



**UNION**

**Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project**

## **Religion and the Arts, through Sacred Space and Devotional Image**

*Deb Rosenbaum, Denver School of the Arts, Denver, CO*

### **Abstract**

This art history curriculum outline is designed to connect traditional historical surveys with contemporary religious practices. Topics can freely weave in and out of visual art or social studies curriculum for middle school or high school in a variety of teaching situations. It is an expansion and development of smaller art history units that focused on Islamic and Christian Art, originally created for 8<sup>th</sup> grade Visual Arts students in an arts magnet public school.

**A major objective is to create opportunities to explore living religious traditions as well as diverse cultures within the context of art appreciation and the art studio.**

Exploration of major faith traditions through **sacred spaces** and **devotional images** provides a framework for a thematic survey of artistic styles and societal functions of art and provides insight into contemporary world cultures and faith traditions. Present day artists continue to create liturgical objects and spaces for spiritual practice, as well as explore religious identity as content in their work. Religious/spiritual themes in contemporary art can reveal a **continuum of living practice** and help students consider their own cultural/religious identity as possible subject matter.

### **Summary of Curriculum**

This following outline consists of study topics providing a connection between historical and contemporary art. There is no set sequencing, but it is suggested that discussion skills be firmly established in 6<sup>th</sup> grade since dialogue and art criticism are an integral part of art instruction. Learning activities for this topic are based on the Feldman 4-Step Criticism Model and Generation Global's [\*Essentials of Dialogue\*](#). This instruction should be introduced and practiced in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade year and reviewed with new activities throughout grades. Topics could be adapted to a Global Classroom skype or blogging experience for dialogue with other teens studying art. Art project suggestions are also included and are easily tailored to fit diverse media such as drawing, painting, sculpture, or performance. Instructional activities should include lecture and presentation by teachers and guest artists from various faith traditions, site visits, discussion, small group work, individual student research, writing, and a variety of hands-on studio art projects.

## Big-Picture Ideas and Questions

### Rationale

Religion cannot be separated from the study of art history because it is art's most common subject; religious art clearly illuminates human creativity, expression, and experience. Humans create religious art to give form and meaning to beliefs and spiritual practices. Religious art can be liturgical, ritual, or symbolic; permanent or transitory. Theme based, rather than chronological study, divulges commonalities and patterns, encouraging understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives. Art is a visual language that can be analyzed and appreciated for meaning through formal and contextual study. This language can build bridges between artists and the world. Cultural and religious content is approachable through visual art classes, especially for those interested in artistic language, elements, and art making experience.

**Understanding the history of art influences contemporary thought and art practice.**

### Essential Questions

- What particular analysis, dialogue, and communication skills are necessary to explore, appreciate, and understand religious or spiritual art from different practices?
- What are appropriate ways to discuss artistic traditions with those of different faiths and backgrounds?
- How/where does art interact with religious practice and rituals?
- What is a “sacred” space? What commonalities or patterns exist in the creation and use of sacred spaces?
- What is a “divine” image and how/why do different traditions portray and use it?
- How can the act of creating (and perhaps destroying) something be part of a spiritual practice?
- How are contemporary artists using religion and spirituality in their work?
- How can I explore or express my own cultural or religious identity through art?

## Curriculum Units

### I. Dialogue and Criticism Skills

**A. Feldman 4-step Art Criticism Model:** Describe, Analyze, Interpret, Evaluate

**B. Essentials of Dialogue,** Generation Global Curriculum and Activities:

Defining Dialogue, Creating a Safe Place, Skill of Dialogue, Identity and Respect

