

Art, Religion, & Material Culture in America

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YSAR Spring Seminar 2004

Course Rationale

Americans in the new millennium live in a complex visual culture in which the individual is relentlessly bombarded with images from a bewildering variety of media. Contemporary college students are often characterized as sophisticated “visual learners”—more comfortable with image-laden websites than the arid black and white of the text. Yet the curriculum they encounter here at the University of Richmond continues to privilege written over visual forms of communication, especially in humanities disciplines such as religious studies.

The stakes are particularly high in American Religious History. Since its inception as an academic discipline in the 1960s, the field has been closely linked to American intellectual history, with introductory courses surveying seminal Protestant *texts* from the sermons of seventeenth-century Puritan divines, through major nineteenth-century figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, to the post-World War II works of neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In recent decades, however, scholars have begun to explore the material, physical, spatial, and embodied ways in which people encounter the sacred. Current research initiatives increasingly examine American religions through art, commercial objects, foodways, and the built environment. The religious traditions under consideration have expanded beyond American Protestantism as well, as scholars have turned their attention to the visually-rich worlds of Roman Catholicism and Judaism, Native and African American religions, world religions in America, and popular religion. From Shaker spirit drawings and religious folk art to Jewish domestic space and Neopagan altars, sophisticated studies of the material dimensions of American religion appear with regularity in prominent journals and national academic conferences.

Art historians, too, have joined the conversation. Where secularization theory once dominated the field, contemporary scholarship is now awash in a sea of spirituality. In a recent state-of-the-field essay, Sally Promey described religion as a “hot topic” in art history circles. She examined dozens of recent dissertations, journal articles, exhibition catalogs, and monographs, all of which blend art historical methods with a sophisticated understanding of the nature of religious life. Promey—along with David Morgan and Colleen McDannell—has been in the vanguard of this new movement to recover the “visual” or “material” culture of American religion. Collaboration among art historians and religious studies specialists, moreover, has resulted in the recent publication of a series of seminal anthologies, a unique website project (<http://www.materialreligion.org/>), and a new academic journal, *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* that is scheduled to begin production in 2005.

I have attempted to bring material culture topics into each of the classes that I teach at the University of Richmond. Students in my Native American Religions course, for example, use archaeological artifacts to explore the spirituality of prehistoric mound builder cultures. Other

classes challenge participants to examine the landscape paintings of Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole, images of frontier revival meetings, the built environment of Shaker communal villages, and the mass-produced bumper stickers, t-shirts, jewelry, and tattoos of contemporary American evangelicals. At the same time, the stated objectives of my other course offerings in the Religions of the Americas do not provide students with the class time, methodological competencies, or research materials necessary to sustain a thorough inquiry into the nature of visual religion. “Art, Religion & Material Culture in America” is designed to meet this need.

The syllabus below introduces students to American religious history through three topical units that highlight religious art, material culture artifacts, and sacred space. Course readings emphasize the interpretation of visual texts and include a general survey of art historical methods as well as recent articles and exemplary studies on material religion by leading art critics and religious studies specialists. I have designed the course to take advantage of the rich cultural resources of the Richmond area. In addition to field trips to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Abby Aldrich Folk Art Museum at Colonial Williamsburg, selected class meetings will be held at key local material religion sites such as Hollywood Cemetery, Monument Avenue, and St. John’s Episcopal Church. Fieldwork at these venues will allow students to apply and expand upon the interpretive techniques that are represented in the course readings.

Art, Religion, & Material Culture in America

Spring Semester 2004
Course Meeting Times: TR 3:45–5:00
Location: North Court 104

Instructor: Doug Winiarski
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Overview

Why do American evangelicals adorn their cars with plastic fish? What's the connection between contemporary religious architecture and the "big box" buildings on Broad Street? What can we learn about religious beliefs and practices from the spatial organization of a house, temple, cemetery, or town? In what ways do even the most quotidian objects both reflect and create a coherent religious worldview? Religious images and objects are all around us, yet we seldom stop to consider the ways in which American spiritual life has been shaped by material forms—from works of so-called high art to mass-produced baubles and trinkets.

"Art, Religion & Material Culture" introduces students to the diverse array of religious traditions that have flourished in America over the past four centuries through a focused examination of *things*: the "stuff" of religious life embodied in art, commercial and "folk" objects, buildings, and landscapes. We will learn to read the "visual culture" of American religion like a text, discovering along the way that a collection of neopagan ritual objects arranged carefully on a bedroom dresser can communicate as much information about the beliefs and practices of its owner as an introspective diary or letter.

