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*Teaching American Art to American Artists:
Object-Based Learning at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*
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For more than two hundred years, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) has been one of the leading art institutions in the United States, and the museum collection reflects that history. I first became involved with PAFA as an instructor in Spring 2015, when I was asked to teach American Art to 1945, the school's wide-ranging American survey course. I had taught a variation of this course before, but this experience was different. First of all, I had the PAFA collection as an accessible resource. Furthermore, my students for the course were in the bachelor of fine arts program, bringing a slightly different set of skills than students in a typical undergraduate class. In designing my course, I wanted to make the collection an integral aspect of class instruction and respond to the unique student needs and so I developed the gallery talk, a short oral presentation that would allow students to engage their classmates in discussion surrounding works in the PAFA collection. By engaging in object-based learning through the gallery talk, I hoped that my art students would build strong visual analysis and public speaking skills in a community of their peers.

In teaching the American art survey at PAFA, I place the role of the school as a leading center for art production in the United States at the forefront of my syllabus. Founded in 1805 by Charles Willson Peale, William Rush, and a collection of leading artists and businessmen of Philadelphia, the school has educated generations of American artists over more than two hundred years. During this time, the school has maintained a collection of works by major American artists, along with works by alumni and faculty of the school. Today, the PAFA galleries boast a collection of American art that covers the breadth of major movements discussed in a typical survey—a valuable teaching resource. Among the many collection highlights are early American masterworks such as Charles Willson Peale's *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822, and Benjamin West's *Death on the Pale Horse*, 1817; a large gallery covering the breadth of nineteenth-century American art, hung salon style to reference nineteenth-century exhibitions at PAFA; and the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women, donated by the artist and including works from the early twentieth to the twenty-first century. With resources like these at my fingertips, it was clear that object-based learning would be a vital part of my curriculum.

In addition to the rich material resources of the museum, I considered the unique student body in developing my version of the American art survey. My course is an elective open to students in the bachelor of fine arts program, who take a total of fifteen credits in art history and criticism as part of their degree requirements. Like most undergraduate students, they display a wide range of skill levels in writing and critical

thinking. But with their background in studio art and strong affinity for visual learning, these students are highly engaged in classroom discussions that involve formal analysis of artwork or conversations about technique. Often, their technical knowledge of art processes surpasses mine. This creates a dynamic learning environment in which the students and I learn from one another, bringing our varied experiences to bear in interpreting works of art. To take advantage of the students' demonstrated aptitude for visual analysis and the strong PAFA art collection, I developed the gallery talk, a public speaking assignment to promote direct engagement with works of art.

On seven out of the fourteen weeks in the semester, the class met in the PAFA galleries rather than our usual classroom. Each week, I assigned works of art from the collection to two to three students, based on the class theme for the week. For their gallery talks, I asked students to prepare a short presentation introducing the work to their classmates, and then to lead their classmates in a discussion of the formal qualities, subject matter, and relevance of the work within the narrative of American art. First, the student provided background on the life and career of the artist, including elements of biography, style, and oeuvre. Next, the student invited his or her classmates to discuss the medium, composition, mood, and subject matter of the work. Finally, the student summed up the presentation by relating the individual artwork to the theme and assigned reading for that week.

The gallery talk proved valuable in several key ways. First, it gave students the opportunity to conduct discussions in formal analysis in front of works from the PAFA collection. This had the added benefit of breaking up our long class sessions: at PAFA, all classes are scheduled in three-hour blocks to accommodate studio instruction. Second, students had a chance to practice public speaking in a museum setting, a skill that will be important in their future careers as professional artists. Lastly, the gallery talk fostered a sense of camaraderie among the students: because each student took a turn in leading discussion, they were highly motivated to participate in discussion during their classmates' talks. Assigning the students to become the instructors also gave them insight into my role in fostering discussion each week, and class participation improved overall. This sense of belonging extended to include the school itself, as students made connections between their experiences today and to the training of American artists that is the legacy of PAFA.

In developing the gallery talk assignment at PAFA, I assessed the resources available to me and the needs of my particular group of students. At PAFA, I benefit from the presence of a strong museum collection and a student body that is highly motivated to analyze works of art. But this assignment model could be adapted to a wide range of museum and university collections and student populations. By considering available resources and weighing the individual strengths and needs of the students, it is possible to place object-based learning and student-led discussion at the center of any survey of American art.