

Department of the History of Art  
University of Pennsylvania  
Fall 2023

**ARTH 2780/6780: Art of the United States, 1750-2000**

Wednesday and Friday 12 to 1 pm, with Monday recitations at 12 and 1:45

**Prospectus**

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**Description:**

This course surveys the varieties of visual art developed in central North America from the time of European colonization to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout this period the visual arts were embedded in complex historical and social processes, including the formation of a national identity, the interpretation of social experience, the acquisition and exercise of political power and cultural authority, the constitution of differentiated (ethnic, racial, class, and gender) social roles and identities, and the promotion or subversion of prevailing belief systems and moral codes. Four central themes of the course will be:

- the struggle to devise a democratic art suited to the nation's self-image
- the intermingling of diverse artistic cultures and traditions that stems from the fraught mix of indigenous, enslaved, immigrant, and colonizing populations
- the influence of a dynamic mass market for images that grew exponentially from the 1830s on
- the emergence of a "modern" art, which developed in conjunction with historical processes of modernization (industrialization, the development of transportation and communications, the spread of corporate organization in business, urbanization, technological development, the rise of mass media and mass markets, etc.)

Works in various media will be examined, including painting, sculpture, photography, prints, video, performance, installations.

**Goals of the course:** to empower students to

- recognize and understand some of the most iconic, influential, and/or important works of art in US cultural history
- see connections between the art that flourished in the US and the social, political, and cultural conditions in which it was made and interpreted
- learn skills of visual analysis and interpretation, including different varieties of analysis and interpretation
- develop a sophisticated conception of the processes by which works of art acquire meaning and significance through interactions among artists, audiences, traditions, and institutions
- appreciate diverse visual traditions developed among artists of varied races, ethnicities, genders, classes, sexual preferences.

**Assignments:**

All readings will be available on the Canvas website. One recommended textbook for the class is:

*Art of the United States, 1750-2000: Primary Sources* (Terra Foundation/University of Chicago Press, 2020), authors J. Davis and M. Leja.

The digital version of this book is available through the Penn Libraries website:

<https://www-aaeportal-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/?id=-20020>.

(Disclaimer: ML receives no royalties from sales of this book, the publication of which has been subsidized by a nonprofit foundation.)

Useful reference books and textbooks include:

American Social History Project, *Who Built America*. Vols. 1 and 2. New York: Pantheon, 1992.

Angela Miller, Janet Berlo, Bryan Wolf, and Jennifer Roberts, *American Encounters*. New York: Prentice Hall, 2007.

Frances Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

Erica Doss, *American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017).

**Course requirements:**

- 1) weekly short quizzes on Canvas, required to proceed through modules (10%)
- 2) active participation in recitations and through Canvas discussion threads (25%)
- 3) mid-term exam (20%)—Wednesday, Oct. 11th
- 4) two short papers; the first 2 to 3 pages (8%), due Wednesday, Sept. 27<sup>th</sup>; the second 5 to 6 pages (12%), due Wednesday, Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>; total 20% for papers
- 5) final exam (25%), date TBD

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