The course is organized around three thematic units: "The Art of American Christianity," "Folk Art & Material Religion," and "Sacred Space in America." Readings include exemplary studies by prominent art historians and religious studies scholars who specialize in this exciting new interdisciplinary field. Our primary sources will be the objects themselves, from portraits of Jesus and Shaker spirit drawings to mass-produced bumper stickers and public monuments. We will be working in the field as well, visiting churches, cemeteries, shops, and museums in the Richmond area. Graded assignments will emphasize independent visual analysis using the interpretive tools outlined in the course readings.

Liberal Arts Competencies

By the end of the semester, it is my hope that you will have developed a general understanding and appreciation of the many ways in which American religious traditions have been created by and expressed through art, objects, and buildings. But this is not all that I hope you will take away from our class. Throughout the semester, we will be working together to hone your analytical, writing, and communication skills. These are the basic building blocks of a liberal education; they are also "competencies" that are highly prized by staffing agents in all professions. Success in this class will hinge on your ability to master the art of interpretation, and I will be evaluating your intellectual growth in these core areas:

1. Summarizing professional scholarship and articulating cogent criticism;
2. Comparing and contrasting visual images, written texts, websites, and other course materials;

3. Applying existing analytical theories and methods to unfamiliar materials;
4. Forming a coherent argument and communicating your ideas persuasively to others.

In short, it is my firm belief that this course will help you to develop the requisite intellectual skills for a successful post-collegiate career.

Required Textbooks

1. Durand, Jorge, and Douglas S. Massey. *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*. Tucson, 1995.
2. McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, 1995.
3. Magliocco, Sabina. *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars*. Jackson, Miss., 2002.
4. Morgan, David, and Sally M. Promey, eds. *The Visual Culture of American Religions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
5. Sayre, Henry M. *Writing about Art*, 3d ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1999.
6. Articles on e-reserve are marked with an asterisk (“*”) below.

Prerequisites, Procedures & Graded Assignments

This course has no prerequisites and assumes no prior knowledge of the topic. It is an introductory survey course that places a premium on student participation. Our biweekly meetings will consist of short presentations and daily discussions. Keeping up with the assignments (readings, visual analyses, and fieldwork) is crucial. The quality of each class session will deteriorate if all participants do not complete these assignments and come to class ready to exchange their ideas with other students. I expect that you spend an average of three hours preparing for each class.

Attendance is mandatory, and I will evaluate the quality of your participation after each class. Missing even a single session will adversely impact your general participation grade.

Final grades for the semester will be calculated as follows:

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|----------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Attendance, Preparation & Participation: | 25% |
| 2. Discussion Board: | 15% |
| 3. Interpretive Paper #1 (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts): | 15% |
| 4. Interpretive Paper #2 (Abby Aldrich Folk Art Museum): | 20% |
| 5. Interpretive Paper #3 (Hollywood Cemetery): | 25% |

Disability Accommodations

Students with disabilities for whom accommodations have been formally granted by a University of Richmond Disability Advisor must present a copy of their “Disability Accommodation Notice” to each professor within the first week of the academic term. Accommodations must be negotiated *in advance for each scheduled course assignment*; students should plan to consult with me *at least one week* prior to any scheduled deadline.

Class Schedule

The Art of American Christianity

TUESDAY, JANUARY 13: INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

THURSDAY, JANUARY 15: FORMAL ELEMENTS OF WARNER SALLMAN'S *HEAD OF CHRIST*

Readings:

- Sayre, Henry. *Writing about Art*, 4th ed. New York, 2001.

PowerPoint Slides: Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 20: SALLMAN'S *HEAD OF CHRIST* IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Readings:

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 163–197.
- Doss, Erika. "Making a 'Virile, Manly Christ: The Cultural Origins and Meanings of Warner Sallman's Religious Imagery.'" In *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. Morgan, pp. 61–94. New Haven, 1996.*
- Morgan, David. "Imaging Protestant Piety: The Icons of Warner Sallman." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* (2001), 29–47.*

PowerPoint Slides: The Art of Warner Sallman.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 22: PUBLIC RECEPTION OF SALLMAN'S *HEAD OF CHRIST*

Reading:

- Morgan, David. "'Would Jesus Have Sat for a Portrait?' The Likeness of Christ in the Popular Reception of Sallman's Art." In *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. Morgan, pp. 181–206. New Haven, 1996.*
- DeBerg, Betty A. "The Ministry of Christian Art: Evangelicals and the Art of Warner Sallman, 1942–1960." In *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. Morgan, pp. 123–47. New Haven, 1996.*

TUESDAY, JANUARY 27: RELIGIOUS ART HIGH & LOW

Reading:

- Promey, Sally M. "Interchangeable Art: Warner Sallman and the Critics of Mass Culture." In *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. Morgan, pp. 148–80. New Haven, 1996.*
- Selected articles on "Jesus 2000" (handout to be distributed in class).
- Selected responses to Serrano's *Piss Christ* (handout to be distributed in class).

