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Connecting Cultures in Consonance and Dissonance: Teaching Art and Architectural History from a Global Perspective

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I have always said that in teaching art and architecture, what interests me is not the buildings, paintings, sculpture, textiles, and utilitarian objects from a particular time and place. Rather I am passionate about people, finding out about them, knowing their likes and dislikes, fears and hopes, dreams and visions. How one delves into that cultural history to find out about those who lived in distant times and/or in far distant communities is a Sherlock Holmes attempt at reconstruction through the evidence these peoples left behind. Sometimes insight comes from consideration of the grand and monumental, for example the awe inspiring Great Pyramids, the quiet fountain courtyard of a Muslim palace, or a Gothic cathedral. And sometimes a revelation may be had by considering the very functional realities of small and seemingly insignificant things—like an offering vase from Ancient Greece, an illuminated personal prayer book of medieval times, or the robes of a Chinese aristocrat.

Whatever the culture or the time period, it is this humanitarian approach that I stress in the survey course in Art and Architectural History. The students are asked over the span of the semester to seek connections between times and places as we proceed week by week through our investigation of world arts. As the essays that follow indicate, the students become alert to the similarities and differences in cultural artifacts that stem from the fundamental values of the people who made and used them. Together, we ask questions about those people and their cultures, their ways of thinking and being. We ask fundamental questions about the essential ideas of:

- The nature of creativity and originality
- The making of the art object
- Self-representation/representation of others
- The identity of the artist
- Architecture and worship
- Representations of the body
- Rituals and public space
- Representation of nature
- Symbols of authority
- Gender and sexuality

In this cultural history of Art and Architecture we focus our attention on paradigmatic works of material culture, making connections through time and space, to help us understand intangible truths about times and places distant from our own. Finally, and most importantly, we ask ourselves what cultural similarities or differences this architecture, painting and sculpture, and other created works might have with our own time and place.

The following short essays each represent a student's personal engagement with the material of the survey course in Art and Architectural History. They demonstrate the

students' discernment of essential ideas that connect works of art and architecture across cultures. These essays, which the students and I call *Connections Colloquia*, are written at four times during a semester. The themes and examples of art works are the students' choosing. In direct engagement with the material of the survey course, they explore the consonance and dissonance between works of art within the broad themes they discuss. It is my hope that in using the arts to explore cultures in contact, these students come to realize that consonance and dissonance are rhythms that transcend our own time, our own place, that they stretch back to the beginning of humankind, and will continue well past the here and now. Our shared responsibilities as teachers and learners are first to learn from the history of this human dynamic, then to use that knowledge to act in our world for the better, remaining always mindful that our own era is just the most recent chapter in that story.