## II. Sacred Spaces

- A. Architecture:** Churches, Mosques, Temples, Synagogues, Storefront Churches
- Compare and contrast architectural religious spaces from major faith traditions.
  - How does religious architecture reflect ideology or practice?
  - How do various traditions integrate cultural-historic contexts, regional styles, functional needs, and environmental possibilities within their religious buildings?
  - How and why might buildings differ within a given tradition?
  - How are sacred spaces used? Who builds them and who pays for it?
  - How does embellishment or decoration compliment the architectural design and intersect practice or belief?
  - What differences in practice might be suggested in comparing historical models with more contemporary religious architecture? How have needs changed?
  - How do religious buildings change identities or affiliation over time.
  - Temple Emmanuel changing roles to church to condos, Hagia Sophia
- B. Shrines and other Spaces:** Monuments, ruins, home shrines, tombs
- Formal and informal spaces
  - Symbolic and recreated spaces
- C. Natural Spaces:** rivers, canyons, mountains, gardens
- D. Sacred Spaces Today**
- How do **immigrants** adapt, substitute, or create new sacred spaces and how might they differ from those in their homeland? (Substitution of the East River for the Ganges, Lady of Lourdes in the Bronx)
  - Public, group and private (individual spaces), personal “retreats”
  - Historic vs. Modern Spaces
  - What do people want, what are they looking for when they enter these spaces?
  - How/when does sacred historical architecture become museum?

## III. Divine Image

- A. What is the meaning of divine?**
- Divine (pertaining to God or gods) vs. sacred (worthy of worship): Interchangable?
  - What is “kosher” for creating divine images in various traditions?
  - How is visual representation given to abstract ideas like God?
- B. How are divine images used?**
- How do images of the divine function for the devotee?
  - Reflection, object of prayer, ritual?
  - On what level is an image “sacred?” (worthy of worship)
  - Intrinsically sacred, A symbol of the sacred, A mediator of the sacred?
  - Are divine images interactive? Hindu Gods: seeing and being seen

### **C. Manifestations of the Divine**

- Divine as Royalty
- Male vs. Female
- Realism vs. abstraction, symbol vs. representation
- Hierarchies in size and materials
- Placement/arrangement of images and Color
- Sculpture, paintings, symbols, objects
- Localized traditions (retablos, icons, crèches)
- Clothing and personal adornment
- Performances

### **IV. “Making” as Spiritual Practice**

- Native American Dance: making, wearing, performing in costume for spiritual practice
- Buddhist monks and Navaho healers: sand art destroyed when completed
- Mandalas as meditation
- Vodou ve-ve in ritual
- Calligraphy and Religious books: copying the word of God.
- Liturgical Art: contemporary artists and crafts people

### **V. Contemporary Art and Religious Themes**

#### ***A. Religion is Alive and Well in Contemporary Art***

**B. Does contemporary art cite religion or engage with it?** Is it mystical or truly religious in its depiction of sacred imagery?

*Question of Faith: Is There a Return of the Religious in Contemporary Art?*

Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis, Andy Warhol: Christian

#### **C. Religious vs. the “political” in contemporary Islamic art.**

Ahmed Mater (Saudi Arabia, b. 1979)—Islamic

#### **D. Contemporary Liturgical Art as Craft**

Ira and Nancy Sedar Sherman

#### **E. Contemporary Issues in Religion and Art**

Display of religious holiday decorations

Wearing religious attire, amulets, of fetishes in public

## VI. Hands-on Art Projects

- Calligraphy and calligraphs
- Sketch -Up as a tool to design architecture
- Create an ancestral or celebrity shrine
- Design a meditative or other special space for yourself with decorative designs, built it
- Interpret an aspect of your cultural or religious identity in a non-representational design
- Incorporate a contemporary identity issue or social justice theme in a work of art
- Design a liturgical object for your own faith or a personal ritual
- Create a mandala or other symbolic design from sand or flour (either fixed or temporary)
- Create a costume and design a performance in which it is worn.

### **Colorado Visual Arts Standards Addressed, Grade 6 - 8**

1. Observe & Learn to Comprehend • 1. Conceptual art theories explain how works of art are created • 2. The history of art, world cultures, & artistic styles influence contemporary art concerns • 3. Art criticism strategies are used to analyze, interpret, & make informed judgments about works of art

2. Envision & Critique to Reflect • 1. Visual literacy skills help to establish personal meaning & artistic intent in works of art

3. Invent & Discover to Create • 1. Achieve artistic purpose to communicate intent • 2. Demonstrate technical proficiency & craftsmanship when planning

4. Relate & Connect to Transfer • 1. Visual arts are valuable for a variety of art and non-art related lifelong endeavors • 2. Cultural traditions & events impact visual arts within a community

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***