PowerPoint Slides: Jesus in Contemporary American Art.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 29: ART GALLERY SPIRITUALITY

Readings:

- Doss, Erika. "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation: Issues of Spirituality in Contemporary American Art." In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 129–46.
- Halle, David. "The Controversy over the Show *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum, 1999–2000." In *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life*, ed. Alberta Arthurs and Glenn Wallach, pp. 139–87. New York, 2001.*

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1: FIELD TRIP TO THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Readings:

- Davis, John. "Catholic Envy: The Visual Culture of Protestant Desire." In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 105–28.
- Schmidt, Leigh E. "Visualizing God's Silence: Oracles, the Enlightenment, and Elihu Vedder's *Questioner of the Sphinx*." In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 211–28.

Fieldwork: Explore the American art galleries and reflect on the place of religion in the VMFA's collection. Use the Davis and Schmidt essays to contextualize individual paintings in the collection. Considered as a whole, do the American holdings at the VMFA confirm or challenge Doss' critique of the contemporary "art world"?

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3: NO CLASS. WORK ON PAPER ASSIGNMENT #1.

Folk Art & Material Religion

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5: THE BIBLE-AS-OBJECT

Readings:

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*, pp. 1–66.
- Gutjahr, Paul. "American Protestant Bible Illustration from Copper Plates to Computers." In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 267–86.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10: CHRISTIAN RETAILING

Readings:

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 222–69

Fieldwork: Visit a Christian retail store in the Richmond area (for a listing, see <http://cba.know-where.com/cba/region/us/us/list/VA.html>).

Internet Exercise: Search for "Christian bumper stickers" on the Web.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12: THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF RELIGIOUS OUTSIDERS

Readings:

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*, pp. 198–221.
- Smith, Ellen. "Greetings from Faith: Early-Twentieth-Century American Jewish New Year Postcards." In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 229–48.
- Giggie, John M. "'When Jesus Handed Me a Ticket': Images of Railroad Travel and Spiritual Transformations among African Americans, 1865–1917." In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 249–66.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17: NEOPAGAN ALTARS

Reading:

- Magliocco, *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars*, 1–70.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19: MEXICAN-AMERICAN RETABLOS

Reading:

- Durand and Massey, *Miracles on the Border*, 1–121.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24: SHAKER SPIRIT DRAWINGS

Reading

- Brewer, Priscilla. "The Shakers of Mother Ann Lee." In *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer, pp. 37–56. Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997.*

PowerPoint Slides: Shaker Spirit Drawings.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26: SHAKER SPIRIT DRAWINGS IN CONTEXT

Readings:

- Promey, Sally M. "Celestial Visions: Shaker Images and Art Historical Method." *American Art* 7 (1993), 79–99.*
- Winiarski, Douglas L., ed. "Mother Ann's Work at Pleasant Hill: The Career of Sarah Pool, Spirit Medium." Unpublished ms., 2001.*

Video Documentary: *Landmarks of Faith: The Shakers*.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 29: FIELD TRIP TO ABBY ALDRICH FOLK ART MUSEUM

Fieldwork: Select an object to examine in Paper Assignment #2.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3: NO CLASS. WORK ON PAPER ASSIGNMENT #2.

THURSDAY, MARCH 5: NO CLASS. WORK ON PAPER ASSIGNMENT #2.

TUESDAY, MARCH 9: NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK.

THURSDAY, MARCH 11: NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK.

American Sacred Space

TUESDAY, MARCH 16: MAPPING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF EARLY AMERICA

PowerPoint Slides: Mapping Early America.

THURSDAY, MARCH 18: PURITAN MEETINGHOUSE, ANGLICAN CHURCH

Note: Class meets at St. John's Episcopal Church on historic Church Hill.

