it as a Renaissance object: that with its bad lighting and its lack of real (as opposed to depicted) space for storing books and papers, it's actually useless for any serious reading and writing. I only learned of this by reading a standard scholarly work by Wolfgang Liebenwein on the general history of medieval and Renaissance studioli. Other tour creators may be more insightful lookers at works of art than me, but nonetheless I suspect that in general, to produce a truly enlightening audio tour, even though the listeners will be relatively unprepared students, the creator must consult the scholarly literature as widely as time allows.

Still and all, no one told me, nor did I read anywhere, that David's Socrates and Plato's are so strikingly different, or that Fame on the birth tray looks like the Roman victory goddess, or that the basic structure of the classicizing building in Fra Carnevale's *Birth of the Virgin,* with a side porch and a central room, is the same as that of buildings housing holy birth scenes in medieval depictions. If these features are mentioned in works that I never got around to reading, that makes no difference to the fact that I noticed them all by my little self. So maybe I got better at looking at objects as I created my tour, and maybe will also be the general experience of tour creators.

Throughout the process of creating my tour, I had to wrestle with the problem of how far to simplify the material. With Lorenzo's birth tray, I thought I had devised a great activity to help students appreciate its use of linear perspective—to make them draw a ground plan of the scene, showing the position of the main objects in it. No, said a colleague with experience of teaching studio art, students would be at sea with such an exercise. Likewise on the birth tray, the images are partly based on poems by Petrarch and Boccaccio, though much changed to fit the occasion. Surely I must say something about Petrarch and Boccaccio, and the tradition of putting important late medieval people on a level with the revered ancients that their poems represented. And surely I must say something about the pictures of the duke of Urbino, his son, and other fifteenth-century Italian power wielders kneeling before allegorical ladies representing the Liberal Arts that originally hung on the walls of the studiolo above the woodwork. No, said colleagues, students who expect to look at things will get muddled and nervous if they're told at length about things that aren't before their eyes. Actually it was a relief not to have to wrestle with this complex material, so I hope and believe the colleagues were right.

That leads to one final tour experience: that the vast majority of suggestions that I got from family and colleagues was helpful, and the vast majority of advice that they gave me I took. Perhaps, once in a while, I may have found myself thinking: How can my colleagues, experienced instructors, published scholars, and holders of Ph.D.s, possibly not understand what I'm driving at? But nearly always, this thought was swiftly followed by another: If my colleagues, experienced instructors, published scholars, and holders of

Ph.D.s, can't understand what I'm driving at, how will undergraduate students, holders of high school diplomas who perhaps have never before entered an art museum, be able to do so? That too, I suspect, will be a general experience of tour creators.