Readings:

- Williams, Peter W. *Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture in the United States*, pp. 3–12. Urbana, Ill., 2000.*
- Dinkin, Robert J. "Seating the Meetinghouse." In *Material Life in America, 1600–1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George, pp. 407–18. Boston, 1988.*
- Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*, pp. 58–65. Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982.*

Video Documentary: *Landmarks of Faith: Puritan New England*.

TUESDAY, MARCH 23: METHODISM & THE FRONTIER CAMP MEETING

Readings:

- Carter, Edward C., III, ed. *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, series I, *The Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1799–1820: From Philadelphia to New Orleans*. New Haven, 1980, 3:107–113.*
- Camp meeting narratives (handout to be distributed in class).

- Cooley, Steven D. “Manna and the Manual: Sacramental and Instrumental Constructions of the Victorian Camp Meeting during the Mid-Nineteenth-Century.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 6 (1996), 131–60.*

PowerPoint Slides: Representing the Camp Meeting.

Video Documentary: *Landmarks of Faith: Methodist Camp Meetings*.

THURSDAY, MARCH 25: SUBURBAN MEGACHURCHES

Readings:

- Buggeln, Gretchen. “Architecture as Community Service: West Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware.” In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 87–101.

Video Documentary: *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*.

TUESDAY, MARCH 30: RELIGION ON CAMPUS

Note: Class meets at Cannon Memorial Chapel.

Readings:

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 132–62.
- Moore, R. Laurence. “Touchdown Jesus and Other Controversies about the Public Display of Religion,” in *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History*. Westminster, 2003, 11–30.*

Fieldwork: Walk around campus and consider the role(s) played by religion—if any—in the spatial organization of the University of Richmond.

THURSDAY, APRIL 2: SACRED SPACE & NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Reading:

- Lane, Belden. “Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11 (2001), 53–81.*

Video Documentary: *In the Light of Reverence*.

TUESDAY, APRIL 6: REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

Reading:

- Linenthal, Edward T. “Locating Holocaust Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.” In *American Sacred Space*, ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal. Bloomington, Ind., 1995, 220–62. This book is available online; consult the library catalog for details.

Fieldwork: I strongly encourage all course participants to visit either the national Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., or the Virginia Holocaust Museum in downtown Richmond over the weekend, though this is an optional activity.

THURSDAY, APRIL 8: CIVIL RELIGION & THE RELIGION OF THE LOST CAUSE

Reading:

- Promey, Sally M. “The Public Display of Religion.” In *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 27–48.
- Wilson, Charles Reagan. “The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865–1920.” *The Journal of Southern History* 46 (1980), 219–38.*

Fieldwork: Walk down Monument Avenue and examine statues of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart, Mathew Fontaine Maury, and Arthur Ashe Jr.

Case Study: The Visual Culture of Death in Early America

TUESDAY, APRIL 13: THE ART OF DYING IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

Readings:

- Messer, Stephen C. “Individual Responses to Death in Puritan Massachusetts.” *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 21 (1990), 155–63.*
- Roger B. Stein, “Thomas Smith’s Self-Portrait: Image/Text as Artifact.” *Art Journal* 44 (1983), 317–27.*
- *Upon the Death of the Virtuous and Religious Mrs. Lydia Minot*. [Cambridge, Mass., 1668.]*
- Trent, Robert F., ed. “‘The Deuil Came Upon me Like a Lyon’: A 1697 Cambridge Deathbed Narrative.” *Bulletin of the Connecticut Historical Society* 48 (1983), 115–109.*

Websites:

- Thomas Smith, *Self Portrait* (ca. 1680), Worcester Art Museum (http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/Early_American/Artists/smith/self/painting.html).
- Old Burial Hill, Marblehead (<http://www.oldburialhill.org/>). View seventeenth-century gravestones only.

THURSDAY, APRIL 15: ICONOGRAPHY OF THE NEW ENGLAND BURIAL GROUND

Readings:

- Vinovskis, Maris A. “Angel’s Heads and Weeping Willows: Death in Early America.” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 86 (1976), 273–302.*
- Schorsh, Anita. “A Key to the Kingdom: The Iconography of a Mourning Picture.” *Winterthur Portfolio* 14 (1979): 41–71.*

Website: Old Burial Hill, Marblehead (<http://www.oldburialhill.org/>). Compare seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century gravestones.

TUESDAY, APRIL 20: THE RURAL CEMETERY MOVEMENT

Note: Class meets at Hollywood Cemetery in downtown Richmond.

Reading:

- McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 103–31.

THURSDAY, APRIL 22: WRAPPING UP